each of us and to the absent partners right and left, humming something
unrecognizable as she did so. Drooping in my chair, I apprehensively watched her
deliver the valentines, as the poker game regulars in the Double W bunkhouse
termed it, feeling unsure of myself but all too sure that turning me into a
sissybritches canasta player was going to test the limits of both of us. And this was
before I even had any inkling that a contest of hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades
could turn into such a dangerous game.

While she was rifling the cards out, Herman wandered by the living room,
took a peek at what was happening, his eyebrows elevating above his glasses and
his step quickening until he was past and out the back door. No help there, so I
silently sighed and kept stuffing cards in my overloaded hand. I was going to need
luck from any source, and none was anywhere I could see.

“No, no, no, child, you can’t meld that card. Pick it back up, hurry
scurry.” Topping over me like Mount Rushmore hogging the jigsaw puzzle, she
forced a smile, the kind with teeth gritted behind it. The first hour or so of canasta
lesson wasn’t up yet, and while her mind may have been set firmly as stone, mine
was simply whirling. “Mistakes are life’s little ways of setting us straight, aren’t
they,” she recited as if reading off a sampler on the wall.

“But how come it’s a mistake?” I came awfully close to whining. “You told
me when I get a three, I’m supposed to put it down like that.”

“Red threes, dear. Black treys, you need three of a kind as usual to meld,
but can only play them to go out on.”

She paused as I sulkily picked up the threespot of spades off the table and
stuck it any old where in my mess of cards. “That rule is a teeny bit tricky,” she
granted, then imperturbably took it back in the next breath. Plainly not to be budged
until I either showed progress at canasta or perished from trying, Aunt Kate sat across from me like one of those Chinese dowager queens shown in a history book, her precisely arranged cards held like a fan, helping herself to a plate of chunks of rock-hard brickle, a peanut-butter kind of candy that I thought in no way deserved the name, kept handy for “nibbles to keep us going.” Crunching a bite of the brittle stuff, she thickly lectured through her chewing. “Learning the cards only takes concentration. It’s no worse than putting your mind to what your schoolteacher shows you on the blackboard, is it.”

I gave her a look meant to wither that comparison. Then when was recess? School was a breeze compared with this slow torture. I brooded as I tried to make sense out of a card game where threes of a certain color counted for more than aces, kings, or queens. Who invented this, some complete moron who flunked arithmetic?

Paying no attention to my snit, she clasped her cards to her mound of chest and leaned across the table. “Now then, let me see your hand, dumpling. I’ll show you what to keep and what are discards.”

It was all I could do to hold fifteen cards--canasta was played with a double deck, fat as a brick- and I slopped a few onto the card table tipping them toward her. Without saying anything, she tucked those back into my hand, drew a mighty breath and went into a long recital of which cards I should try to build on by drawing from the deck or taking from the discard pile, and which ones were natural throwaways, as she called them.

As much as I tried to concentrate on what she was telling me, I couldn’t get past the feeling of being caught up in something like a measles epidemic, only the spots were on the cards. To today’s seekers of home entertainment, canasta has to be as distant, dreary, and out of date as a Civil War 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 fever was written all over her, in commanding voice and unrelenting manner, to an extent that spooked me silly. Anyone with a brain bigger than a jumping bean should be able to catch on to a dumb card game, right? However, the same lost 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.

“Now then,” she finished a spate of instructions that had gone right over my head. “Anything you don’t understand, dear, before we play out a hand?”

“Yeah, there is something,” I mustered myself, knowing it was now or never. Feeling vaguely traitorous but instinctively trying to save my own skin, I asked, “Why can’t Herman? Play cards with you instead of me, I mean.”

“Him?” The one word did that idea in, but she added for good measure, “The old silly, he calls our little canasta parties something rude having to do with chickens.” She snapped off a piece of brickle and held it as if she would like to throw it in the direction of him and his greenhouse hideout. “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. Gulping, I tried another way to wiggle out of the canasta trap. “Gee, Aunt Kate, it’s nice of you to try to teach me like this, really it is, but I just don’t think I’m slick enough at cards to--”

“Don-ny.” It’s always bad when an adult breaks your name in two. The doll-like eyes were fixed on me a certain way as she leaned across the table and enunciated further, “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.”

That began a spell of time when the high point of my days was the sugar on my cereal. Everything else in the Schmidt household was contentious or worrisome or both. Fortunately the main battles did not involve me, although I had to duck for cover on a regular basis to make sure of that. Right away I deduced that I had better get downstairs early every day, bolt down some puffed rice while the kitchen was at peace, and hole up in the living room reading a National Geographic to stay out of the line of fire when hostilities commenced, as they always did. Morning by morning, Aunt Kate and Herman had a fight to go with breakfast. Generally it was her to start things off with a bang. “Can’t you quit that?” Her first salvo would make me jump, even though it was not aimed at me. “It’s childish and a nasty habit, how many times do I have to tell you?”

“Is not,” he would pop right back. “Toast is made for such things.”

“That is absolutely ridiculous. Why can’t you just eat?”

“Hah. It goes in my mouth, same as you push it in yours.”

“It is not the same! Oh, you’re impossible.”

The one constant in the repeated battle was Aunt Kate holding her ground in the kitchen, while Herman retreated elsewhere to scrap over toast scraps another breakfast time. Eventually, when it sounded safe, I would leave the green leather couch—there is only so much “Forgotten Valley of Peru” a person can take in one sitting—and creep across the living room to peek into the kitchen. The remains of the daily toast war which might still be sitting there at lunch or beyond, I could not figure out. Sometimes on what had to be Herman’s plate would be nothing but
Aunt Kate got right down to business. The puzzle pieces were barely settled in the box before she was pulling up across the table from me and had the cards flying as she dealt a stream to each of us and to the absent partners right and left, humming something unrecognizable as she did so.

Drooping in my chair, I apprehensively watched her deliver the valentines, as the poker game regulars in the Double W bunkhouse termed it, feeling unsure of myself but all too sure that turning me into a sissybritches canasta player was going to test the limits of both of us. And this was before I even had any inkling that a contest of hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades could turn into such a dangerous game.

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As much as I tried to follow her baffling instructions that deuces counted twice as much as tenspots and so on, I couldn't shake the feeling of being caught up in something like a measles epidemic, only the spots were on the cards. In today's era of more home entertainment than we know what to do with, canasta seems as out of date as a Civil War songbook singalong around the upright piano. But let me tell you, in any day and age the latest thing can get to be a craze, and the freshly conceived card game with the Spanishy name swept into the living rooms of mid-century America like a fever. This I knew only in the vague way a kid picks up 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, but from her warnings that "the girls" would beat the pants off us if we didn't play our cards right, I pictured an ominous pair of prune-faced sharp-eyed whizzes who ate, slept, and dreamt canasta. Even their names went with that: Etheline and Zilla.

"Now then," Aunt Kate finished a spate of instructions that had gone right over my head. "Anything you don't understand, dear, before we play out a hand?"

"Yeah, there is something," I mustered myself, knowing it was now or never. Feeling vaguely traitorous but instinctively trying to save my own skin, I asked, "Why can't Herman? Play cards with you instead of me, I mean."

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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 shepherders’ 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 like cowboys while building the dam that bottled the creek into the newest lake on earth lasted in me.

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, that lowest saddest category of people, wards of the county, 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 ended up gave me the shivers, but I found I could not take my eyes off the poor farm and what it stood for. I was just a kid and did not have every thought fully formed, but it somehow bugged me that I was looking at the best of life a minute ago, and this quick, the worst of it.
The town of Gros Ventre was so far from anywhere that you had to take a bus to catch the bus. At that time, the Rocky Mountain Stage Line 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?”
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*
The town of Gros Ventre was so far from anywhere that you had to take a bus to catch the bus. At that time, the Rocky Mountain Stage Line served locales like ours with a maroon elongated Chevy 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 stretch 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.

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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 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?”

“My, uhm, 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 imagining, 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 sailor 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 outlines of the Rocky Mountains steadily along the horizon to the west. There where the South Fork of English Creek emerged from a canyon, during the big Rainbow Reservoir dam job my folks and I crammed into a humpbacked trailer house built for approximately one, which I remembered as not as bad as it sounds. But next, 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, the real one, graded the gravel road while my mother and I spent creepy days watching out a cabin window at the inmates pottering uselessly at makework tasks. Seeing past the talkative woman to that frightening institution again where the unluckiest people ended up gave me the shivers, but I couldn’t not look. 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, a happy time. A little farther on, where the road 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, steady as the speedometer. Passing by it all with everything unfamiliar ahead, maybe too young 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. I wish for him that things had been different enough then that this boy on a bus can look on his situation as 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?

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.
“Why 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 beanburner 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. For another, You-
know-who is not about to let you gallivant around the ranch on your own.”
Trying not be 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. “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
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 sheepherder, 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.
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 ♠️.*
*Before you are married it’s ♥️.*
*After you are married it’s ♦️.*
*When you are dead it’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.”

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. 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, the best teacher I’ve ever had.” Together we took in the deathless composition:

*A flea and a fly flit into a flue*

*Said the fly, let us flee*
Said the flea, let us fly
And away they flew

“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. 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?”


“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 smackeroos 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.” She was. I still was trying to catch up with the dizzying twists and turns of the day.
"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 imagining, 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 sailor 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 shepherders’ 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 dam 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 at the time the excitement of being right there in the midst of the big project—a long high ridge of dirtfill bottling up the creek into miles and miles of lake—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, the real one, had graded the gravel road and done some other bulldozer work 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.

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, a happy time. A little farther on, where the road 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, steady as the speedometer. Passing by it all with everything unfamiliar ahead, maybe too young 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. I wish for him that things had been different enough then that this boy on a bus can look on his situation as 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?

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.
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 fat 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. Groggily forcing my eyes open, I tried to unstiffen and come to grips with my surroundings. Yawning and bleary, I looked
around the bus. 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, me and a few elderly couples who looked like they were off hardscrabble farms and a man in a gabardine suit of the kind county extension agents and livestock buyers wore.

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.

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 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.

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“Afternoon, Sheriff. Prize customer?”

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“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,
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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
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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 asked, trying to keep the squeak out of my voice. "Could you--I mean, would you sign my autograph book?"

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. Wasn't you ever 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, 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 cousins,” the prisoner said sunnily. “Ain’t we, Carl.”

The sheriff folded his arms on his chest in a huff. “Second cousins.”
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?"

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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
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. Wasn’t you ever 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 cousins,” the prisoner said sunnily. “Ain’t we, Carl.”

The sheriff folded his arms on his chest in a huff. “Second cousins.”
They 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-feet 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 direct 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 sheepherder, both of whom I had miraculously escaped. The hibernating Indian. Heavenly Letty. The cantankerous little sheriff and the sunny 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 first coming of night during my lone journey, has stayed with me everlastingly. 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 twelve years of 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 stopped in silent towns where only the streetlights were on. 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 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 syrupered 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 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
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.

“Hey, you’re pretty sharp.” 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.”

“Riding horses, 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.”

“Indian booties?” He looked at me as if to make sure I was on the level.

“How are those any big deal?”
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?"

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"Indian booties?" He looked at me as if to make sure I was on the level.

"How are those are any big deal?"

"They were made for a Blackfoot chief a long time ago, that's how." I
didn't need to fumble for a name. "Red Chief, he was called. The tribe gathered all
its beads on a blanket, and the best moccasin maker chose the fanciest ones and spent all winter sewing the design, and so the chief wore them for really big ceremonies like powwows, see, but after he died nobody else in the tribe was allowed to wear them, and then 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 Indians for them." I had to stretch a little for the next part, but I got there. "When he 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.

His 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."

"They’re way too valuable," I fielded that. "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
They were made for the best Blackfoot fancy-dancer a long time ago, that's how.” I didn’t need to fumble for a name. “Red Chief, he was called. See, when there was a 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 Reservations, 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, 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 Indians for them.” For all I knew, this part approached the truth. Maybe in roundabout fashion, but my grandmother the Browning fry cook had bargained someone out of the glorious moccasins somehow. I had to stretch a little for the next part, but I got there. “When he 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.

His 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.”

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“A fortune on your tootsies, huh? I tell you, some guys have all the luck.”
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 seatmate 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 as if I was really something. He leaned my way as if he had just figured something 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.

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 in the compartment.

"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. 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. Wrestling 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. 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 version of Palookaville 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. "Let him go," I said. When the driver turned him loose, 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?”
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. Ignoring my fallen face, Gram directed, “Now go pick out the shirts you want to take. Three will do you, to start with.”

I stalled. “What’s the dumb weather like back there?”

“About like anyplace else,” she said less than patiently, “eenie, meenie, minie, and moe. 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 asked 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 with pearl-colored snap buttons. “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. Cheering me up was a lost cause, but she made the effort. “People will think you’re a champion bronc rider.”

“I bet they haven’t even got rodeos in Wiss-con-sun.”

“Don’t whine.” Folding things expeditiously like the veteran of many moves that she was, she had the suitcase nearly packed while I was changing shirts. Back and forth between gauging packing space and my long face, she 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 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. It’s a tough proposition,” by which a
Montanan of her generation meant a situation there was no wriggling out of.
“Kitty and Dutch are the only relatives we have left, like it or not.” She blinked
hard as if that would make the glistening go away, and my own eyes stung from
watching. “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, “that’s the size of it. You’ll
do fine. 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 them," 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. "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. "Just in case, I wrote down their address and phone number and tucked it in your memory book."

When that did not noticeably improve my disposition, 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. 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 the 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 Wisconsin, 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 if 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.

“Nell’s bells, boy, don’t worry so,” all at once she herself sounded like something was caught in her voicebox. “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 as if the thought of him had put new backbone in her, Gram managed a trembling smile and a last pat to my packed clothes. “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 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 stronghold 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 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 a twelve-year-old 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 fancily 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 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 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 upon walking in, 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 acount 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 strangulated 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.

\textit{In the game of life, don’t lose your marbles.}

\textit{Wendell Williamson}

\textit{Double W ranch}

\textit{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, \textit{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 a Sherman 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 across the sun-baked yard to the cook shack.

Gram watched in concern as I came back in 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."
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 quite swainve and debonure oput 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 an Almond Joy that I justified as dessert—it took the last of my pocket change, but by suppertime 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 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 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 famous fastball, and while in my case work-up softball in rural Montana pebbly schoolyards was a long way from to 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 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 on it--sped away in a cloud of exhaust.

Too panicked 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."
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“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 truck 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 woundn’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 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 in Minneapolis.” 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.”
“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 beanburner 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. For another, You-know-who is not about to let you gallivant around the ranch on your own.” Trying not be 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. “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. Ignoring my fallen face, Gram directed, “Now go pick out the shirts you want to take. Three will do you, to start with.”

I stalled. “What’s the dumb weather like back there?”

“About like anyplace else,” she said less than patiently, “eenie, meenie, minie, and moe. 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 asked 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 with pearl-colored snap buttons. “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. Cheering me up was a lost cause, but she made the effort. “People will think you’re a champion bronc rider.”

“I bet they haven’t even got rodeos in Wiss-con-sun.”

“Don’t whine.” Folding things expeditiously like the veteran of many moves that she was, she had the suitcase nearly packed while I changed shirts. “There now, you look swayve and debonure,” she tried her customary joke—I think it was, anyhow—about putting on airs of being suave and debonair. Ordinarily I’d have laughed, but this was no ordinary time. Back and forth
between gauging packing space and my long face, she 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 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. It’s a tough proposition," by which a
Montanan of her generation meant a situation there was no wriggling out of.
"Kitty and Dutch are the only relatives we have left, like it or not." She blinked
hard as if that would make the glistening go away, and my own eyes stung from
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send you off by yourself like this, it’s hard on both of us. But you know what they say, you have to make your way in this old pig-iron world. You’ll do fine. 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 them,” 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. “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. “Just in case, I wrote down their address and phone number and tucked it in your memory book.”

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“What was that?” Gram asked from across the room.

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“People will think you’re a champion bronc rider.”

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“Don’t whine.” Cheering me up was a lost cause, but she made the effort.

“There now, 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. Gram 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 cherry-colored shirt
and stiff pants. Back and forth between gauging packing space and my long face, she 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 together. By rights, she deserved them. My conscience made a feeble try. “Maybe you’ll need them in the--where you’re going?”

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send you off by yourself like this, it's hard on both of us. But you know what they say, you've got to make your way in this old pig-iron world.” At twelve? Wasn't that kind of rushing it? “You'll do fine,” she went on. “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 them,” 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--”

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When that did not noticeably improve my disposition, 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. 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 the 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 Wisconsin, 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 if 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.

"Nell's bells, boy, don't worry so," all at once she herself sounded like
something was caught in her voicebox. "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 as if the thought of him had put new backbone
in her, Gram managed a trembling smile and a last pat to my packed clothes. "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 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 stronghold 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 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 a twelve-year-old 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.

Gettring 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 fancily 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 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 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 upon walking in, 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 strangulated 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."

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

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“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--”

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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 a hick lugging it around. Ignoring my fallen face, Gram directed, “Hurry up now. Go pick out the shirts you want to take. Three will have to do you, to start with.”

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“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 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. It’s a tough proposition," by which a Montanan of her generation meant a situation there was no wriggling out of. "Kitty and Dutch are the only relatives we have left, like it or not." She blinked hard as if that would make the glistening go away, and my own eyes stung from watching. "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, "that’s the size of it. It’s hard on both of us. But you know what they say, you’ve got to make your way in this old pig-iron world." At twelve? Wasn’t that kind of rushing it? "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 them," 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. "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. “Just in case, I wrote down their address and phone number and tucked it in your memory book.”

When that did not noticeably improve my disposition, 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. 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 Wisconsin, 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.

“Nell’s bells, boy, don’t worry so,” all at once she herself sounded like something was caught in her voicebox. “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 as if the thought of him had put new backbone in her, she managed a trembling smile and 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 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 stronghold of the Williamsonsons, the house. 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 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 a twelve-year-old 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 fancily 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 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 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 upon
walking in, 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 strangulated 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 ‘Au 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*

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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. It’s a tough proposition,” by which a
Montanan of her generation meant a situation there was no wriggling out of.
“Kitty and Dutch are the only relatives we have left, like it or not.” She blinked
hard as if that would make the glistening go away, and my own eyes stung from
watching. “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, “that’s the size of it. It’s
hard on both of us. But you know what they say, you’ve got to make your way
in this old pig-iron world.” At twelve? Wasn’t that kind of rushing it? “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--”

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 meet people and have experiences and so on.

“You could call it a vacation, in a way,” she tried hopefully.

“You could call it getting rid of me, too,” I said heartlessly.

“Oh, Donny, no,” 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.

“Nell’s bells, boy, don’t worry so,” all at once she herself sounded like something was caught in her voicebox. “I can hear your granddad now, ‘We just have to hunch up and take it.’” Gram kept in touch with people who were no