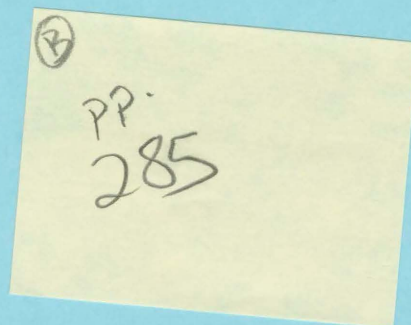


Sub for Carnation inscription on p. 39-40 of 1-64:

*When you lift your hat,  
to ladies and that,  
make sure you have something upstairs  
besides a collection of hairs.*



gripping Joe DiMaggio's bat--it was that kind of dizzying moment of experience, unexpected and unforgettable, a touch of greatness tingling all through the lucky recipient. Resting the autograph book on the front fender of the Cadillac, Rasmussen started writing. Not merely his signature, I saw, which would have been plenty. An inscription, a full-page one from the way he was going at it! My heartbeat doubled and my mind ballooned as I watched the pen continue in what to me was world championship handwriting.

"Hey, Rags," a hazer at the nearest bucking chute hollered to him, "better come look over your rigging. You're up in this first go-round."

"Great literature takes time, Charlie. Be right there."

*My life took on meaning  
back when I was weaning.  
My ma pulled me away  
from her breast that day,  
and said, "Son, time we had a session  
for you to learn the big lesson."  
She held up to sight  
A can red and white.  
"The best invention in tarnation  
is this can of Carnation.  
It's milk, you see,  
but not from me.  
Nor from cow and pail  
At risk from that tail.  
So if you're to be a wise man,  
seek out marvels like this can--  
No tits to pull, no hay to pitch*



*Just punch a hole in the sonofabitch."*

"There you go," he said, his signature and all the rest on the page in Kwik Klik purple ink magically matching his riding chaps--clear as anything, a sign to me this was meant to happen. Lucky arrowhead, happy coincidence, the spitzen finger that had put Herman and me in this place at this time, something finally was working in my favor this loco summer. Skyhigh about my newly found good fortune, I heard as in a haze Rags Rasmussen talking to me almost as an equal. "Seen that little ditty on the bunkhouse wall at the old Circle X ranch down in the Big Hole country, a time ago. Wasn't much older than you when I started breakin' horses for outfits like that." He gave me a look up and down and a long-jawed grin. "Figured it was worth passing along to somebody who knows how to wear a rodeo shirt."

"Wow, yeah! I mean, thanks a million," I fumbled out my appreciation for his supremely generous contribution to the autograph book, hugging it to myself as though it might get away. Unwilling to let go of these minutes of glory with him, I blurted, "Can I ask, what horse did you draw today?"

He shifted from one long leg to the other. "Aw, sort of a crowbait"--he broke off into a rueful laugh and scratched an ear. "Guess I hadn't ought to use that word around here. Anyway, I pulled out of the hat a little something called Buzzard Head."

Hearing that just about bowled me over. Talk about a Believe It Or Not! moment. Buzzard Head was famous--the notorious kind of famous--as the most wicked bucking horse on the rodeo circuit, the bronc that had never been ridden. Through the years, contestants at Cheyenne, Pendleton, Great Falls, Calgary, all the big rodeos, had done their best to stay in the saddle for ten seconds aboard Buzzard Head, and eaten arena dirt for their trouble. Worse yet, this was the horse that killed its would-be rider in front of twenty thousand people at Madison Square



the whopping number of cards and began melding, the black aces sidebet and rainbows of other highscoring combinations across half the table, canastas following canastas, while Gerda squirmed as if enduring torture and Herta tried to look remorseful, although with little glances sideways at me marking our secret. I pressed my cards to my chest with one hand, nervously rubbing the arrowhead in its sheath with the other to summon all the luck I could. It must have worked. Finally done laying down cards, Aunt Kate looked around the table with a smile that spread her chins.

"Guess what, girls. Donny and I seem to have 5100 points, also known as out." She reached for the stream of silver Gerda was unhappily tossing quarters into while Biggie screamed as if celebrating our triumph.

As we drove home I was on top of the world, basking in the victory over the canasta hens. The lucky black arrowhead was doing its stuff now, for sure, so much so I could almost imagine the summer turning itself on its head, with Aunt Kate dropping the afternoon torture of canasta lessons now that I had proven myself and instead attending to such matters as the fact that I still didn't have a cent to my name nor a stitch of school clothing. Keep the luck going by aiming at chosen targets, right? Aunt Kate herself looked as pleased as could be, humming away where she was wedged behind the steering wheel of the DeSoto. Even Manitowoc was showing a more kindly face, leafy streets and nice houses surrounding us as she took a different way than we had come because of the "nasty traffic."

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Start

I felt  
like a  
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"There's the sort of thing I mean," she emphasized. "You're Dorie, all over again. Chatter, chatter, chatter," she took a hand off the wheel to imitate with her arched fingers and thumb something like Biggie the budgie's nonstop beak. "One uncalled-for remark after another."

Ooh, that stung. Was my imagination, as she seemed to be saying, nothing more than a gift of gab?

"Don't ask questions there aren't answers for." Which of course were the kind I could never stop asking.

"Don't make such a fuss."

About then Aunt Kate let out a sigh as if the air was going out of her, jarring me back to that dream moment on the bus when I heroically would reach over the stricken driver and grab the steering wheel to save the doomed Greyhound and passengers, but this time for real from the sound of it. I saw in a flash she was stricken, for sure, but not in an emergency way. Everything about her appeared normal enough except her eyes were not the road, her attention seized by something we were passing. "I'm sorry, buttercup," she apologized in another expulsion of breath, "but the sight of it always almost does me in."

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"Husband, who else?"

I gaped at her. She seemed like the least likely person to believe the plural of spouse is spice. "You've got another one besides Herman? They let you do that in Wisconsin?"

"Silly. Before Schmidt, I mean." She gazed through the windshield  
"Fritz Schulz. A real man."

Herman seemed real enough to me. "What happened to him? The other one, I mean."

"I lost him." She made it sound as if he had dropped out of her pocket somewhere.

Not satisfied, I stared the question to her until she had to answer. "Storm, slick deck."

"Really? Like when the Witch of November came?"

"He's been filling your head with his OO out there in the garden shed, hasn't he."

Another sigh as heavy as that first one. "All right, you want the whole story. My Fritz was bosun on the 00. Washed overboard in the big November storm of '39."

My imagination running wild at that, I miraculously managed to hold my exclamation to a high-pitched "Holy wow!"

"Yes, it's a tragedy." She gazed off across the room to the Manitowoc sampler as if the thread of ship was going down. "But that's in the past, we have to put up with life in the here and now, don't we," she said as if she didn't want to any more than I did.

The other one would be out working and drawing a nice wage.

Yeah, well, I though, he had two good eyes... And I bet she didn't call him "Schulz"

"You did fine in today's game, honeybunch, but stay on your toes. Next time, we'll do as usual and play two out of three."

"Did you know they play canasta for money?"

"For two bitses, *pthht*. Hens play for chicken feed."



"Cross our hearts and hope to die."

She giggled and whispered. "We'll do it."

Since there wasn't much time to waste before Herta and Gerda would reach a winning score just in the ordinary way of things, at the first chance I had when the discard pile grew good and fat I discarded a deuce, the wild card under Manitowoc rules, crosswise onto the pile.

Aunt Kate leaned over the table toward me. "Honeybunch, that freezes the pile, you know."

"I know."

"You are sure that is the card you want to play, that way."

"Yes'm."

"Mmm hmm." Stuck for any way to dislodge me from my stubborn maneuver, she tried to make the best of it by shaking her head as if I was beyond grownup understanding. "Girls, it appears we have a frozen deck."

"Doesn't it, though," Gerda said through tight lips. "Someone has been putting ideas in this boy's head." Aunt Kate sat there looking like she couldn't imagine what got into me, nor could she. "Well, we have no choice, do we," Gerda reluctantly conceded. "Your draw, Hertie."

Herta drew and stuck the card away and as if distracted by Biggie's latest chorus of chirrups, discarded an ace of spades. Immediately she went into flutters and the full act of "Oh, did I play that card? I didn't mean to!"

She made as if to pick it up, which Aunt Kate headed off fast as a shot. "Oh no you don't. Against the rules, Herta, you know perfectly well." Tossing down her natural pair of aces, she gobbled up the whopper of a pile and began melding aces and queens and jacks in rainbows of highscoring cards across half the table and then down into the lower denominations, canastas following canastas,

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"Guess what, girls. Donny and I seem to have 5100 points, also known as out." *Trumping*

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"The reason I am telling you all this," she was going on relentlessly, "is that I have a responsibility you maybe are not aware of. With your grandmother laid up the way she is and your mother and father not, well, available, I am in the position of being what is called *in loco parentis*. And no," she was swift to stamp out my



immediate thought, "*loco* in this case has a different meaning. *In loco parentis* is a legal term that means in place of a parent, or parents.

"Child, I want someone in the family to amount to something.

"Sometimes I wonder, what am I going to do with you?"

"Board me for the summer and send me home with new clothes on my back and money in my pocket, like when I came?" I answered quick as a shot.

"Oh, that again.

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Keep

doused at once and she would devote her efforts to conveying to the others what a complete moron she was nobly putting up with. She could go either way. I was in big rouble if I did not play my cards right, in more methods than one.

With all that circling in my head as I stuffed cards into my hand fifteen deep, scrupulously following Herman's advice to sort them in order from kings down, I sneaked looks right and left sizing up our opponents. Both women were cut from the same cloth as Aunt Kate, which was to say spacious. Gerda was squat and broad, Herta was tall and broad. The halfway similar names and wide builds aside, they were not sisters, merely cousins, and old acquaintances of Aunt Kate from some ladies' club way back when, I gathered. Both were widows, Herman holding the firm belief that they had talked their husbands to death. Widders, in the bunkhouse pronunciation I had picked up. *Melody Roundup* on the Great Falls radio station sometimes played a country-and-western song that backed Herman's theory to a considerable extent: "*Widder women and white lightning, what they do to a man is frightening.*" That tune crazily invaded through my head, too, as I tried to force myself to remember the countless rules of canasta.

"Don-ny," Aunt Kate prompted with a smile seeking forgiveness from the Herta-Gerda partnership, "any red threes to meld?"

Not a good start. "Sure, I was just about to." I grabbed the trey of hearts I had stuck at the far end of my hand without a thought and flopped it on the table. Aunt Kate leaned back and smiled at me with a hint of warning in her eyes that I had almost cost us a hundred points by not playing the damn three in the first place, and Gerda looked at me slyly as she flipped me the replacement card. "My, my, aren't you something, you're beating the pants off us already," Herta said in the same dumber-down tone she used in talking to the bird.

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After that I tried to keep my mind fully on draws and discards and Herman's eye-deas for bushwhacking and the rest, but the hen party combination on either side of me, not even to mention Biggie the budgie squealing away, was really distracting. Herta actually clucked, making that *thwock* sound with her tongue against the roof of her mouth when she exclaimed over something, which was often. That was bad enough, but her partner presented an even worse challenge. The last name of Gerda was Hostetter, which was so close to Horse Titter that I couldn't get that out of my mind either. I had learned by way of Gram to call grownups I didn't know well Mr. and Mrs., and every time I addressed her it came out something like "Mrs. Horssstetter."

"Oh, don't, snickelfritz," she killed that off after the first few times. "Just call me Gerda, please." Making a discard that I had absolutely no use for as she uncannily almost always did, she idly glanced at me saying, "I understand you're from a ranch. Is it one of those fancy dude ones?"

"No-o-o, not exactly. It's more the kind with cows and horses and hayfields," that last word came out wistfully.

"I suppose you're glad to be here because there's not much for a boy like you to do there," said Gerda as if that were the epitaph on my ranch life.

"Well, not exactly," I found myself sticking up for the Double W, "there's always something going on." All three women were eating the cheese-and-cracker nibbles as if they were gumdrops, so it must have their obvious devotion to food that brought what I considered an inspiration. "You know, what's really fun on a ranch is a testicle festival."

That stopped everyone's chewing and drew me full attention from three directions, so I thought I had better explain pretty fast.

"It happens at branding time, see, when the male calves have to be taken care of. It's nut cutting, there's no way around calling it anything but that. Well,

castration, if you want to be fancy. Anyway, all these testicles get thrown in a bucket to be washed up and then cooked over the fire right there in the corral. There's plenty to feed the whole branding crew. Two to a calf, you know," I spelled out because from the blank expressions around the table, maybe they weren't that knowledgeable about livestock.

"Don-ny," Aunt Kate spoke as if she had something caught in her gullet, "that's very interesting, but--"

Herta blurted, "You actually *eat* those?"

"Oh sure, you can guzzle them right down. Rocky Mountain oysters, they're real good. You have to fry them up nice, bread them in cornmeal or something, but then, yum."

Yum did not seem to sit well with the ladies. Thinking it might be because they were used to nibbles, as Aunt Kate called the candy gunk which bite by bite didn't amount to much and Herta's crackers-and-cheese treat which tasted like dried toast and library paste, I kept trying to present the case for Rocky Mountain oysters despite the discreet signals from across the table that enough was enough. Not to me, it wasn't. I had an argument to make. "Honest, you can make a whole meal out of not that many nu--testicles, see. They're about yay long," I held my fingers four or so inches apart, the size of a healthy former bull calf's reproductive items.

Herta seemed to take that in with more interest than did Gerda, who just looked at me as if sorting me out the ruthless way she did cards. Apparently deciding I could be coaxed off the topic, she crooned in practically birdie talk, "That tells us so much about ranch life. Anyway, aren't you cuter than sin in your cowboy shirt."

Without meaning to--much, anyway--I gave her the full snaggle smile for that, the one like I might bite.



"Heavens!" She jerked her cards up as if shielding herself from me. "What in the world happened to that boy's t--?"

"He fell while he was working on the ranch," Aunt Kate wisely did not go into the roundup tale. "His grandmother is taking him to the dentist the minute he gets home to Montana," she topped that off smooth as butter. This was news to me, but not the kind intended. She could rattle off a as readily as I could.

After that performance on my part, as I knew Aunt Kate was going to level the word at me later, the game dragged on with the score steadily mounting against us. Gerda was a terrifying player, seeming to know which cards each of the rest of us held, as if she had X-ray vision. Herta was no slouch either. As I tried to keep up with what cards were played and the passel of rules, I was concentrating nearly to the point of oblivion when I heard the word *green*, followed by stamps.

I snapped to. Herta was going on about a certain lawn chair featured in the window at the Schermerhorn furniture store downtown. "It has the nicest blue plastic weave and is so light, made of aluminum, and you can fold right down flat in it to sun yourself," she enthused. "I'm hoping I can get it if I can build up my Green Stamps before too awfully long, while summer is still going good."

"Oh, those, I never bother with them," Aunt Kate pooh-poohed the trading stamps. "They're so little use, you can't even trade them in for clothes. Besides, I don't shop at Schermerhorn's any more, I'm convinced they short-changed me when I bought my recliner there."

"We all *have* clothes, Kitty," Herta responded with a huffy glance at Aunt Kates' outfit, royal red today. "What I want is that lawn chair. Free and for nothing and with not even a fee, as the saying is." All three tittered at that. Then Herta sighed and consoled herself with a nibble. "I've been saving up and saving up, but it's a slow process."



"You watch and see," Gerda put in, "'you'll be eligible for that lawn chair about the time a foot of snow comes. I'm with Kitty, those silly stamps aren't worth the trouble. It's your draw, snickelfritz," and bang, we were right back at canasta, tooth and nail. For me, though, Green Stamps had been added into the reds and blacks of eye-deas.

I watched and waited for the discard pile to grow, meanwhile dipping my hand into my pants pocket to work on the lucky arrowhead. Gerda noticed me at it, as she did everything, and asked none too nicely, "What's the attraction down your leg there?"

Before I could make up an excuse, Aunt Kate spoke up. "Ugh, it's that old rabbit's foot he carries. You don't want to see the nasty thing."

That took care of that, and on the next go-round, my ears ringing with Herman's advice--*Hold back, discard one like you don't got any use for it, and watch for same kind of card to show up on pile in your turn. Bullwhack the hens--* I discarded one of the five sevenspots I had built up. Sure enough, two rounds later, Gerda the human card machine operated on memory and tossed onto the pile what should have been an absolutely safe seven of spades. Saying nothing and maintaining a poker face if not a canasta one, I produced my double pair of sevens and swept up the pile.

There was a stunned silence from Gerda and Herta and a tongue-in-cheek one from Aunt Kate as I pulled in the rich haul of cards. Finally Gerda could not stand it and said, in a tone very much as if she had been bushwhacked, "Just as a point of the obvious, you do know you discarded a seven a bit ago."

"Uh-huh," I played dumb although I also kept spreading sevens and other melds across the table, "but this way I got it back." Aunt Kate conspicuously said nothing, merely watching me meld cards right and left as if our good fortune was an accident of luck, which it was but not in the way she thought.



That and a few other stunts I came up with that drew me black looks from Gerda and surprised ones from Aunt Kate saved our skin somewhat, but I was running out of tricks according to Hoyle and Herman, and several hands later we still trailed on the score sheet. Another ridiculous thing about canasta was that the game went on and on until one set of partners had scored a total of five thousand points. The way this was going, Herta and Gerda would reach that in another hand or two. Before the next hand was dealt, Aunt Kate and I were temporarily saved by the luck or whatever it was of me sneaking the last cracker-and-cheese and downing it. "Goodness, we've gone through the nibbles, haven't we," Herta immediately noticed the empty plate and felt her hostess duty. "What do you say we take a wee little break and I'll fix some more."

"And a little wee break," said Aunt Kate, surprisingly reckless, as she headed out to what she called the powder room, which from my experience with names for the convenience I figured must be the toilet. Gerda called dibs on the next visit, and went over to wait by cooing to the parakeet.

Here was my chance, slim as it was. As if just looking around, I wandered into the kitchen where Herta was industriously dipping a tableknife into a freshly opened jar of pimento cheese spread and daubing some on cracker after cracker to build a pyramid on the plate. She glanced around at me with an eyebrow raised, humorously maybe. "After all that talk of 'oysters', too hungry to wait, are we?"

"It's not that." I peeked back into the living room to make sure we couldn't be overheard. Gerda was babytalking to the parakeet, which answered her with screeches of "*Big-ee, Big-ee*" "Those stamps you were talking about, the green ones? You know what? I've got some that aren't doing me any good."

"Oh, do you?" A glob of cheese spread had smeared onto the edge of the plate and she cleaned it off with her finger and ate it, with a wrinkle of her nose at me that said it would be just our secret, wouldn't it. Thinking I was making too

much of too little, she said, "You must have been with Kitty or that husband of hers at one of those gas station where they give out Green Stamps few and far between, is that it?"

"Uh-uh. I have a whole book, pasted in and everythibng."

She sucked her finger while studying me with deepened interest. "What's a boy like you doing with all those?"

Sixteen hundred and one miles on the bus, that was what. But I only said, "I got them with my ticket here. So I was wondering if we could sort of make a trade, since they're called trading stamps, right?"

"A trade, you say," she inquired in a lowered voice, nibbles forgotten now. "Such as?"

"Well, see, I know how much you'd like to have that lawn chair. And you know how much Aunt Kate likes to win. If you could help that along a little, so she and I come out on top today, I could bring you my book of Green Stamps next time we play. That way, you get your free lawn chair and I don't get my fanny chewed about canasta all week "

"Goodness gracious, you do have a way of putting things." She thought for a moment, then craned her neck to check on the living room, with me doing the same. Gerda was taking her turn in the bathroom, and Aunt Kate Aunt Kate now was stationed at the birdcage whistling at Biggie and receiving squeaks and scratchy *chirrup*s in return. Clucking to herself as clicking onto a decision, Herta leaned all the way down to my nearest ear and murmured:

"It would be a good joke on Kittycat, wouldn't it."

"A real funnybone tickler, you bet."

"Just between us, of course."

"Cross our hearts and hope to die."

She giggled and whispered. "We'll do it."



Since there wasn't much time to waste before Herta and Gerda would reach a winning score just in the ordinary way of things, at the first chance I had when the discard pile grew good and fat I discarded a deuce, the wild card under Manitowoc rules, crosswise onto the pile.

Aunt Kate leaned over the table toward me. "Honeybunch, that freezes the pile, you know."

"I know."

"You are sure that is the card you want to play, that way."

"Yes'm."

"Mmm hmm. Girls, it appears we have a frozen deck."

"Doesn't it, though," Gerda said through tight lips. "Someone has been putting ideas in this boy's head." Aunt Kate sat there looking like she couldn't imagine what got into me, nor could she. "Well, we have no choice, do we," Gerda reluctantly conceded. "Your draw, Herta."

Herta drew and stuck the card away and as if distracted by Biggie's latest chorus of chirrups, discarded an ace of spades. Immediately she went into flutters and the full act of "Oh, did I play that card? I didn't mean to!"

She made as if to pick it up, which Aunt Kate headed off fast as a shot. "Oh no you don't. Against the rules, Herta, you know perfectly well." Tossing down her natural pair of aces, she gobbled up the whopper of a pile and began melding aces and queens and jacks in rainbows of highscoring cards across half the table and then down into the lower denominations, canastas following canastas, while Gerda squirmed as if enduring torture and Herta tried to look remorseful, although with little glances sideways at me marking our secret. I pressed my cards to my chest with one hand, nervously rubbing the arrowhead in its sheath with the

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Shatterhand in Herman's shoot-'em-ups faced situations all the time where a person's fate could be decided on the turn of a card. But in real life, my future with Aunt Kate rested just as precariously on my gameness, to call it that in all possible senses, to cope with great big handfuls of canasta cards.

For it had dawned on me during the hen party chitchat before we sat up to the card table why she was so determined--savagely so, I thought at the time--to drill canasta into me. From the evidence of framed family photographs lined up over on the glistenng sideboard, Herta was the matriarch of a whole slew of sharp-looking Schepkes, and Gerda ever so casually kept working into the conversation remarks about the latest achievement of a grandson here, a granddaughter there, the cream of her crop that was no doubt doing outstanding things in the world. And Aunt Kate was stuck with me, her lone such twinkling star of the younger generation, supposedly bright enough to read by at night, to be shown off at last. If I didn't prove to be too dim to grasp a card game old ladies played like riverboat gamblers. By now I knew Aunt Kate well enough that if that happened, any attempt at shining me up to match Herta's and Gerda's golden offspring would be doused at once and she would devote her efforts to conveying to the others what a complete moron she was nobly putting up with. She could go either way. I was in big trouble if I did not play my cards right, in more than one meaning as I was about to find out.

No sooner had Gerda finished dealing than she reached down for her purse beside her chair and took out a roll of coins, plunking it down beside her. Aunt Kate simultaneously did the same, each woman thumbing open the bank wrap to spill a stock of quarters in front of them.

"Time to feed the kitty," Aunt Kate said musically, evidently a usual joke.

"We'll see about that," Gerda declared.



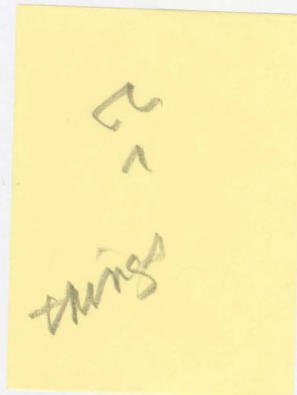
"Here's my half, Gerd," Herta thrust a five-dollar bill across the table, which vanished into Gerda's purse. I blinked at that transaction, which indicated each roll of quarters was ten dollars' worth, a long way toward the total of my lost stash and plopped down here casually as if this was a game of marbles. That was only half of my astonishment.

"Are we playing for blood?"

My shrilled question, straight from bunkhouse poker lingo, made all three women recoil. It was up to Aunt Kate to set me straight, the pointed looks at her from Gerda and Herta made plain.

"If you mean are we gambling, dearie, *you* most certainly are not," she set in on me with a warning frown. "I am standing your share, aren't I," underscoring the point by picking up a wealth of quarters and letting them tickle from her hand. "The Minnie share, we can call it." The other two tittered appreciatively at that. "As to our teensy wagers," she spoke as if this might be hard for me to follow but I had better try, "we are simply making the game more interesting, aren't we, girls. To liven ghints up a little, mm?" So saying, she shoved a quarter each for herself and me, the wouldbe Minnie Zettel, out next to the deck to form the kitty, Gerda did the same for her and Herta, and that was supposed to be that.

With money riding on the game, added to all else circling in my head as I stuffed cards into my hand fifteen deep, I sneaked looks right and left sizing up our opponents. Both women were cut from the same cloth as Aunt Kate, which was to say spacious. Gerda was squat and broad, Herta was tall and broad. The halfway similar names and wide builds aside, they were not sisters, merely cousins, and old acquaintances of Aunt Kate from some ladies' club way back when, I gathered. Both were widows, Herman holding the firm belief that they had talked their husbands to death. Widders, in the bunkhouse pronunciation I had picked up.



*Melody Roundup* on the Great Falls radio station sometimes played a country-and-western song that backed Herman's theory to a considerable extent: "*Widder women and white lightning, what they do to a man is frightening.*" That tune crazily invaded through my head, too, as I tried to force myself to remember the countless rules of canasta.

"Don-ny," Aunt Kate prompted with a smile seeking forgiveness from the Herta-Gerda partnership, "any red threes to meld?"

Not a good start. "Sure, I was just about to." I grabbed the trey of hearts I had stuck at the far end of my hand without a thought and flopped it on the table. Aunt Kate leaned back and smiled at me with a hint of warning in her eyes that I had almost cost us a hundred points by not playing the damn three in the first place, and Gerda looked at me slyly as she flipped me the replacement card. "My, my, aren't you something, you're beating the pants off us already," Herta said in the same dumbed-down tone she used in talking to the bird.

After that I tried to keep my mind fully on draws and discards and Herman's eye-deas for bushwhacking and the rest, but the hen party combination on either side of me, not even to mention Biggie the budgie squealing away, was really distracting. Herta actually clucked, making that *thwock* sound with her tongue against the roof of her mouth when she exclaimed over something, which was often. That was bad enough, but her partner presented an even worse challenge. The last name of Gerda was Hostetter, which was so close to Horse Titter that I couldn't get that out of my mind either. I had learned by way of Gram to call grownups I didn't know well Mr. and Mrs., and every time I addressed her it came out something like "Mrs. Horssstetter."

"Oh, don't, snickelfritz," she killed that off after the first few times. "Just call me Gerda, please." Making a discard that I had absolutely no use for as she

.00 to my right



uncannily almost always did, she idly glanced at me saying, "I understand you're from a ranch. Is it one of those fancy dude ones?"

"No-o-o, not exactly. It's more the kind with cows and horses and hayfields," that last word came out wistfully.

"I suppose you're glad to be here because there's not much for a boy like you to do there," said Gerda as if that were the epitaph on my ranch life.

"Aw, there's always something going on," I found myself sticking up for the Double W. All three women were eating the cheese-and-cracker nibbles as if they were gumdrops, so it must have their obvious devotion to food that brought what I considered an inspiration. "You know, what's really fun on a ranch is a testicle festival."

That stopped everyone's chewing and drew me full attention from three directions, so I thought I had better explain pretty fast.

"It happens at branding time, see, when the male calves have to be taken care of. It's nut cutting, there's no way around calling it anything but that. Well, castration, if you want to be fancy. Anyway, all these testicles get thrown in a bucket to be washed up and then cooked over the fire right there in the corral. There's plenty to feed the whole branding crew. Two to a calf, you know," I spelled out because from the blank expressions around the table, maybe they weren't that knowledgeable about livestock.

"Don-ny," Aunt Kate spoke as if she had something caught in her gullet, "that's very interesting, but--"

Herta blurted, "You actually *eat* those?"

"Oh sure, you can guzzle them right down. Rocky Mountain oysters, they're real good. You have to fry them up nice, bread them in cornmeal or something, but then, yum."

Yum did not seem to sit well with the ladies. Thinking it might be because they were used to nibbles, as Aunt Kate called the candy gunk which bite by bite didn't amount to much and Herta's crackers-and-cheese treat which tasted like dried toast and library paste, I kept trying to present the case for Rocky Mountain oysters despite the discreet signals from across the table that enough was enough. Not to me, it wasn't. I had an argument to make. "Honest, you can make a whole meal out of not that many nu--testicles, see. They're about yay long," I held my fingers four or so inches apart, the size of a healthy former bull calf's reproductive items.

Herta seemed to take that in with more interest than did Gerda, who just looked at me as if sorting me out the ruthless way she did cards. Apparently deciding I could be coaxed off the topic, she crooned in practically birdie talk, "That tells us so much about ranch life. Anyway, aren't you cuter than sin in your cowboy shirt."

Without meaning to--much, anyway--I gave her the full snaggle smile for that, the one like I might bite.

"Heavens!" She jerked her cards up as if shielding herself from me. "What in the world happened to that boy's t--?"

"He fell while he was working on the ranch," Aunt Kate wisely did not go into the roundup tale. "They have a favorite dentist back there and his grandmother will take him to to be fixed up the minute he gets home to Montana," she topped that off smooth as butter. This was news to me, but not the kind intended. She could story as fast and loose as I could.

After that performance on my part, as I knew Aunt Kate was going to level the word at me later, the game dragged on with the score steadily mounting against us and the quarters in the kitty regularly being scooped in by Gerda. It turned out that livening things up a little, as Aunt Kate called it, including many an ante during



play as well as the payoff for winning each hand. Natural canastas, without wild cards, brought groans and a forfeit of quarters, as did things Aunt Kate characterized as Manitowoc rules, such as melding all black aces. I watched with apprehension as the score steadily mounted against us and Aunt Kate's supply of quarters dwindled. In bunkhouse terms, we were up against sharpies. Gerda was a terrifying player, seeming to know which cards each of the rest of us held, as if she had X-ray vision. Herta was no slouch either. As I desperately tried to keep up with what cards were played and the passel of rules and the kitty being won by them instead of us two times out of three, I was concentrating nearly to the point of oblivion when I heard the word *green*, followed by stamps.

I snapped to. Herta was going on about a certain lawn chair featured in the window at the Schermerhorn furniture store downtown. "It has the nicest blue plastic weave and is so light, made of aluminum, and you can fold right down flat in it to sun yourself," she enthused. "It costs somethiong fierce, though. So I'm hoping I can get it if I can build up my Green Stamps before too awfully long, while summer is still going good."

"Oh, those, I never bother with them," Aunt Kate pooh-poohed the trading stamps. "They're so little use, you can't even trade them in for clothes. Besides, I don't shop at Schermerhorn's any more, I'm convinced they short-changed me when I bought my recliner there."

"We all *have* clothes, Kitty," Herta responded with a huffy glance at Aunt Kates' outfit, royal red today. "What I want is that lawn chair. Free and for nothing and with not even a fee, as the saying is." All three tittered at that. Then Herta sighed and consoled herself with a nibble. "I've been saving up and saving up, but it's a slow process."

"You watch and see," Gerda put in, "you'll be eligible for that lawn chair about the time a foot of snow comes. I'm with Kitty, those silly stamps aren't

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worth the trouble. It's your draw, snickelfritz," and bang, we were right back at canasta, playing for blood. For me, though, Green Stamps had been added into the reds and blacks of eye-deas.

I watched and waited for the discard pile to grow, meanwhile dipping my hand into my pants pocket to work on the lucky arrowhead. Gerda noticed me at it, as she did everything, and asked none too nicely, "What's the attraction down your leg there?"

Before I could make up an excuse, Aunt Kate spoke up. "Ugh, it's that old rabbit's foot he carries. You don't want to see the nasty thing."

That took care of that, and on the next go-round, my ears ringing with Herman's advice--*Hold back, discard one like you don't got any use for it, and watch for same kind of card to show up on pile in your turn. Bullwhack the hens--* I discarded one of the five sevenspots I had built up. Sure enough, two rounds later, Gerda the human card machine operated on memory and tossed onto the pile what should have been an absolutely safe seven of spades. Saying nothing and maintaining a poker face if not a canasta one, I produced my double pair of sevens and swept up the pile.

There was a stunned silence from Gerda and Herta and a tongue-in-cheek one from Aunt Kate as I pulled in the rich haul of cards. Finally Gerda could not stand it and said, in a tone very much as if she had been bushwhacked, "Just as a point of the obvious, you do know you discarded a seven a bit ago."

"Uh-huh," I played dumb although I also kept spreading sevens and other melds across the table, "but this way I got it back." Aunt Kate conspicuously said nothing, merely watching me meld cards right and left as if our good fortune was an accident of luck, which it was but not in the way she thought.

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somewhat, but I was running out of tricks according to Hoyle and Herman, and several hands later we still trailed on the score sheet and worse in the kitty. Another ridiculous thing about canasta was that the game went on and on until one set of partners had scored a total of five thousand points. The way this was going, Herta and Gerda would reach that in another hand or two and wipe us out good and plenty. Aunt Kate wore an expression of resignation tinged with exasperation, and I did not look forward to the ride home with her. Before the next hand was dealt, though, we were temporarily saved by the luck or whatever it was of me sneaking the last cracker-and-cheese and downing it.

“Goodness, we’ve gone through the nibbles, haven’t we,” Herta immediately noticed the empty plate and felt her hostess duty. “What do you say we take a wee little break and I’ll fix some more.”

“And a little wee break,” said Aunt Kate, surprisingly reckless, as she headed out to what she called the powder room, which from my experience with names for the convenience I figured must be the toilet. Gerda called dibs on the next visit, and went over to wait by cooing to the parakeet.

Here was my chance, slim as it was. As if just looking around, I wandered into the kitchen where Herta was industriously dipping a tableknife into a freshly opened jar of pimento cheese spread and daubing some on cracker after cracker to build a pyramid on the plate. She glanced around at me with an eyebrow raised, humorously maybe. “After all that talk of ‘oysters’, too hungry to wait, are we?”

“It’s not that.” I peeked back into the living room to make sure we couldn’t be overheard. Gerda was babytalking to the parakeet, which answered her with screeches of “*Big-ee, Big-ee* “ “Those stamps you were talking about, the green ones? You know what? I’ve got some that aren’t doing me any good.”

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me that said it would be just our secret, wouldn't it. Thinking I was making too much of too little, she said, "You must have been with Kitty or that husband of hers at one of those gas station where they give out Green Stamps few and far between, is that it?"

"Uh-uh. I have a whole book, pasted in and everythibng."

She sucked her finger while studying me with deepened interest. "What's a boy like you doing with all those?"

Sixteen hundred and one miles on the bus, that was what. But I only said, "I got them with my ticket here. So I was wondering if we could sort of make a trade, since they're called trading stamps, right?"

"A trade, you say," she inquired in a lowered voice, nibbles forgotten now. "Such as?"

"Well, see, I know how much you'd like to have that lawn chair. And you know how much Aunt Kate likes to win. If you could help that along a little, so she and I come out on top today, I could bring you my book of Green Stamps next time we play. That way, you get your free lawn chair and I don't get my fanny chewed about canasta all week "

"Goodness gracious, you do have a way of putting things." She thought for a couple of seconds, weighing what she would lose in the kitty against the fierce cost of the lawn chair, then craned her neck to check on the living room, with me doing the same. Gerda was taking her turn in the bathroom, and Aunt Kate ~~Aunt Kate~~ now was stationed at the birdcage whistling at Biggie and receiving squeaks and scratchy *chirrup*s in return. Clucking to herself as clicking onto a decision, Herta leaned all the way down to my nearest ear and murmured:

"It would be a good joke on Kittycat, wouldn't it."

"A real funnybone tickler, you bet."

"Just between us, of course."

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Announcer spiel. singles him out, calls him Leggings. "How about... Look at him go! as a Scotchman trying to sneak under the door of a pay toilet. Folks, these dances go back a long way...

Still hopping and writhing, goes out of arena and rodeo grounds in the pack of dancing kids. back out to the tepees.

Herman is waiting. "Louie has truck out, you can change there."

And would you believe, I got his autograph and more.

"More to you than meets an eye.

"What do you want to see next?"

"Something without po-leece breathing on us." "Notcheral wonders."

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mean?

Unable to get my ears around that, I started to tell him to talk plain English because we didn't have time to fool around, but he got there first, more or less. Tilting his head to peer down at me as much with his glass eye as his good one, he uttered--and I still wasn't sure I hearing right--"You got fingerspitzengefuhl, I betcha."

My hands curled as if he had diagnosed some kind of disease. "That doesn't sound like something I want to got, I mean have."

"Faith, you need." Herman showed that same sly expression as when he'd disclosed Manitou and Manitowocers and other spooky stuff to me that time in the greenhouse, my goosebumps coming back while he elaborated on the finger-spitty-whatever it was.

"No choice do you have. It comes notcheral, once in great while," he said as if it was perfectly normal for me to singled out by some loco-sounding thing. "Generals who think with their fingers, like Napoleon, born with it. Clark and Lewis maybe, explorers like us, ja?" The more he spoke, the more serious he seemed to be, while I wished he would just shut up. Ticket-holding passengers coming by to check out their routes on the map and happening to overhear any of this were giving us funny looks and stepping away fast.

"Captain Cook, how about, sailing the world around and around," he still was cranking it out, very much Herman the German in his accent at this point. "Must of had fingerspitzengefuhl, or *pthht*, shipwreck."

I since have learned that what he was trying to describe with that jawbreaker word might best be called intuition in the fingertips, something like instinct or born genius or plain inspired guesswork tracing the best possible course up from map paper there at the end of the hand. A special kind of talent of touch and decision that came from who knows where. He cocked that glass-eyed look at me as if I was something special. "You are lucky boy, Donny, to got it."

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not



Unconvinced and uncertain, I rubbed my thumbs against my fingertips, which felt the same as ever. "And wh-what if I do?"

"Easy. You find us where to go." In demonstration, he wagged his fingers as if warming up to play the piano and shifted his gaze to the map over our heads.

I did not want any part of this. "Herman, huh-uh. Even if I stand on a bench I can't reach anything but Florida, and that's way to hell and gone in the wrong direction."

"Tell you what," he breezed past my objection, "I get down, you get up." Then and there, he squatted low as he could go.

I realized he wanted me to straddle his shoulders. Skittish, I couldn't help glancing at people pouring past in as public a place as there was, a good many of them staring as if we already were a spectacle. "Hey, no, really, I don't think I'd better," I balked. "Won't we get arrested?"

"Pah," he dismissed that. "America don't know hill of beans about arresting people. You should see Germany. Come on, up the daisy," he finished impatiently, still down there on his heels. "Pony ride."

Feeling like a fool, I swung my legs onto his shoulders and he grunted and lifted me high.

Up there eight feet tall, the West was mapped out to me as close as anyone could want, for sure. Matter of faith or not, I had to go through the motions. Pressing my hand against the map surface, slick as a blackboard, I tried to draw out inspiration from one spot or another, any spot. Certain the eyes of the entire depot were on me, I felt around like the blind man exploring the elephant. Easy, this absolutely wasn't. If Herman's Apache knight was anywhere around Tucson or Albuquerque, he didn't answer the call. Nor did any Navajo cousin of Winnetou, around the four corners where Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado all met.

Automatically my hand kept following the bus routes traced in bright red, drifting up, on past Denver, Salt Lake City, Cheyenne. Whatever the right sensation of this silly Hermanic stunt was supposed to be, it was not making itself felt.

By now I was stretching as far as I could reach, the Continental Divide at my elbow, with Herman swaying some as he clutched me around the ankles.

"Donny, hurry, ja? Getting heavy, you are."

"I'm trying, I'm trying." At least my hand was, moving as if of its own accord. I could tell myself I didn't believe in the finger-guh-fool stuff all I wanted, but all of a sudden my index finger went as if magnetized to the telltale spot over the top of Wyoming.

"I got it!"

"Whereabouts?"

"Montana!"

"Good! Where in Montana?"

"Down from Billings a little."

"What is there?"

"Crow Fair."

"Hah? Go see birds? Donny, try again."

"No! Let me down, I'll tell you about it."



Back to earth, or the depot floor at least, I talked fast while Herman listened for all he was worth.

“These Crows are Indians, see, and Crow Fair is their big powwow. They always hold it between the strawberry moon and the buck moon, something to do with when berries are done growing but buck deer grow new antlers.” I could tell I lost Herman more than a little there. “That’s this time of year, get it? We learned a bunch of Indian stuff like that in social study class at Heart Butte. Anyhow,” I rushed on, absolute grade school expert that I was on such matters, “Crow Fair is really something, it lasts until they’re powwowed out after about a week and I bet we can get there while it’s still going on.”

Fingerspitzengefuhl notwithstanding, he squinted dubiously up at the little red artery of Greyhound route to the Crow reservation, way out west from Milwaukee certainly but also in the apparent middle of nowhere, until I kicked in, “All kinds of Indians show up for Crow Fair, honest.”

Herman’s thick glasses caught a gleam. “All kinds Indians? You are sure?”

“Sure I’m sure. Hundreds of them. Thousands.”

“Even Apaches like Winnetou?”

"There's gotta be," I professed. "They wouldn't stay home from a powwow like that, the other Indians would think they're sissies."

That settled it. Declaring there could be no such thing as sissy Apaches, Herman nodded decisively. "Crow Fair is where we go. Pick up your suitcase, Donny."

In my experience, there is no other thrill quite like disappearing, the way Herman and I were about to aboard the dog bus. Who would not be excited at the prospect of walking away--no, better, riding away at high speed almost as if the racing hound beneath our side window was carrying us on its back in some storybook--from what we faced? This is hindsight, always 20/20, but given my nearly dozen years of living more or less like an underage vagabond in construction camps and cookhouse, I had been through enough to grasp that with every mile flying past we would be borne away from Palookaville existences--Manitowoc ruled by the Kate in his case, orphanage limbo in mine--to life of our own making in the wide-open map of the West. An idea as freeing as a million-dollar dream and a whole hell of a lot more appealing than waiting on your knees for your soul to be snatched to heaven, right? So I still have to hand it to Herman, vanishing as we did was an inspiration right up there with the Manitou walkers going about their business in ghostly invisibility.

Not that erasing ourselves from where we were supposed to be was as easy as a snap of the fingers and the two of us gone in a cloud of tailpipe exhaust. Right away there in the Milwaukee bus terminal, Herman had me keep out of sight while he did the buying of the tickets to the map dot called Crow Agency--as he said, so any busy body would not remember us traveling together. "No tracks behind do we leave," he told me as if we were as stealthy as the Apaches themselves.

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Which held true only if Apaches greeted anyone sitting across from them on a Greyhound bus with "Hallo, you are going where?"

Something I had not counted on was that my newly conceived comrade in travel would be an adventure himself on the long trip west. This came through to me almost the minute our fannies hit the bus seats, when Herman struck up a conversation with whoever happened to be seated opposite us, or for that matter, in front or behind. Evidently he had stored up bushels of talk those hours in the greenhouse all by his lonesome, and did he ever let the surplus out now, much of it given to bragging up the two of us as adventurers of the highway.

"My nephew, quite the traveler he is," time after time he presented me, grinning back skittishly through my freckles, to whatever listener happened to be captive at the moment. "Seeing the land, we are."

Now, I had palavered plenty with total strangers on my trip to Manitowoc, for sure, but I was not trying to cover my tracks at the time. So while I was constantly jumpy about us somehow being tracked down--fairly or not, in my imagination the busybody who might do so had the plentiful face of Aunt Kate--Herman without a qualm gabbed away along a tricky line of conversation to maintain, keeping things approximate enough to be believed yet skipping the troublesome truth that we amounted to voluntary fugitives. Runaways, when you came right down to it, as the mean little Glasgow sheriff had wrongly accused me before I was even out of Montana on my first cross-country journey. It does make a person think: Had the runty lawman spied something in me with his sour squint that I didn't recognize in myself? Being seen through is never welcome, and thank heaven or Manitou or whatever spooky power seemed to guide Herman, because despite my nerve flutters whenever someone expressed curiosity about where we were going, he always derailed the question with a goofy grin and the observation, "Somewheres south of the moon and north of Hell, if we are lucky."

41



And so, state by state as the bus rolled up the miles, if we were remembered at all by the young honeymooners giggling their way to Wisconsin Dells or the retired Mayo Clinic doctor and his nice wife who reminded me of the kindly Zimmermans or the Dakotan couple off the hog farm to shop in town, any of the Greyhound riders across the aisle would have recalled the pair of us only as a pared-down family of tourists out to see things.

That, at least, held a lot of truth, because with Wisconsin behind me I belatedly was ready to heed Gram--although not nearly in the manner she had advised back there in the cookhouse--and step out in the world eager for new scenes and experiences, while Herman was as complete a sightseer as a one-eyed person can be. "Donny, see!" he'd point out any stretch of land open enough to hold a horse or cow. Even across cactusless Minnesota, he declared the countryside exotic enough to be the setting for a Karl May shoot-'em-up.

Then about the time I'd had all of those exclamations I could stomach, I would look over and he'd be snoring away--literally in the blink of an eye he could sleep like a soldier, anytime and anywhere, simply conk off--restoring himself for the next stint of gabbing and gawking. But no sooner would I be taking the quiet opportunity to have a Mounds bar or pull out the autograph album to coax an inscription from some promising passenger than I'd hear from beside me, "You got work done, Donny?"

The yawning question as he came awake would be my signal to sigh and get back at what needed to be done, thanks to his big *eye-dea* on our ride out of Manitowoc. That is, corresponding with Gram from well into the future. I will say, when Herman put his mind to something like that, he did it all-out. In the shop at the Milwaukee terminal that sold everything from toothpaste to shoelaces, he had bought me a tablet with stiff backing, envelopes and stamps, everything needed "for you to write like a good boy." Then, of course, it was up to me, the

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shameless storier as Aunt Kate characterized it. As towns and their convenience stops came and went--Fond du Lac, Eau Claire, Menomonie, the Twin Cities where I made damn sure we caught the next bus in plenty of time--I composed letter upon letter describing how my summer in the company of Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch was supposedly going. Creating my ghost self, I suppose it could be said, existing with the Manitowocers roaming around in the afterlife.

If my imagination and I were any example, there may be something to the notion that life on the road lends itself to rambling on the page. Putting the Kwik Klik into action, I would begin with some variation of *Dear Gram--I am fine, I hope you are better. The weather here in Wisconsin is hot. I am having a good time. Then I'd bring my foe into the picture, disguised as the swellest great-aunt ever. Guess what, Aunt Kitty bought a collie dog named Laddie to keep me company. She is always doing things like that.... Today Aunt Kitty took me to the circus. Those acrobats are really something... For the Fourth of July we went the park where they played music like God Bless America and shot off fireworks and everything. Next, Aunt Kitty is taking me to see the big ship in the harbor, the Chequamagon. Things are spelled long like that in Wisconsin....*

I scarcely mentioned Herman, not wanting to get into his change from Dutch and the glass eye and all that, and he seemed not to mind being left out. He read each of my compositions with his finger, very much as as Gram would do when it arrived to her, occasionally questioning a word--"Looks funny, trapeze is spelled with z?"--before carefully sealing the result into an envelope for the packet to go to Max, the Schooner bartender, for mailing onward to the Columbus Hospital pavilion in Great Falls. And I would go on to make up the next feature of my pretended summer on the Lake Michigan shore where Manitou held sway. *Aunt Kitty and I went to the museum. It was real interesting, full of Indian stuff....*

Old Hippo Butt would have been surprised all the way to her back teeth at the number of kindly endeavors my imagination provided her.

If Herman and I were a bit out of our heads in our enthusiasm for all things Indian, my explanation is that we had stumbled onto, or into, the practice called a vision quest. In a vision quest, a member of the tribe sets off on his own into forest or desert, the territory of the unknown, to seek wisdom of some sort, perhaps in the form of a visit from an imaginary being. A spirit, in more than one sense of the word. With apologies to true Indians starting with the Crows and on around, I maintain that our trip halfway across America to Crow Fair came to represent something like that for the two of us. I mean, we even had moccasins and the arrowhead and what Herman had absorbed about Manitou and Winnetou and Hiawatha and what I had picked up in school with Blackfeet kids at Heart Butte, and when you come right down to it, fingerspitzengefühl in and of itself was pretty much a visionary frame of mind, right? So it was not as if we were totally unequipped for our journey. And I don't know about other quests, but on our nearly two-thousand-mile one, things I had not known or could even have guessed at tended to show up when I least expected, surprising as anything you'd ever meet in the timber. While those may not have bestowed as much wisdom as wanted, they definitely wised me up to a few facts of life.

The first such revelation came at breakfast with Herman, that much-fought-over battleground between the Kate and him.

I did not think anything out of the ordinary when the bus pulled in just past daybreak at Ortonville, a stateline town as sleepy as if it had ridden through the Minnesota night with the rest of us trying to yawn ourselves awake as we piled off into the otherwise dead Greyhound depot and its linoleum-floored cafe section. Before straddling up to the counter for his coffee and banter with the waitress, the



driver half jokingly warned us all to stoke up for the long stretch of South Dakota ahead. I never needed that sort of encouragement and promptly tied into a breakfast of ham and eggs and a stack of hotcakes swimming in syrup. Herman at his, though, turned out to be what Gram would have called a pecky eater, and then some.

That is, when his order of scrambled eggs and toast arrived, he ate the eggs in regular enough fashion, but then I noticed him nibbling away and nibbling away at a piece of toast. More accurately, taking bites tinier than nibbles, whatever those might be, which was quite a sight with his chisel-like teeth.

While this peculiar performance across the table did not cause me to throw a fit as it so regularly did Aunt Kate at Manitowoc breakfast times, I do have to say such behavior was sort of disturbing, hard to watch and harder not to.

Herman kept at it, turning the toast this way and that to take those squirrely little bites, discarding crust onto the edge of his plate, until finally putting down what was left of the slice and sitting back in apparent satisfaction. Figuring it was none of my business if a person wanted to eat a piece of toast like it was bird food, I worked away at my hotcakes without saying anything.

He wasn't letting me off that easy. "So, Donny, see," he prompted, indicating the remains of his meal. "Where is it, do you think?"

What kind of nutty question was that? Giving him a funny look, I pointed my fork at the limp remainder of toast, so chewed over it had ended up vaguely like the outline of a discarded boot, nibbled-out instep between heel and toe and all. "What, are your peepers going bad?" I spouted off, not the best thing I could have said to someone with a glass eye. "I mean, what you were eating on is right there in your plate, if it was a snake it'd bite you."

"Hah-uh. Think bigger." When I didn't catch on, he hinted: "Gee-oh-gaphy."

Still perplexed, I peered harder at the crustless gob of toast. Then it dawned on me, not vague at all.

"Italy?"

Herman slapped the table in triumph. "Smart boy. You got it, first try."

Where Aunt Kate thought his way with toast was disgusting, I was all for it. "Out the far end, Herman! Can you do other countries?"

"Everything in the book," he claimed grandly. "On ship and in army, you pass time best you can." He grinned practically wide enough to fit a piece of toast <sup>it</sup> in. "Winned lots of bets that I could not do Australia or somewheres, too."

Add that to playing a tune with a spoon on his glass eye and dog-robbing behind the lines at places like Dead Man's Hill and surviving the Witch of November in the Strait of Mackinac and recognizing any beer at first taste and stocking up on Indian lore from Gitchee Gumee to Winnetou, and I realized I was in the company of someone whose surprises just did not stop coming. This was a treat of a kind I could never have dreamed of, but also a challenge. Life with Herman was a size larger than I was used to, like clothing I was supposed to grow into.

His next trick came when I still was digesting the breakfast world of toast, so to speak. At the lunch stop in Mobridge, halfway across South Dakota after a long morning when the most exciting thing out the bus window was jackrabbits, Herman pushed his half-finished plate away, lit up an el stinko and puffed away, squinting at me reflectively as I polished off peach pie a la mode after chicken fried steak with all the fixings. Smoke clouding over him like a gathering thought, he asked abruptly, "When do you got to go to gymnasium?"

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He pronounced it gim-nasium, and while I figured that out pretty quick, I didn't savvy what he meant. "Why would I have to go to the gym? Nobody plays basketball this time of year."

"Pardon my German," he looked put out with himself. "School, I am talking about."

"Oh, that. Not until after Labor Day. Tons of time until then, see."

"Too long," he thought that over with a puff, something in his tone putting me on guard. "Your grossmutter, hah, Donny?" Even without translation, I knew he meant Gram. "You must telephone, right now quick. Make her think she don't got to worry about situation in Manitowoc."

That jerked me up in my chair. "Aw, fuck and phooey, Herman. Are you kidding? On top of writing letters to her until my hand is about to fall off, like I've been? Why?" I may have whined a bit there at the last.

"Not kidding." Snubbing out his cigar decisively, he looked around the terminal. "Phone booth, over there." While I still was floored by this latest *eye-dea*, he already was onto his feet. "Giddy up," he urged me onto mine. "We got time before bus goes."

I wasn't budging. Lying to Gram by mail was one thing, but doing it out loud, even across hundreds of miles of telephone wire, was nothing I wanted to attempt. "I--I don't think I'd better. The nuns and all maybe don't want me bothering Gram and might not let me talk to her anyway and so it'd be a waste of--"

"Must be done," he insisted. "Otherwise, what if she calls before a letter comes, talks to the Kate? *Pthht*, we are."

I had to take his point about our secret trip being kaput if that happened, and even more, the mile-deep trouble I'd be in if Gram had any inkling I was not where I was supposed to be. That fast, I was the one worried about the situation in

Manitowoc, and surrendered to whatever scheme Herman had this time. "So, what do I say?"

He laid it out in more or less plain English, with me trying to memorize the words that counted.

When I was installed in the phone booth to his satisfaction, he dug a handful of change out of his pocket, stressing as if this was a lesson I needed to carry through life, "First thing is put in plenty money, so operator don't come on the line for more." *Ching ching ching*, he fed coins in until it was a wonder the phone box didn't burp. With the booth door cracked open so he could help out if I needed it, he oversaw my shaky dialing of the number of the Columbus Hospital pavilion ward, all the way away in Great Falls. "I keep track of time," he tapped his wristwatch.

I clutched the receiver to my ear, with one of Gram's sayings filling my head as if she was already on the line. *Here goes nothing from nowhere.*

The phone rang and rang until at last a highly recognizable voice crisp as frost answered, saying I had reached the Order of Mercy nursing pavilion, Sister Carma Jean speaking, may she help me?

"This is, ah, Donal Cameron," I rushed past any civilities, "please can I talk to my grandmother?"

"Mrs. Blegen, you mean?" The nun sounded none too willing. "She is still gettng over the complications from her surgery, I'm sorry to say, and is not allowed visitors yet. Doctor's orders. Can this wait?"

"Huh-uh," I gulped out honestly enough with the instigator of this nearly breathing down my neck. "I'm calling from sixteen hundred and one miles away, see," I made use of Manitowoc, "so I'm not really a visitor, am I."

There was silence on the phone as if Sister Carma Jean was reckoning that number of miles against the doctor's orders, until eventually she took mercy on me.

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"I suppose that changes the matter. She's at the other end of the ward. Hold on, I'll bring her in the chair."

That confused me. What, carry her in a chair? Sister Carma Jean must be one muscular nun. Then I caught on.

Meanwhile Herman was frowning into the phone booth at the stall in conversation, and I booted the door open. "They have to go get her, and besides, she's--"

Swearing in German, he squeezed into the booth alongside me and slugged some more silver into the coin slot. The *chings* had barely died down when I heard: "Donny? In the name of heaven as they say around here, is that you?"

"Gram? Are you in a wheelchair?" Caught by the sudden onset of conversation, Herman had to stay crammed in with me and yank the door shut quickly as the public address system announced a bus arrival.

"For now." Her voice did not sound quite right, like she was trying to make it seem sturdier than it was. "What was that noise on the line?"

"The radio. Aunt Ka--Kitty plays it a lot. How come you're in a wheelchair?"

"Oh Donal, what in the world am I going to do with you?" That panicked me, the issue slambang like that in her own words. Luckily it turned out to be only Gram being Gram. "How many times do I have to tell you, boy, don't worry so about me. I had a little setback, is all."

"Are you gonna be okay?" I quavered. Herman had his ear down practically on top of mine, both of us waiting in anxiety.

"Of course I will, good as new and spitshined besides. It just takes time." What she was saying did not match what I was hearing, the strain in her talk coming through despite her best effort. My uncharacteristic silence, maybe with Herman's piled onto it, made her try it over. "The only thing about it is, I have so

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many stitches the doctor doesn't want me exerting myself any, and they wheel me around everywhere. The nuns are awful kind, Sister CJ and the others treat me like the Queen of Sheba."

Charitable to a charity case, I heard that as. "That's good, I guess."

"Donny, this is a surprise, hearing from you like this."

"I--I was thinking about you."

"That's nice. Are you calling about anything in particular?" I could hear her real question behind that: *Or just to make you head rattle?*

"No, no." I tried to think of a good reason why I might be calling. "I only wanted to wish you happy birthday."

"My birthday is in October, like yours."

"Hey, that's right. I must have got that mixed up. Anyway, better early than never, huh?"

"I see, said the blind man as he picked up the hammer and saw," she sounded more like her old self. "If there's nothing else on your mind, funnybones, but having me blow out candles on my cake months early, let me talk to Kitty a minute, please."

This was the memorized part. "She's, uh, too busy to talk to you, she said. Getting ready to go to her canasta party. Told me not to spend too much time on the phone with you because it's long-distance and costs money."

"Oh, she's going to behave like that, is she," Gram turned huffy, which for once was a development I was after. "Well, she needn't strain her busy self to pick up the phone to talk to her own sister if she doesn't want to. Silly me, I thought we were back to being on speaking terms when she agreed to take you for the summer. But if she's bound and determined to be The Great Kate"--that brought back my dumb Kate Smith episode, along with a rush of blood to my head--"toward me, that's up to her."

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Success. An old nerve touched, all the way back to girlhood. As worked up as Gram was, I hoped she didn't bust her stitches. But Herman, crammed in next to me, nodded full approval of how the conversation was going. If so, though, why did I feel more than a little guilty?

We both heard the note of desperation take over the voice at the other end. "Donny, listen, please. I hope you're getting along with her, that's all that counts. Her and I don't need to have anything to do with each other, as long as she's treating you right." A pause that was painful at both ends of the line, before: "This summer has to work out the best we can get it to, or--"

That needed no spelling out beyond *or*. "Oh, we're fine and dandy, her and me," I pretended to the best of my ability, nudged along by Herman. "She's teaching me how to play canasta and everything." Herman shook his head at me not to overdo it.

"Playing 'nasty, is she," Gram could not resist. "Anyway, tell Miss Stuck Up for me I'm dreadful sorry I missed her."

"Yeah, sure," I trailed off, my end of the conversation exhausted. "Gram, wait a minute, Herm--I mean, Dutch wants to say hello." He was shaking his head, but I thrust the receiver at him.

"Hallo? How is your operation?"

That induced enough from the other end--which I could not quite hear--that he only needed to contribute "Ah-huh" repeatedly. It went on surprisingly long like that until my name apparently came into it. "Hah-uh, he is not geting carried away any too much." He grinned and I winced.

More expansive yet, Herman was doing all the talking now. "Donny fits right in with us here in Manitowoc, from day number one. We're enjoying him like all git out."

My pained show of teeth told him not to get too carried away and besides, the time was ticking down.

"Must go, somebody at the door," he made up with an ease that impressed me. "Don't worry yourself. He is a good boy."

Hanging up, he bobbed his head in satisfaction. "Her and the Kate won't give each other time of day now." Then, though, I caught sight of the concern that flickered into his expression. "She is quite the woman. The graveyard wants her much too soon."

Putting aside that sorrowful German saying or whatever it was before I could bring myself to deal with it, he scooted me out of the phone booth for us to make the run for our bus.

Then at suppertime, it was my turn to do the surprising. Almost from the start of the trip, Herman kept pestering me to know, "When are we in the West?" That evening, when we had reached Miles City, far enough into Montana that the neon signs on bars showed bucking broncs kicking up their heels, I finally could give the answer he wanted to hear. "Guess what," I pointed out the window of the cafe section of the Greyhound depot to that evidence. "We're there now."

"Hah," said Herman, his eyes lighting up and following mine to the flashing sign on The Buckaroo bar across the street, with a rider waving his cowboy hat back and forth with the bronc's every blinking jump. "Feels different already. Map of Montana at breakfast, I make."

I'll say for myself that I knew inspiration when I saw it. "Guess what again," I caught Herman's attention by gobbling the last of my piece of pie and shoving the plate away. "Now that we're here, we need hats like that guy's. C'mon, the bus isn't leaving for a while yet."



Herman was like a kid on Christmas morn as we rushed across to the WRANGLERS WESTERN WEAR, conveniently right next to the bar with the flashing bronc and rider. As we went in the store, Herman was gamely peeking into his wallet until I told him, "Put that away, this is on me." It was rambunctious of me, not say impetuous, but the smaller sign I had spotted on the storefront was irresistible: S&H GREEN STAMPS ACCEPTED.

In the merchandise-packed place of business, one of those rambling old enterprises that smelled like leather and saddle grease, every kind of western regalia from ordinary cowboy boots to fancy belts slathered with turquoise was on display and I had to herd Herman closely to keep him from stopping and exclaiming at each bit of outfit. But I managed to navigate us to the redemption desk at the back of the store, where the clerk, a bald man with a sprig of mustache who looked more like he belonged in Manitowoc than Montana, pooched his lip as my pages of stamps counted up and up. Finally he pushed a catalogue across the counter, fussily instructing us that we needed to shop through it for what we wanted--I saw with dismay it was page after page of lawn chairs and the like--and as soon as the item was shipped in we could return and pick it up.

"No no no," for once I simulated Aunt Kate, waving off the catalogue as if batting a fly. "We're not interested in mail-order stuff, we want hats."

"Cowboys ones," Herman contributed.

"In-store merchandise is outside the redemption program," the clerk stated.

"That's not fair," I said.

"It's policy," said the clerk

"Proves it is not fair," said Herman, the veteran of Der Kaiser's army.

"Folks, I just work here," the clerk recited.



To my surprise, Herman leaned halfway across the counter, the clerk gravitating backward some as he did so. "You maybe know who Karl May is," Herman leveled at him curtly, "writes books about the Wild West?"

"I've heard of the person, of course," the clerk tried to fend, his mustache twitching in a rabbit way. "The Zane Grey of Germany or something like that."

"Austria, but does not matter. You are looking at him in the face." Now the clerk appeared really worried, running a hand over his bald head. "Sane Grey, pah," Herman puffed up in righteous Karl May indignation. "I can write whole story about Old Shatterhand while Grey fellow is taking a leak in the morning."

The clerk was speechless, kept that way by Herman's spiel about how I, favorite nephew accompanying him on one of his countless trips from Vienna to the land of Old Shatterhand and the like, had collected Green Stamps all the way across America with my heart set on obtaining cowboy hats for the two of us when we reached the real West, which was to say Miles City, and now here we were and being offered rubbish like lawn chairs instead. "I hope I don't got to tell my million readers Green Stamps are not worth spitting on."

I held my breath, watching the clerk shift nervously. "Mr.--uh, Herr May, let's be reasonable," he pleaded. "The problem is, it takes a special transaction form to substitute anything for catalogue merchandise. It's only done when the item you want is out of stock, but that doesn't quite fit this--"

"Close enough, I betcha," Herman closed him off. "Let's have action form, my nephew will fill it out in big jiffy."

I did exactly that, and the defeated clerk led us over to the selection of Stetsons. Quickly I selected the Junior Stockman model with a low crown and not extravagant brim, nice pearl-grey in color, while Herman glommed onto a white floppy ten-gallon type until I convinced him he'd look like the worst duded-up greenhorn this side of Hopalong Cassidy in it and talked him down to about an

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eight-gallon one in sensible tan. Without a whimper the clerk shaped the hats for us, working the brims in the steam machine until we each had what we wanted--mine with a neat downward crimp in front, Herman choosing to have his curled up on the sides like the cowboys on the cover of *Deadly Dust*.

Next to each other, we gazed at ourselves in the full-length mirror. "Get you," I laughed to Herman. "You look pretty good in Mr. Stetson's shade."

"Not so bad your own self," he grinned back at me in the reflection. "We can go be punchers of cows now, ja?"

"Huh-uh, not quite yet," I declared. Whipping out the autograph book, I laid it open on the counter, startling the clerk morosely compiling the paperwork of our transaction. All the cross-country letter writing had kept me too busy to hunt inscriptions on the bus as I'd wanted and I was bound and determined to make up for it. Seeing what I was up to, Herman started to say something, then didn't. "People have been putting stuff in it for me all during our trip, see," I reeled off to the clerk staring at the spread pages in confusion, "I'm getting a real good collection, but I don't have any Green Stampers in it yet, so can you write something?"

The clerk stood on one foot and then the other, as if he couldn't decide even that much. "I've never been asked for this before. I don't know what to put in it, except--" He dipped his head shyly. "There's our song. We sing it at company picnics. Will that do?"

"Sure! Anything!"

*Oh, S&H, S&H,  
What would I do without you  
To stretch my wage?  
To trade for stuff  
page by page?*

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*Everybody craves 'em,  
 I bet even Jesus saves 'em.  
 Little green stamps, little green stamps!  
 Sperry & Hutchinson  
 Does wonders for my purchasin'.  
 My book is full at last,  
 I better spend'em fast.  
 I'll get that lamp with the frilly shade,  
 I'll fill the tub with free Kool-Ade.  
 Oh, those bonus-givin'  
 Guaranteed high-livin',  
 Super excellent little green stamps!*

I spoke truer than I knew when I assured Herman there in Miles City that we had reached the part of the country to take our hats off to. The next day, he and I hopped off the local Greyhound at Crow Fair, and into a vision of the West that Karl May and Zane Grey at their most feverish could not have come up with.

As if to greet us, what appeared to be a mile of Indians slowly riding in file was headed in our direction. At last! There we were at the fabled gathering, the tribal heart of the Indian world. Herman looked as happy as a tabby in catnip. As was I. We grabbed a spot along the parade route with a few thousand other paleface onlookers to watch the approaching procession.

As parades go, this one spared no form of horsepower. First came ranch trucks and hard-used pickups turned into floats with bales of hay as seating for the participants, the sides of the vehicles draped with handprinted banners.

THE CROW NATION  
 WELCOMES  
 ITS INDIAN BROTHERS AND SISTERS  
 AND  
 WHITE FRIENDS



CROW FAIR  
A PROUD TRADITION  
SINCE 1904

CROW FAIR PRINCESS 1951  
VALENTINA BUFFALO CHILD  
SPONSORED BY THE WIGWAM CAFE

And so on. The genuine thing for us, though, was the Crow nation saddled up in its glory, the horses' hooves stirring up little eddies of dust like a lazy ground blizzard as the spectacular column of riders approached. The Crows, not a tribe afraid to show off, were dressed top to bottom in powwow regalia, men in beaded leather vests that caught the sun in brilliant dazzles and women in beautifully soft red velvet dresses decorated with elk teeth. Even the appaloosas and dappled ponies the riders were mounted on glinted with finery, beadwork on saddlebags and rifle scabbards and right down to the cradleboards where babies bobbed on their mothers' backs.

"Whoo," I let out in awe as the long, long horseback procession passed, while drums kept up a constant beat we could almost feel in the ground, and the air vibrated with the chant of "Hey-ya-ya-ya, hey-ya-ya-ya" from every side. Herman I think did not even hear me, too taken up with looking at everything.

"See, Donny, chiefs they must be!" he exclaimed at the sight of elders of the tribe wearing war bonnets of golden eagle feathers, gratifying my Red Chief side.

We watched for maybe an hour, to the last horse and lordly rider of the cavalcade. Such is fascination, the spellbinding moment of imagination coming true. I can only speak for myself, but surely Herman too felt like a spectator into a world beyond any dreaming, that day. Back then, the term "native Americans" had

not come into usage, but definitely the traditions of the people who were here before Columbus, like the first owner of my precious arrowhead, were on living display beyond anything museums could capture, and indisputably American as well in the presence of the color guard of warbonneted Crow veterans marching in khaki, the same army uniform my father had worn. As far as we were concerned, "Indian" was word enough to carry the magic of the past, and here it was on full show, as if just for us.

"Oh man, that was as good as it gets!" I still was giddy afterwards. "Did you see those saddle blankets, even? They use Pendletons!" I rattled on about how unbelievably great it was to be there until Herman said, "Ja, I telled you fingerspitzengefuhl works like charm," as if the bus ride all the way from Milwaukee had been merely a matter of giving it a little think.

Already feeling like we'd had one of the great days of our lives, after the parade the two of us followed the flow of the crowd to the ticket booth at the fairground entrance, where the rest of the day's events were chalked on a slab of blackboard. In unison we read the list.

"Fancy dancing, Donny."

"Rodeo, Herman."

I was impatient to get in and start to see everything worth seeing, but he took his time peeling off money for our entrance fee, asking the ticket seller, an Indian of indeterminate age with a single feather sticking straight up out of his hair, if we could stow the duffel bag and suitcase in the booth since we hadn't had time to find a place to stay. "Hokay, I'll keep an eye on 'em," he jerked a thumb to the corner of the booth and I dragged our luggage there and turned to go.

"Donny, wait." Herman was grinning nearly back to his ears. "One thing more. Put moccasins on, hah?"



Why hadn't I thought of that? Already outfitted in my purple rodeo shirt with the sky-blue yoke trimming and now my pearl-grey cowboy hat, the moccasins were the final needed touch. Swiftly I swapped out of my shoes, my feet grateful in the softness of the buckskin, and in an inspiration of my own, I tucked the autograph book under my belt like a hunter's pouch. And off Herman and I went, as if the beadwork fancy dancers on my feet were leading us to the real thing.

We still were on the same earth as Manitowoc, but the world changed as we headed for the fenced-in area of grandstand and corrals and chutes where the rodeo would be held. Tepees by the hundreds populated the encampment bordering the fairground, white cones sharp against the blue sky like a snowy mountain range, all the same precise height. Drummers and chanters there kept up the "Hey-ya-ya-ya, hey-ya-ya-ya" beat as if it was the pulse of the seasons of the strawberry moon and the buck moon. Herman and I tried not to rubberneck amidst it all, but failed laughably. Fully half of the rodeo-going crowd around us was Indian families, the fathers wearing braids and the mothers maybe not, excited children dribbling after in colorful shirts while trying to look as swayed and debonair as I felt, and we couldn't help getting an eyeful. Herman was like a keyed-up kid too, asking this person and that if they happened to be Apaches and not discouraged by the steady answer, "They're not from around here."

Then we were funneled into the rodeo grounds--surrounded by a horse-high hog-tight woven wire fence with the gate conspicuously manned by sharp-eyed tribal police; rodeo crowds are not exactly church congregations, and the Crows were taking no chances on drunks and other bad behaviors getting in--and the pair of us practically walking on air filled with the aromas of fry bread and sizzling steak amid the lane of food booths and craft displays of jewelry and woven blankets and wearables set up next to the arena. "Karl May would not believe his eyes, hah?"

Herman chuckled to me when we passed by a backed-in pickup camper, SLEWFOOT ENTERPRIZES painted on its cabin, where a bearlike Indian man was punching belt holes in a piece of leather with an electric drill and chanting, "Made to order, folks, best dancing rigs this side of the happy hunting grounds, same price as they were a minute ago, get 'em right here and now." Whether or not he was doing any business, suddenly ahead of us at a refreshment stand were fancy dancers everywhere, costumed as if they were under a spell that made them halfway to birds.

The sight cast me into a spell of my own. The day's fancy-dance exhibition, according to the printed program we had picked up at the gate, would take place between the bronc-riding events, and this batch of selected dancers--many of them no older than me, I noticed with ~~infinite~~ <sup>involuntary</sup> envy--were waiting around drinking pop and eating candy bars until called on to perform. Until Herman gently tugged me along, I stopped and gaped at their costumes, covering them almost entirely from beaded moccasins to a feather or two sprouting out of equally beaded headbands. I mean, <sup>only began to say</sup> fancy hardly said it. Fuzzy Angora goat hide step-ins were wrapped around the bottoms of their legs, and fringed vests long as aprons draped down that far. Anklets of sleigh bells were in there, too, jingling with their every step. The upper part of the body was the real story, though. Strapped on each dancer's back was a great big spray of feathers, like a turkey's tail in full display. What lucky kids they were in all that getup, I thought with a pang, ready to dance their Indian hearts out. It may have been my imagination, but my moccasins seemed to twitch as we passed the dancers by.

Coming out of my trance as everyone but us was flocking to the grandstand on the far side of the arena, I had the presence of mind to say the magic word to Herman.

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hums  
back

next



"Cowboys."

"Ja? Whereabouts?"

He gawked all around, as if expecting pistolero angels wearing Stetsons and boots to materialize. Here I was on familiar ground, steering us to the area behind the bucking chutes, knowing that was where anything interesting happened until the events got underway.

Back there in the gathering place between where horse trailers and other vehicles were parked and the pole corral of the arena, it was as busy as could be wished, big-hatted Indian contestants and those from the professional rodeo circuit clustered behind the chutes working on their riding rigging, adjusting their chaps, joshing one another about how high the bronc they'd drawn would make them fly. Calf ropers were building their loops and making little tosses at nothing. Teenage girl barrel racers exercised their horses, leaving behind increasing islands of horse manure. In the background, Brahma bulls bawled in the holding corrals and saddle broncs snorted and whinnied as they were hazed into the bucking chutes. Herman and I sashayed through taking in the whole scene as if we were old hands at this, our hats blending with the cloud of Stetsons.

Then I saw it. If I were telling this story from long enough ago, I suppose it would have been the chariot of a god touched golden by the fire of the sun. As it was, the gleaming purple Cadillac convertible parked at the very end of a row of horse trailers and pickups stopped me in my tracks.

"Herman, look at that!" Recovering, I rushed over to the chrome-heavy car with upswept tail fins and peeked in. The seamless leather seat covers were the same deep purple as the exterior. Likewise the floor mats and door panels. And the crowning touch--on the inlaid-wood steering wheel even the necker knob was that color. I was so excited I was forgetting to breathe. All but certain who had to be the owner of this modern heavenly chariot, I checked the hood ornament. And

in  
arena

pen



yes, wonder of wonders, there it was, exactly according to reputation. The shiny replica of a livestock brand replacing the Cadillac's stylized flying figure.

"See, it is!" I gushed to Herman as he came up behind me. "It's his!"

"Ja?" He eyed the gaudy car as if it was unique, all right. "Whose?"

"Rags Rasmussen! The champion bronc rider of the world! That's his brand, he puts it on everything--the Diamond Buckle." The symbol of his world championships, in other words. "He's just the greatest," I attested as Herman puzzled out the hood ornament for himself. "My folks and me saw him ride at the Great Falls fair. I tell you, he turned that horse every way but loose."

Babbling on like that about what a famous cowboy we were going to be lucky enough to watch in the saddle bronc go-round, I happened to look past Herman and the air sucked out of me as I gasped, "Here he comes!"

Tall and lanky except for squared-off chest and shoulders like the box the rest of him came in, the champ rider was moseying toward us with purple chaps slung over his arm. No one else in the world walks like a real cowboy, a sort of devil-may-care saunter as if the ground was unfamiliar territory but he was making the best of it. "Would you look at them long legs on Rags," some admirer over at the chutes remarked. "The Lord took his time when he split him up the middle."

The object of all attention continued on his way toward the bucking chutes as if cloudwalking, his black boots with the inlaid Diamond Buckle emblem freshly shined, his lavender Stetson spotless, his plum-colored gabardine pants sharply creased. Completing his outfit, I was thrilled to see, was a shirt nearly identical to mine, emphatic purple with a blue yoke and pearl snap buttons. Talk about swayve and debonure, he carried it on his back in a naturally fitting way that made me wish I was him so hard it hurt.



Blinking along with me at the sight, Herman whispered, "Why is he called Rags?"

"That's easy. He's always got his glad rags on when he rides." Herman still didn't get it. "Look how dressed up he is."

"Hah," he understood and more. "Like a knight, he puts on his best for the tournament, what you mean."

"The rodeo, you bet," I confirmed breathlessly. "That makes him the slickest rider there is in every way, see."

The female population of the rodeo grounds conspicuously thought so, too. Flirtatious hellos were cooed out by barrel racing beauties in tight blue jeans and a performing troupe of blonde cowgirls astride matching palominos, no small number of these contingents so-called buckle bunnies who had an eye for winners, as the famous broncstomper passed. "Later, ladies," he sent them with a lazy smile.

By now the immaculate lanky figure was nearing the chutes and being greeted by fellow contestants. A calf roper rosining his lariat called out, "How's it hanging, Rags?"

"Long as a bull snake," the champion bronc rider of the world said back, loose and easy. "Got to be careful I don't step on it."

Now that was man talk. Imagine how my vocabulary would increase around somebody like him. Swamped with hero worship, I could think of only one thing to do, and I did it--a little frantically, but I did it. "I'll be right back," I yipped to Herman, and charged over to the most famous cowboy there was, yanking the album out from my belt as I ran.

"Rags? I mean, Mr. Rasmussen. Can I get your autograph, huh, can I?"

He broke stride enough to give me a curious glance.

"I'm helluva sorry to bother you," I bleated, the pitch of my voice all over the place, "I know you're getting ready to ride and everything, but this is maybe the

only chance to put you in my book and I'm trying to get really famous people in it and you're right here and--please?"

Amused at my prattling, he smiled and offered up in the same easy drawl as before, "Guess I don't see why not, if it's gonna put me in such highfalutin' company."

He handed me his chaps to hold, taking the autograph book in return, a swap so momentous it nearly made me keel over. A kid in Cleveland with the pitcher's glove of Bob Feller bestowed on him, an eleven-year-old New Yorker gripping Joe DiMaggio's bat--it was that kind of dizzying moment of experience, unexpected and unforgettable, a touch of greatness tingling all through the lucky recipient. Resting the autograph book on the front fender of the Cadillac, Rags Rasmussen started writing. Not merely his signature, I saw, which would have been plenty. An inscription, a full-page one from the way he was going at it! My heartbeat doubled and my mind ballooned as I watched the pen continue in what to me was world championship handwriting.

"Hey, Rags," a hazer at the bucking chute hollered to him, "better come look over your rigging. You're up in this first go-round."

"Great literature takes time, Charlie. Be right there."

*My life took on meaning  
back when I was weaning.  
My ma pulled me away  
from her breast that day,  
and said, "Son, time we had a session  
for you to learn the big lesson."  
She held up to sight  
A can red and white.  
"The best invention in tarnation*

*nearest*



*is this can of Carnation.*

*It's milk, you see,*

*but not from me.*

*Nor from cow and pail*

*At risk from that tail.*

*So if you're to be a wise man,*

*seek out marvels like this can--*

*No tits to pull, no hay to pitch*

*Just punch a hole in the sonofabitch."*

"There you go," he said, his signature and all the rest on the page in Kwik Klik purple ink magically matching his riding chaps--clear as anything, a sign to me this was meant to happen. Lucky arrowhead, happy coincidence, the spitzen finger that had put Herman and me in this place at this time, something finally was working in my favor this loco summer. Skyhigh about my newly found good fortune, I heard as in a haze Rags Rasmussen talking to me almost as an equal. "Seen that little ditty on the bunkhouse wall at the old Circle X ranch, a time ago. Wasn't much older than you when I started breakin' horses for outfits like that." He gave me a look up and down and a long-jawed grin. "Figured it was worth passing along to somebody who knows how to wear a rodeo shirt."

"Wow, yeah! I mean, thanks a million," I fumbled out my appreciation for his supremely generous contribution to the autograph book, hugging it to myself as though it might get away. Unwilling to let go of these minutes of glory with him, I blurted, "Can I ask, what horse did you draw today?"

He shifted from one long leg to the other. "Aw, sort of a crowbait"--he broke off into a rueful laugh and scratched an ear. "Guess I hadn't ought to use that word around here. Anyway, I pulled out of the hat a little something called Buzzard Head."

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Hearing that just about bowled me over. Talk about a Believe It Or Not! moment. Buzzard Head was famous--the notorious kind of famous--as the most wicked bucking horse on the rodeo circuit, the bronc that had never been ridden. Through the years, contestants at Cheyenne, Pendleton, Great Falls, Calgary, all the big rodeos, had done their best to stay in the saddle for ten seconds aboard Buzzard Head, and eaten arena dirt for their trouble. Worse yet, this was the horse that killed its would-be rider in front of twenty thousand people at Madison Square Garden. Here was the matchup that people would talk about ever after, the bronc that threw them all and the rider who was never thrown, and Herman and I as fate and luck and blind coincidence would have it were on hand to see history made.

When I had my breath back, I said with more fervor than diplomacy, "Good luck in riding to the whistle."

"Might need it," Rags Rasmussen said agreeably. "Get yourself a good seat and enjoy the doings." Flopping his chaps over a shoulder, he strolled off to meet the meanest horse imaginable as if he hadn't a worry in the world.

Herman had come up behind me and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Quite a man, he is. Like Old Shatterhand, cool custard, hah?"

"Cool customer," I fixed that, still idolizing the strolling figure in his riding finery.

"Buzzard Head does not sound like merry-go-round horse," Herman cocked an inquisitive look at me.

"He's the worst," was all I could say. "C'mon," I still was on fire from the miraculous encounter with my hero Rags, "I know the best place to watch him ride, if they'll let us."

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"You are sure this is good idea?? Dangerous place, if we fall?" Herman shied away as far as he could from the bronc pawing at the chute planking beside us, as he crept after me on the narrow set of stairs alongside the bucking chutes.

"Then don't fall," I gave him the cure over my shoulder. "Shhh. Leave this to me," I cautioned further, keeping on up the shaky steps that led to the shaded platform beneath the announcer's booth.

When we popped our heads through the opening in the floor of the platform, what awaited us was pretty much as I expected from other rodeos I'd been to. There where the arena director and anyone else who counted in running the events could keep track of things at close hand were clustered several Indian men in snazzy beaded vests and the darkest sunglasses made, plus a lesser number of white guys in gabardine western suits, from the prosperous look of them rodeo circuit officials and livestock contractors who provided bucking horses and Brahma bulls for big shows like this one. As I scrambled onto the perch with Herman stumbling after, the only personage paying any particular attention to our arrival was a Crow elder, lean as a coyote, with braids like gray quirts down over his shoulders, who gave us a freezing stare.

"We're friends of Rags and he told us to get a good seat to watch him ride," I said hastily as if that took care of the matter. "My uncle here is from, uh, out of the country and this is his first rodeo"--Herman wisely just grinned wide as the moon and did not ask if there were any Apaches around--"and it'd be a real treat for him to see it from up here like this and we'll stay out of the way, honest, and just--"

"Welcome to Crow Fair, don't get too close to the horses," the gray-haired Number One Indian made short work of us and swung back to overseeing the commotion in the chutes beneath our feet where the rigging crew was wrestling saddles onto thrashing broncs.

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Establishing ourselves at the far end of a long bench softened by gunny sack cushions filled with cattail reeds--boy, these Crows knew how to do things--Herman put his attention to the printed program that listed saddle bronc riding, calf roping, steer wrestling, barrel racing, bareback riding, and of course, the fancy dancing exhibition. "Same as circus, many acts," he expressed in satisfaction as I read over his shoulder. But then, coming to the names of the broncs the riders had drawn, Widowmaker and Funeral Wagon and Dive Bomber and similar ones, he nudged me in concern. "Sounds like war, this buckjumping."

I had no time to reassure him on that as the saddle bronc riding explosively got underway almost beneath where we sat, with an Indian contestant named Joe Earthboy sailing out of the chute on a nasty high-kicking horse called Dynamite Keg. Earthboy and airborne animal became a swirl of dust and leather and mane and tail as the crowd cheered and the announcer chanted encouragement. A full few seconds before the timer's whistle, the rider flew up and away from the bronc as if dynamite had gone off under him, all right. "Ow," Herman sympathized as Earthboy met the dirt, gingerly picked himself up, and limped out of the arena.

Which set the tone for that go-round, contestant after contestant getting piled without coming close to completing the ride. By now it was obvious Crow Fair did not fool around in staging bucking contests. Deserving of their blood-and-guts names, these clearly were biggest meanest most treacherous horses available from the professional circuit, as veteran in their way as the career rodeo cowboys who tried to master them. Watching these hooved terrors with Herman swaying next to me as if he felt every jolt in the saddle himself, I couldn't stop my nerves from twanging about Rags Rasmussen's chances on the monarch of them all, Buzzard Head.



All the while--I realize it was as contradictory as could be, but eleven going on twelve is a contrary age--I was having the time of my life. Beside me, Herman was entranced in a Karl May knights-of-the-prairie way as he ohhed and ahhed at the spectacle of cowboys and broncos whirling like tornadoes in the arena. We were sitting pretty in the best seats in the rodeo grounds, comfy as mattress testers, in the shade while an acre of sunburn was occurring in the sweltering grandstand across the way. The Crows were running the proceedings slick as a whistle, the rodeo progressing at just the right rhythm--maybe it had something to do with the drumming still pounding away methodically in the encampment--to keep matters interesting. Overhead in the booth that held the announcer and the judges, rodeo's answer to heaven as the lofty spot where decisions descended from and a fatherly voice spoke out of the blue, the steady patter was as soothing to my ears as a cat's purr, filling time between the bucking contestants with the broadcaster at the microphone joking with the rodeo clown down in the arena going through antics in overalls six sizes too large and a floppy orange wig. Like committing poetry to memory I took in every word of their old loved corny routines, as when the clown hollered up to the booth that he hated to leave such a good job as dodging broncs and Brahma bulls, but he needed to move to Arizona for his seenus trouble. "Hey, Curly, don't you mean sinus trouble?" I could have recited the deep-voiced announcer's line right along with him. "Nope," the clown made the most dejected face ever seen and I knew this part by heart too, "the trouble is I was out with another fellow's wife, and he seen us."

Hooting and hollering, the crowd reliably responded as if that was the height of humor, while Herman slapped me on the back to tell me he got it and nearly fell off his gunny sack seat guffawing and I laughed as hard as if I hadn't heard that mossy joke at every rodeo I had ever been to. Life can tickle you in the ribs surprisingly when it's not digging its thumb in.

Sweetly

5



# All of which is a way of saying, what an emotion came over me in that precious space of time at Crow Fair. For the first time that unhinged summer, I felt like I was where I belonged. Around horses and cattle and men of the ranches and reservations, and the smell of hay in the fields and the ripple of a willowed creek where magpies chattered. Most of all, I suppose, because he was the author of this turnaround of our lives, in the company of halfway wizardly Herman, the pair of us blest with freedom of the road wherever the dog bus ran, enjoying ourselves to the limit at this peaceable grownup game of cowboys and Indians. This is not the prettiest description of a perfect moment, but it was a king hell bastard of a feeling, filling me almost to bursting.

Even the introduction of danger as the next rider was announced--"Here's the matchup we've all been waiting for," the announcer's voice hushed as if on the brink of something colossal, "down in chute number one, the reigning world champion in this event, Rags Rasmussen, on a pony that has never been ridden, Buzzard Head!"--felt like it fit with the fullness of the day. Secretly, I would have given anything to be in those Diamond Buckle boots snugging into the stirrups down there on the bronc that the riding champ of all mankind was easing onto. A fantasy like that knows no logic and common sense, of course, because the most treacherous hazard in all of rodeo was hanging up a foot in a stirrup while being thrown and getting dragged by a horse determined to kick the life out of its trapped victim. While my imagination naturally pasted me into Rags Rasmussen's place as he safely rode to the top of his profession, I nonetheless slipped the black arrowhead from my pocket and out of its thumb pouch, fervently fingering it for whatever luck it could bring in his matchup against the killer horse.

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Herman looked as breathless as I felt, on the edge of his seat as we craned to see into the chute below, watching Rags make his preparations, his purple chaps vivid against the buckskin flanks of the waiting horse. Buzzard Head plainly deserved its name, with a big Roman nose and cold mean eyes at the end of a droopy neck. Clustered behind us, the Crow organizers masked in sunglasses and the gabardined livestock contractors witnessed the doings in the chute as fixedly as we were. Rags took his own sweet time getting ready, casually joking that the chute crew might at least have stuck some chewing gum in the saddle to help him stick on, tugging his hat down tight, putting on soft leather gloves, flexing his boots into the stirrups until it felt right. Then, every motion easy but practiced, one hand gripping the hackamore rope and the other high in the air according to the rules, spurs poised over the point of the bronc's shoulders, he leaned back almost sleepily in the saddle, balanced against the catapult release he knew was coming. Throughout this, the glassy-eyed horse stayed deathly still, according to reputation saving itself up to attempt murder in the arena.

The tense chute crew stood ready until the man in the saddle said, casual as can be, "Open."

Then the gate was flung wide, and the bronc erupted out of the chute, twisting its hindquarters in mid-air that initial breathtaking jump. Buzzard Head alit into the arena practically turned around and facing us, as if to convey *You wanted to see what a real horse can do, here it is*. Instantly the buckskin bronc went airborne again, throwing itself full circle in the opposite direction from the first maneuver, snapping Rags from one side to the other like cracking a whip.

"Damn, it's a sunfisher," my fear found words.

Herman needed no translation of that, the crazily bucking creature contorting in its leaps as if to show its belly to the sun. He worried in return, "The picker-ups, they can't get to Rags neither if he don't fall."

I saw what he meant. The pair of Indian pick-up men, whose job it was to trail the action at a little distance and swoop in on their spotted horses to pluck the rider off after the whistle blew, were driven away by the bronc's hind hooves cutting the air wickedly at every unpredictable twist and turn. Buzzard Head plainly hated everything on four legs as well as two. Now even if Rags survived atop the murderous horse for the full ride, he would have to get out of the trap of stirrups by himself. "Meat wagon," the grey-braided Crow in back of us issued flatly, sending one of the other Indians swiftly down the steps to the arena gate where the ambulance and its crew waited outside.

An *Oooh* ran through the crowd as the bronc levitated as high as a horse can go, the ugly head ducking from side to side trying to yank the rope from Rags's grasp. Possibly the only person there that never to be forgotten day who thought the rider stood a chance as Buzzard Head writhed and twisted and plunged through its bag of tricks was Rags himself, athletically matching split-second reactions to those of the bronc, his long form rebounding from every dodge and dive as if he was made of rubber. I suppose a question for the ages is, What is so spellbinding about watching a man ride an uncooperative horse? Probably something that goes far, far back, the contest between human will and what it finds to match itself against. At least that is the justification for the sport of rodeo, if it needs any. I was rubbing the obsidian arrowhead so hard my fingers went numb as we watched the sunfishing horse do its best and worst, but Rags still in the saddle, even as his hat flew off, bouncing onto the horse's rump, then to the ground as if Buzzard Head meant to throw the man off his back piece by piece.

Time never passed so slowly. But at last, after the ten-second eternity of Rags Rasmussen's immortal ride, the whistle blew.

"Jump, right quick!" Herman shouted, as carried away as I was, watching the pickup men futilely trying to spur in on the furiously kicking bronc.



Then, in a feat as unlikely as sticking in the saddle the way he had, Rags shed the stirrups in a lightning backward kick and simultaneously vaulted off in a running dismount. Before Buzzard Head could locate and trample him, the pickup men forced their horses in between, letting Rags saunter to the safety of the chutes, picking up his hat on the way and sailing it up to the pretty woman whistle judge in the announcer's booth.

That great ride, I knew even then, was the legendary kind that would have people saying for years after, *I was there that day*, and by the luck of the arrowhead or some other working of fate, now I was one of them, forever. It was left to Herman to put the moment into words.

"That was bee-yoot-ifle."

Then came this, all because I had to use the rodeo version of a convenience, one of the outhouses behind the corrals.

During a break in the action while the chute crew saddled the next round of broncs, I excused myself to Herman and trotted off to do the necessary. Naturally there was a long line there at the one-holer toilets, but I scarcely noticed the wait, my head filled with the dizzying experiences of the day, topped by the purple presence of Rags Rasmussen himself in the memory book. On my way back from the outhouse visit, I still was caught up in such thoughts, trying to decide whether to press my luck and ask the head Crow there on the platform to write himself in, too. He looked kind of mean behind those darkest dark glasses, but at last getting an Indian into the autograph album would make the day just about perfect, wouldn't it. Couldn't hurt to try, could it? Maybe if I said to him--

Whomp, the sound of hooves hitting wood next to my ear sent me sideways. Startled, I reeled back from the corral alley I was passing. In the confusion, it took me a moment to catch up with what was happening. Horses

sticking



were being hazed in for the bareback riding, and barebacks generally were unruly cayuses fresh off the range and not accustomed to being corraled as the saddle broncs were. This first one being herded through <sup>from, holding pen</sup> was spooked by the cutting gate that would send it to one of the bucking chutes and was trying to kick its way out, hind end <sup>rear</sup> first. Crosswise in the narrow corral enclosure with its rump toward me, the snorty bronc kept on kicking up a ruckus despite the swearing efforts of the corral crew. "Whoa, hoss," I contributed uselessly as I backed away farther, ready to continue on my way. But then. Then the agitated horse turned enough that I caught sight of the brand on its hip, the double letters registering on me as if still hot off the branding iron.

I stood there like a complete moron, unable to take my eyes off the WW in the horseflesh. It didn't take any figuring out that the same would be on all the broncs in the bareback bucking string. No way had this ever entered my mind, that Wendell Williamson, livestock contractor to rodeos though he was, might furnish Double W bucking stock to this one all the way across the state. But perfectly like the next thing in a nightmare, here came the familiar braying voice in back of the milling broncs and the frustrated corral crew. "Don't let 'em skin themselves up on the cutting gate, damn it. These nags are worth money, don'tcha know."

In horror, now I could see the chesty figure through the corral poles. Sparrowhead, flapping a gunnysack at the hung-up bronc and barging in on the hard-pressed corral wranglers. My blood drained away.

"Here, let me handle the sonofabitching thing myself," he broke off a streak of swearing and scrabbled up the corral fence to run the cutting gate. Panicked, I backed away fast, but he spotted me. The beady expression of recognition on the puffy face expanded into something far worse.

"Hey you, Buckshot! Get your thieving butt over here, I want that arrowhead back!"



I bolted.

Behind me I heard Sparrowhead yelling for the tribal police. Luckily I was able to dodge out of sight around the corrals and back to the arena before the gate cops knew what was up. Every lick of sense told me, though, it would not take long before they tried to sort me out of the crowd. Heart beating a mile a minute, I scrambled up the stairs beside the bucking chutes, reached through the platform opening and grabbed Herman's ankle. "Hah?" I heard him let out, before he had the good sense to glance down and realize it was me.

He came down as fast as I had gone up, ducking behind a head-high trash bin of the kind called a green elephant where I was hiding. "Donny, what is it? You look like losing your scalp."

"We're in trouble up the yanger," I whimpered.

"Don't want that, I betcha." Herman waited for translation and explanation, hanging on every word as the story tumbled out of me about how I took the arrowhead when I left the ranch and Sparrowhead now wanted it back to the extent of siccing the Crow cops on me. When I was finished, he poked his hat up as if to get a closer look at me. Too close for comfort.

"Took. As means, stealed?"

"No! I found it in the creek fair and square. I mean, he thinks it's his because he owns the whole place, but why isn't it just as much mine, for seeing it in the creek when nobody else had since before Columbus and--"

He held up a hand to halt any more explanation. "Let's think over. Maybe give it him back?"

"No," I moaned it this time. "Herman, listen. It's like when you were a dog robber. Didn't you take only what you needed? I--I can't really explain it, but the arrowhead is like that to me. Something I need to have."

41

"Different case, that is," his expression changed, in my favor. He cast a look around the rodeo grounds and that horse-high hogtight fence. "We must get you away."

There was this about Herman. When he really gave something a think, you could see him generating a brainstorm until his eyes lit up, somehow even the glass one. That happened now, as I listened with every pore open to hope while he assuredly outlined the *eye-dea* to me. Anything was better than being arrested and branded a thief and handed over the authorities who would send me to the poorfarm for kids the other side of the mountains and I'd lose Gram and my life would go right down the crapper. But Herman's plan set off all kinds of fresh worries in me.

"You--you're sure that'll work? I mean, they'll *know*, won't they? I don't think I can--"

"You betcha you can," he had more than enough confidence for both of us, not necessarily a good sign. "Come on, no time is there to waste."

Scared half out of my wits as I kept looking for the trooper hats of Crow cops to show up, I stuck right by his side as we sifted along the arena corral where people were watching the rodeo from the backs of pickups and the fenders of their cars, blending in as best we could, which probably was not that much. At last safely reaching the area of food booths and crafts tables and so on, we made straight for the camper pickup where the bearlike Indian man sprang up from his leatherwork when he saw us coming.

"Howdy. You fellows collectors, maybe? 'Cause I got some nice things stashed in the camper here. Buffalo skulls and like that."

"Hah-uh," Herman shook off that approach, glancing over his shoulder in one direction while I nervously checked over mine in the other. "Something else, we are in hurry for."

fight



"In a hurry, huh? Funny, you don't look like fugitives from a chain gang." Humorous as that theoretically was, there was small-eyed suspicion behind it as the Indian vendor studied the pair of us trying too hard to compose ourselves. "Anyhow, the something else. What might that be?"

"Your help, ja?" So saying, Herman extracted a twenty-dollar bill from his billfold but held on to it.

"Huh, twenty smackers," the Indian acknowledged the sight of the cash, "that's starting to look like the price on something else." He jerked his head toward the rear of the camper. "Step around the tin tepee here and let's palaver."

Back there out of sight, I breathed slightly easier. Waiting to hear what we had to say, the Indian stood there broad as a bear. Even his head looked like a grizzly's, round and low on his shoulders. Herman couldn't wait to ask. "You are Apache, maybe? Winnetou, you know about?"

"Winnie who?"

"Not now, okay?" I hissed to Herman.

"Apaches aren't from around here, friend," the Indian helped me out in putting us past any further Karl May enthusiasms out of Herman. "I'm Blackfoot. Louie Slewfoot, to boot," he introduced himself, Herman and I shaking hands with him the proper soft Indian way while keeping our eyes off his clubfoot that jutted almost sideways from the other one. Briskly he got down to business. "What can I do for you to loosen your grip on poor old Andy Jackson there," he indicated the twenty-dollar bill in Herman's fist. "Look, he's turned green."

Herman glanced at me, I endorsed what he was about to say with a sickly smile, and he spoke the momentous words that would either save my skin or not.

"Dress up Donny like fancy dancer. Long enough to get him out from here."

"Whoa, no way," Louie Slewfoot backed away a lame step, laughing in disbelief. "These costumes are sort of sacred to Indian people, you can't just wear them for Halloween." He gave me a sympathetic wink. "Nothing personal, cowboy, but you look more like watered milk than redskin."

"Hey, that's not fair," I bridled. "I have an Indian name even, Red Chief. Nickname, I mean."

"Sure you do," he rolled his eyes, "and I'm Tonto."

"And look at my moccasins, don't they count? They're Blackfoot, like you." His heavy dark eyebrows drew down as he took a good look, but that was the extent of it. "And I went to school some at Heart Butte with Indian kids," I persisted insistently, "and--"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he butted in, "all of that gives you full standing in the Wannabe tribe, chiefie, but I can't go around duding up a white kid in--"

"How about this," I butted right back, reaching the arrowhead out of my pocket and its pouch and flashing it to him in my palm.

"Wah." Silent now, he put a hand toward the shiny black stone, but didn't touch it. "That's big medicine. Where'd you get it?"

"It's, uh, been in the family."

"Tell him all, Donny," Herman warned before wisely hustling off toward the front of the camper to keep a lookout.

I spilled the whole tale of Sparrowhead and the arrowhead, Louie Slewfoot listening without ever taking his gaze off the obsidian gleam of it. At the end, he growled deep in his throat. "That wampus cat, Williamson. He runs the Gobble Gobble You like the whole earth is his. We have to run its goddamn cattle off the rez land all the time. The rich sonofabitch sure to hell don't need any big medicine like that." With something like an animal grin, he sized me up in a new way.



"Besides, rigging you up as a fancy dancer would be a good joke on these Crows. They were on Custer's side, you know. Bastard scouts for Yellow Hair."

"Po-leece are com-ing," Herman's soft singsong reached us from his sentry post up front.

I just about dissolved at that, but it galvanized Louie Slewfoot. "Get in," he half helped half shoved me into the back of the camper, with him clambering after. In there, in the semi-dark, everything was a flurry as I undressed and was dressed all over again by the grunting Louie slipping a long apronlike skin shirt and a beaded harness that hung way down and goatskin leggings and jingle bell anklets and a bunch more onto me. I was feeling as weighted down as a deep-sea diver, but he kept on digging out items and fastening me into them, until we both froze when we heard a voice with the flat cadence of the Crows asking Herman where the person for that booth was.

"Hungry, he is. Gone for the frying bread. I am minding for him," said Heman, as if glad to be of help.

"When he comes back, tell him to keep an eye out for a redheaded punk kid in a purple shirt and give us a holler if he spots him. Some kind of sneak thief we need to turn in to the sheriff," the Crow cop finished his business and could be heard moving on. Sheriff! The memory of the mean little Glasgow lawman who arrested his own brother gripped me like a seizure, the vision of what all sheriffs must be like.

Louie Slewfoot had his own pronounced reaction. "You would have red hair." He pawed through his stock of items, and the next thing I knew, I was top-heavy in a turban-like feathered headdress that came halfway down to my eyes. "That's better. Now we'll paint you up good." Working fast, he smeared my face and hands with some oily tan stuff. "The halfbreed kids use this, it makes them look more Indian to the dance judges."

41

costumery

Success. An old nerve touched, all the way back to girlhood. As worked up as Gram was, I hoped she didn't bust her stitches. But Herman, crammed in next to me, nodded full approval of how the conversation was going. If so, though, why did I feel more than a little guilty?

We both heard the note of desperation take over the voice at the other end. "Donny, listen, please. I hope you're getting along with her, that's all that counts. Her and I don't need to have anything to do with each other, as long as she's treating you right." A pause that was painful at both ends of the line, before: "This summer has to work out the best we can get it to, or--"

That needed no spelling out beyond *or*. "Oh, we're fine and dandy, her and me," I pretended to the best of my ability, nudged along by Herman. "She's teaching me how to play canasta and everything." Herman shook his head at me not to overdo it.

"Playing 'nasty, is she," Gram could not resist. "Anyway, tell Miss Stuck Up for me I'm dreadful sorry I missed her."

"Yeah, sure," I trailed off, my end of the conversation exhausted. "Gram, wait a minute, Herm--I mean, Dutch wants to say hello." He was shaking his head, but I thrust the receiver at him.

"Hallo? How is your operation?"

That induced enough from the other end--which I could not quite hear--that he only needed to contribute "Ah-huh" repeatedly. It went on surprisingly long like that until my name apparently came into it. "Hah-uh, he is not getting carried away any too much. His head is level." He grinned and and I winced.

More expansive yet, Herman was doing all the talking now. "Donny fits right in with us here in Manitowoc, from day number one. We're enjoying him like all git out."



My pained show of teeth told him not to get too carried away and besides, the time was ticking down.

"Must go, somebody at the door," he made up with an ease that impressed me. "Don't worry yourself. He is a good boy."

Hanging up, he bobbed his head in satisfaction. "Her and the Kate won't give each other time of day now." Then, though, I caught sight of the concern that flickered into his expression. "She is quite the woman. The graveyard wants her much too soon."

Putting aside that sorrowful German saying or whatever it was before I could bring myself to deal with it, he scooted me out of the phone booth for us to make the run for our bus. "Lead us to Crow Fair, Red Chief."

Then it was my turn to do the surprising. Almost from the start of the trip, Herman kept pestering me to know, "When are we in the West?" At suppertime that evening, I finally could give the answer he wanted to hear. We had reached Miles City, far enough into Montana that the neon signs on bars showed bucking broncs kicking up their heels. "Guess what," I pointed out the window of the cafe section of the Greyhound depot to that evidence. "We're there now."

"Hah," said Herman, his eyes lighting up and following mine to the flashing sign on The Buckaroo bar across the street, with a rider waving his cowboy hat back and forth with the bronc's every blinking jump. "Feels different already, now that you say so." *since you point out*

I'll say for myself that I knew inspiration when I saw it. "Guess what again," I caught Herman's attention by gobbling the last of my piece of pie and shoving the plate away. "Now that we're here, we need hats like that guy's. C'mon, the bus isn't leaving for a while yet."

*cut  
now  
that*

Herman was like a kid on Christmas morn as we rushed across to the WRANGLERS WESTERN WEAR store, conveniently right next to the bar with the flashing bronc and rider. As we went in, Herman was gamely peeking into his wallet until I told him, "Put that away, this is on me." It was rambunctious of me, not say impetuous, but the smaller sign I had spotted on the storefront was irresistible: S&H GREEN STAMPS ACCEPTED.

In the merchandise-packed store, one of those old enterprises that smelled like leather and saddle grease, every kind of western regalia from ordinary cowboy boots to fancy belts slathered with turquoise was on display and I had to herd Herman closely to keep him from stopping and exclaiming at each bit of outfit.

I got us to the redemption desk at the back of the store, where the clerk, a bald man with a sprig of mustache who looked more like he belonged in Manitowoc than Montana, pooched his lip as my pages of stamps counted up and up. Finally he pushed a catalogue across the counter, fussily instructing us that we needed to shop through it for what we wanted--I saw with dismay it was page after page of lawn chairs and the like--and as soon as the item was shipped in we could return and pick it up.

"No no no," for once I simulated Aunt Kate, waving off the catalogue as if batting a fly. "We're not interested in mail-order stuff, we want hats."

"Cowboys ones," Herman contributed.

"In-store merchandise is outside the redemption program," the clerk stated.

"That's not fair," I said.

"It's policy," said the clerk

"Proves it is not fair," said Herman, the veteran of Der Kaiser's army.

"Folks, I just work here," the clerk recited.



To my surprise, Herman leaned halfway across the counter, the clerk gravitating backward some as he did so. "You maybe know who Karl May is," Herman leveled at him curtly, "writes books about the Wild West?".

"I've heard of the person, of course," the clerk tried to fend, his mustache twitching in a rabbity way. "The Zane Grey of Germany or something like that."

"Austria, but does not matter. You are looking at him in the face." Now the clerk appeared really worried, running a hand over his bald head. "Sane Grey, pah," Herman puffed up in righteous Karl May indignation. "I can write whole story about Old Shatterhand while Grey fellow is taking a leak in the morning."

The clerk was speechless, kept that way by Herman's spiel about how I, favorite nephew accompanying him on one of his countless trips from Vienna to the land of Old Shatterhand and the like, had collected Green Stamps all the way across America with my heart set on obtaining cowboy hats for the two of us when we reached the real West, which was to say Miles City, and now here we were and being offered rubbish like lawn chairs instead. "I hope I don't got to tell my million readers Green Stamps are not worth spitting on."

I held my breath, watching the clerk shift nervously. "Mr. May, let's be reasonable," he pleaded. "It takes a special transaction form to substitute anything for catalogue merchandise. It's only done when the item you want is out of stock, but that doesn't quite fit this--"

"Close enough, I betcha," Herman closed him off. "Let's have action form, my nephew will fill it out in big jiffy."

I did exactly that, and the dazed clerk led us over to the selection of Stetsons. I chose the Junior Stockman model with a low crown and a not extravagant brim, a nice pearl-grey in color, while Herman grabbed a white floppy ten-gallon type until I convinced him he'd look like the worst dude-up greenhorn this side of Hopalong Cassidy in it and talked him down to about an eight-gallon

#1

- why  
Hans  
problem

Quickly  
selected



one in sensible tan. Without a whimper the clerk shaped the hats for us, working the brims in the steam machine until we each had what we wanted--mine with a neat downward crimp in front, Herman choosing to have his curled up on the sides like the cowboys on the cover of *Deadly Dust*.

Next to each other, we gazed at ourselves in the full-length mirror. "Get you," I laughed to Herman. "You look pretty good in Mr. Stetson's shade."

"Not so bad your own self," he grinned back at me in the reflection. "We can go be punchers of cows now, ja?"

"Huh-uh, not quite yet," I declared. Whipping out the autograph book, I laid it open on the counter, startling the clerk morosely compiling the paperwork of our transaction. All the cross-country letter writing had kept me too busy to hunt inscriptions on the bus as I'd wanted and I was determined to make up for it. Seeing what I was up to, Herman started to say something, then didn't. The clerk stared at the spread pages in confusion. "People have been putting stuff in it for me all during our trip, see," I reeled off, "I'm getting a real good collection, but I don't have any Green Stampers in it yet, so can you write something?"

The clerk stood on one foot and then the other, as if he couldn't decide even that much. "I've never been asked for this before. I don't know what to put in it, except--" He dipped his head shyly. "There's our song. We sing it at company picnics. Will that do?"

"Sure! Anything!"

*Oh, S&H, S&H,  
What would I do without you  
To stretch my wage?  
To trade for stuff  
page by page?  
Everybody craves 'em,*

41



*I bet even Jesus saves 'em.*  
*Little green stamps, little green stamps.*  
*Sperry & Hutchinson*  
*Does wonders for my purchasin'.*  
*My book is full at last,*  
*I better spend 'em fast.*  
*I'll get that lamp with the frilly shade,*  
*I'll fill the tub with free Kool-Ade.*  
*Oh, those bonus-givin'*  
*Guaranteed high-livin',*  
*Super excellent little green stamps.*

The autograph album enriched with that and our heads swelled in our Stetsons, Herman and I hopped off the local Greyhound from Billings the next day at Crow Fair, and into a vision of the West that Karl May and Zane Grey at their most feverish could not have come up with.

As if to greet us, what looked like a mile of Indians slowly riding in file was headed in our direction. At last! There we were at the fabled gathering, the tribal heart of the West. Herman looked as happy as a tabby in catnip. As was I. We grabbed a spot along the parade route with a few thousand other paleface onlookers to watch the approaching procession.

First came <sup>ranch</sup> trucks and pickups turned into floats with bales of hay as seating for the participants, the sides of the vehicles draped with handprinted banners.

THE CROW NATION  
 WELCOMES  
 ITS INDIAN BROTHERS AND SISTERS  
 AND  
 WHITE FRIENDS

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CROW FAIR  
A PROUD TRADITION  
SINCE 1904

CROW FAIR PRINCESS 1951  
VALENTINA BUFFALO CHILD  
SPONSORED BY THE WIGWAM CAFE

*genuine*

And so on. The real thing for us, though, was the Crow nation saddled up in its glory, the horses' hooves stirring up little eddies of dust like a lazy ground blizzard as the spectacular column of riders approached. The Crows, not a tribe afraid to show off, were dressed top to bottom in powwow regalia, men in beaded leather vests that caught the sun in brilliant dazzles and women in beautifully soft red velvet dresses decorated with elk teeth. Even the appaloosas and dappled ponies the riders were mounted on glinted with finery, beadwork on saddlebags and rifle scabbards and right down to the cradleboards where babies bobbed on their mothers' backs.

"Whoo," I let out in awe as the long, long horseback procession passed, while drums kept up a constant beat we could almost feel in the ground, and the air vibrated with the chant of "Hey-ya-ya-ya, hey-ya-ya-ya" from every side. Herman I think did not even hear me, too taken up with looking at everything.

"See, Donny, chiefs they must be!" he exclaimed at the sight of elders of the tribe wearing war bonnets of golden eagle feathers, gratifying my Red Chief side. I can only speak for myself, but surely Herman too felt like a spectator into a world beyond any dreaming, that day. Back then, the term "native Americans" had not come into usage, but definitely the traditions of the people who were here before Columbus, like the first owner of my precious arrowhead, were on proud display, and indisputably American as well in the presence of the color guard of warbonneted Crow veterans marching in khaki, the same army uniform my father



had worn. As far as we were concerned, "Indian" was word enough to carry the magic of the past, and here it was on parade, as if just for us.

"Oh man, that was as good as it gets!" I still was giddy afterwards.

"Ja, I telled you fingerspitzengefühl works like charm," Herman said as if it was merely a matter of giving it a little think.

Already feeling we had our money's worth for the bus ride all the way from Milwaukee, after the parade the two of us gravitated to the ticket booth at the fairground entrance, where the rest of the day's events were chalked on a slab of blackboard. In unison we read the list.

"Fancy dancing, Donny."

"Rodeo, Herman."

He peeled off money for our entrance fee and asked the ticket seller, an Indian of indeterminate age with a single feather sticking straight up out of his hair, if we could stow the duffel bag and suitcase in the booth since we hadn't had time to find a place to stay. "Hokay, I'll keep an eye on 'em," he jerked a thumb to the corner of the booth and I dragged our luggage there and turned to go.

"Donny, wait." Herman was grinning nearly back to his ears. "One thing more. Put moccasins on, hah?"

Why hadn't I thought of that? Already outfitted in my purple rodeo shirt with the sky-blue yoke trimming and now my pearl-grey cowboy hat, the moccasins were the final needed touch. Swiftly I swapped out of my shoes, my feet grateful in the softness of the buckskin, and in an inspiration of my own, I tucked the autograph book under my belt like a hunter's pouch. And off Herman and I went, as if the beadwork fancy dancers on my feet were leading us to the real thing.

full  
now

Did  
gon  
me

It was  
impatient  
to his time

We still were on the same earth as Manitowoc, but really in an Indian world now. Tepees by the hundreds populated the encampment along the edges of the fairground, white cones sharp against the blue sky like a snowy mountain range all the same precise height. Along the leafy river at the edge of the encampment the riverbank was practically carpeted with braided men and their families picnicking in good style, putting watermelons in the stream to cool them, and ice cream churns were turning as fast as hands could go. This side of Crow Fair I had saved as a surprise. "Okay, Cowboy Joe," I stage-whispered to Herman, "guess what river that is."

He pushed his eight-gallon hat up with an index finger, a practice he'd caught onto right away, and glanced at the wooded course of the stream where magpies flashed black and white as they watched for chances to get in on the picnicking. "Not the Rhine, if I am not mistook."

"You'll never guess. The Little Big Horn."

"No-o-o!" Herman's eyes grew big. "Where Custer felled?"

"Right over in those foothills." I pointed a little distance away to the battlefield with the authority of a grade-school history book behind me. "Where the Seventh Cavalry got its ass shot off."

The sometime soldier clucked his tongue at that, and next thing we knew, we were being swept along with the crowd flocking to the high-fenced area of grandstand and corrals and chutes where the rodeo would be held. My moccasins drew a considerable number of looks, I'm glad to say, so between showing those off and my snappy shirt I felt as swayed and debonair as Gram promised I would. Herman was like a keyed-up kid too, asking any Indian couples around us if they happened to be Apaches and not discouraged by the steady answer, "They're not from around here."

Maya  
cut?



Then we were through the gate to the rodeo grounds conspicuously manned by sharp-eyed tribal police, rodeo crowds not exactly church congregations, and practically walking on air filled with the aromas of fry bread and sizzling steak amid the lane of food booths and craft displays of jewelry and woven blankets and wearables set up next to the arena. "Karl May would have to catch up with the times, hah?" Herman chuckled to me when we passed by a backed-in pickup camper where a bearlike Indian man sat in the doorway punching belt holes in a piece of leather with an electric drill and chanting, "Made to order, folks, best dancing rigs this side of the happy hunting grounds, same price as they were a minute ago, get 'em right here and now." Whether or not he was doing any business, suddenly ahead of us at a refreshment stand were fancy dancers everywhere, costumed as if they were under a spell that made them halfway to birds.

I was struck dumb at the sight. The day's fancy-dance exhibition, according to the printed program we had picked up at the gate, would take place between the bronc-riding events, and this batch of selected dancers--many of them no older than me, I noticed with infinite envy--were waiting around drinking pop and eating candy bars until called on to perform. Until Herman gently tugged me along, I stopped and gaped at their costumes, covering them almost entirely from beaded moccasins to a feather or two sprouting out of equally beaded headbands. I mean, *fancy* hardly said it. Fuzzy Angora goat hide step-ins were wrapped around the bottoms of their legs, and fringed vests long as aprons draped down that far. Anklets of sleigh bells were in there, too, jingling with their every step. The upper part of the body was the real story, though. Strapped on each dancer's back was a great big spray of feathers, like a turkey's tail in full display. What lucky kids they were in all that getup, I thought with a pang, ready to dance their Indian hearts out.

Sleight  
Enkeperize

It may have been my imagination, but my moccasins seemed to twitch as we passed the dancers by.

Coming out of my trance as everyone but us was flocking to the grandstand on the far side of the arena, I said the magic word to Herman: "Cowboys."

As if I had invoked angels, he gawked all around, looking for them to materialize. "Ja? Whereabouts?" Here I was on familiar ground, steering us to the area behind the bucking chutes, knowing that was where anything interesting happened until the events got underway.

It was as busy as could be wished, back there in the gathering place between where horse trailers and other vehicles were parked and the pole corral of the arena, big-hatted Indian contestants and those from the professional rodeo circuit clustered behind the chutes working on their riding rigging, adjusting their chaps, joshing back and forth about how high the bronc they'd drawn would make them fly. Calf ropers were building their loops and making little tosses at nothing. Teenage girl barrel racers were exercising their horses, leaving behind increasing islands of horse manure. In the background, Brahma bulls bawled in the holding corrals and saddle broncs snorted and whinnied as they were hazed into the bucking chutes. Herman and I ambled through taking in the whole scene as if we were old hands at this, our hats blending with the cloud of Stetsons.

Then I saw it. If I were telling this story from long enough ago, I suppose it would have been the chariot of a god touched golden by the fire of the sun. As it was, the gleaming purple Cadillac convertible parked at the very end of a row of horse trailers and pickups stopped me in my tracks.

"Herman, look at that!" Recovering, I rushed over to the chrome-heavy car with upswept tail fins and peeked in. The seamless leather seat covers were the same deep purple as the exterior. Likewise the floor mats and door panels. And the crowning touch--on the inlaid-wood steering wheel even the necker knob was



that color. I was so excited I was forgetting to breathe. All but certain who had to be the owner of this modern heavenly chariot, I checked the hood ornament. And yes, wonder of wonders, there it was, exactly according to reputation. The shiny replica of a livestock brand replacing the Cadillac's stylized flying figure.



"See, it is!" I gushed to Herman as he came up behind me. "It's his!"

"Ja?" He eyed the gaudy car as if it was unique, all right. "Whose?"

"Rags Rasmussen! The champion bronc rider of the world! That's his brand, he puts it on everything--the Diamond Buckle." The symbol of his world championships, in other words. "He's just the greatest," I attested as Herman puzzled out the hood ornament for himself. "My folks and me saw him ride at the Great Falls fair. I tell you, he turned that horse every way but loose."

Babbling on like that about what a famous cowboy we were going to be lucky enough to watch in the saddle bronc go-round, I happened to look past Herman and the air sucked out of me as I gasped, "Here he comes!"

Tall and lanky except for squared-off chest and shoulders like the box the rest of him came in, the champ rider was moseying toward us with purple chaps slung over his arm. No one else in the world walks like a real cowboy, a sort of devil-may-care saunter as if the ground was unfamiliar territory but he was making the best of it. "Would you look at them long legs on Rags," some admirer over at the chutes remarked. "The Lord took his time when he split him up the middle."

The object of all attention continued on his way toward the bucking chutes as if cloudwalking, his boots with the inlaid Diamond Buckle emblem freshly shined, his lavender Stetson spotless, his plum-colored gabardine pants sharply creased. Completing his outfit, I was thrilled to see, was a shirt nearly identical to mine, emphatic purple with a blue yoke and pearl snap buttons. Talk about swayve

and debonure, he carried it on his back in a naturally fitting way that made me wish I was him so hard it hurt.

Blinking along with me at the sight, Herman whispered, "Why is he called Rags?"

"That's easy. He's always got his glad rags on." Herman still didn't get it. "Look how dressed up he is."

"Hah," he understood and more. "Like a knight, he puts on his best for the tournament, what you mean."

"The rodeo, you bet," I confirmed breathlessly. "That makes him the slickest rider there is in every way, see."

The female population of the rodeo grounds conspicuously thought so, too. Flirtatious hellos were cooed out by barrel racing beauties in tight blue jeans and a performing troupe of blonde cowgirls astride matching palominos, no small number of these contingents so-called buckle bunnies who had an eye for winners, as the famous broncstomper passed. "Later, ladies," he sent them with a lazy smile.

By now the immaculate lanky figure was nearing the chutes and being greeted by fellow contestants. A calf roper rosining his lariat called out, "How's it hanging, Rags?"

"Long as a bull snake," the champion bronc rider of the world said back, loose and easy. "Got to be careful I don't step on it."

Now that was man talk. Imagine how my vocabulary would increase around somebody like him. Swamped with hero worship, I could think of only one thing to do, and I did it--a little frantically, but I did it. "I'll be right back," I yipped to Herman, and charged over to the most famous cowboy there was, yanking the album out from my belt as I ran.

"Rags? I mean, Mr. Rasmussen. Can I get your autograph?"

He broke stride enough to give me a curious glance.



"I'm helluva sorry to bother you," I bleated, the pitch of my voice all over the place, "I know you're getting ready to ride and everything, but this is maybe the only chance to put you in my book and I'm trying to get really famous people in it and you're right here and--please?"

Amused at my prattling, he smiled and offered up in the same easy drawl as before, "Guess I don't see why not, if it's gonna put me in such highfalutin' company."

He handed me his chaps to hold, taking the autograph book in return, a swap so momentous it nearly made me keel over. A kid in Cleveland with the pitcher's glove of Bob Feller bestowed on him, an eleven-year-old New Yorker gripping Joe DiMaggio's bat--it was that kind of dizzying moment of experience, unexpected and unforgettable, a touch of greatness tingling all through the lucky recipient. Resting the autograph book on the front fender of the Cadillac, Rags Rasmussen started writing. Not merely his signature, I saw, which would have been plenty. An inscription, a full-page one from the way he was going at it! My heartbeat doubled and my mind ballooned as I watched the pen continue in what to me was world championship handwriting.

"Hey, Rags," a hazer at the bucking chute hollered to him, "better come look over your rigging. You're up in this first go-round."

"Great literature takes time, Charlie. Be right there."

*My life took on meaning*

*back when I was weaning.*

*My ma pulled me away*

*from her breast that day,*

*and said, "Son, time we had a session*

*for you to learn the big lesson."*

*She held up to sight*

*A can red and white.*

*"The best invention in tarnation  
is this can of Carnation.*

*It's milk, you see,  
but not from me.*

*Nor from cow and pail  
At risk from that tail.*

*So if you're to be a wise man,  
seek out marvels like this can--*

*No tits to pull, no hay to pitch*

*Just punch a hole in the sonofabitch."*

"There you go," he said, his signature and all the rest on the page in Kwik Klik purple ink magically matching his riding chaps--clear as anything, a sign to me this was meant to happen. Lucky arrowhead, happy coincidence, the spitzen finger that had put Herman and me in this place at this time, something finally was working in my favor this loco summer. Skyhigh about my newly found good fortune, I heard as in a haze Rags Rasmussen talking to me almost as an equal. "Seen that little ditty on the bunkhouse wall at the old Circle X ranch, a time ago. Wasn't much older than you when I started breakin' horses for outfits like that." He gave me a look up and down and a long-jawed grin. "Figured it was worth passing along to somebody who knows how to wear a rodeo shirt."

"Wow, yeah! I mean, thanks a million," I fumbled out my appreciation for his supremely generous contribution to the autograph book, hugging it to myself as though it might get away. Unwilling to let go of these minutes of glory with him, I blurted, "Can I ask, what horse did you draw today?"

He shifted from one long leg to the other. "Aw, sort of a crowbait"--he broke off into a rueful laugh and scratched an ear. "Guess I hadn't ought to use



that word around here. Anyway, I pulled out of the hat a little something called Buzzard Head."

Hearing that just about bowled me over. Talk about a Believe It Or Not! moment. Buzzard Head was famous--the notorious kind of famous--as the most wicked bucking horse on the rodeo circuit, the bronc that had never been ridden. Through the years, contestants at Cheyenne, Pendleton, Great Falls, Calgary, all the big rodeos, had done their best to stay in the saddle for ten seconds aboard Buzzard Head, and eaten arena dirt for their trouble. Worse yet, this was the horse that killed its would-be rider in front of twenty thousand people at Madison Square Garden. Here was the matchup that people would talk about ever after, the bronc that threw them all and the rider who was never thrown, and Herman and I as fate and luck and blind coincidence would have it were on hand to see history made.

When I had my breath back, I said with more fervor than diplomacy, "Good luck in riding to the whistle."

"Might need it," Rags Rasmussen said agreeably. "Get yourself a good seat and enjoy the doings." Flopping his chaps over a shoulder, he strolled off to meet the meanest horse imaginable as if he hadn't a worry in the world.

Herman had come up behind me and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Quite a man, he is. Like Old Shatterhand, cool custard, hah?"

"Cool customer," I fixed that, still idolizing the strolling figure in his riding finery.

"Buzzard Head does not sound like merry-go-round horse," Herman cocked an inquisitive look at me.

"He's the worst," was all I could say. "C'mon," I still was on fire from the miraculous encounter with my hero Rags, "I know the best place to watch him ride, if they'll let us."

"You are sure this is good idea?? Dangerous place, if we fall?" Herman shied away as far as he could from the bronc pawing at the chute planking beside us, as he crept after me on the narrow set of stairs alongside the bucking chutes.

"Then don't fall," I gave him the cure over my shoulder. "Shhh. Leave this to me," I cautioned further, keeping on up the shaky steps that led to the shaded platform beneath the announcer's booth.

When we popped our heads through the opening in the floor of the platform, what awaited us was pretty much as I expected from other rodeos I'd been to. There where the arena director and anyone else who counted in running the events could keep track of things at close hand were clustered several Indian men in snazzy beaded vests and the darkest sunglasses made, plus a lesser number of white guys in gabardine western suits, from the prosperous look of them rodeo circuit officials and livestock contractors who provided bucking horses and Brahma bulls for big shows like this one. As I scrambled onto the perch with Herman stumbling after, the only personage paying any particular attention to our arrival was a Crow elder, lean as a coyote, with braids like gray quirts down over his shoulders, who gave us a freezing stare.

"We're friends of Rags and he told us to get a good seat to watch him ride," I said hastily as if that took care of the matter. "My uncle here is from, uh, out of the country and this is his first rodeo"--Herman wisely just grinned wide as the moon and did not ask if there were any Apaches around--"and it'd be a real treat for him to see it from up here like this and we'll stay out of the way, honest, and just--"

"Welcome to Crow Fair, don't get too close to the horses," the gray-haired Number One Indian made short work of us and swung back to overseeing the commotion in the chutes beneath our feet where the rigging crew was wrestling saddles onto thrashing broncs.



Establishing ourselves at the far end of a long bench softened by gunny sack cushions filled with cattail reeds--boy, these Crows knew how to do things--Herman put his attention to the printed program that listed saddle bronc riding, calf roping, steer wrestling, barrel racing, bareback riding, and of course, the fancy dancing exhibition. "Same as circus, many acts," he expressed in satisfaction as I read over his shoulder. But then, coming to the names of the broncs the riders had drawn, Widowmaker and Funeral Wagon and Dive Bomber and similar ones, he nudged me in concern. "Sounds like war, this buckjumping."

I had no time to reassure him on that as the saddle bronc riding explosively got underway almost beneath where we sat, with an Indian contestant named Joe Earthboy sailing out of the chute on a nasty high-kicking horse called Dynamite Keg. Earthboy and airborne animal became a swirl of dust and leather and mane and tail as the crowd cheered and the announcer chanted encouragement. A full few seconds before the timer's whistle, the rider flew up and away from the bronc as if dynamite had gone off under him, all right. "Ow," Herman sympathized as Earthboy met the dirt, gingerly picked himself up, and limped out of the arena.

Which set the tone for that go-round, contestant after contestant getting piled without coming close to completing the ride. By now it was obvious Crow Fair did not fool around in staging bucking contests. Deserving of their blood-and-guts names, these clearly were biggest meanest most treacherous horses available from the professional circuit, as veteran in their way as the career rodeo cowboys who tried to master them. Watching these hoofed terrors with Herman swaying next to me as if he felt every jolt in the saddle himself, I couldn't stop my nerves from twanging about Rags Rasmussen's chances on the monarch of them all, Buzzard Head.

Like a stuck compass, Herman's one-way mind pointed us in a single arrowstraight direction. To the Karl May territory of Indian knights and noble cowboys, if you were him. To anywhere out there short of 'the other side of the mountains' and a nightmarish orphanage, if you were me. To the west, or rather, the West, capitalized in both our minds as the Land of Plenty where we could be free of the Kate and her bossy brand of fate.

Old gray duffel bag on his shoulder, Herman marched through the crowd in the waiting room of the Milwaukee depot without deviating an inch either way, the wicker suitcase and I trying to keep up, dead-ahead until reaching the big wall map topped with COAST TO COAST--THE FLEET WAY. Over our heads loomed the outline of America which, I swear, seemed to grow as we stared up at the numerous Greyhound routes extending to the Pacific Ocean.

Our silent gawking finally was broken by a thin voice. Mine.

"So where do we go?"

"Somewheres there," said Herman as if he didn't have any more of a clue than I did. "Takes some fingerspitzengefuhl, hah?"



Unable to get my ears around that, I started to tell him to talk plain English because we didn't have time to fool around, but he got there first, more or less. Tilting his head to peer down at me as much with his glass eye as his good one, he uttered--and I still wasn't sure I hearing right--"You got fingerspitzengefuhl, I betcha."

My hands curled as if he had diagnosed some kind of disease. "That doesn't sound like something I want to got, I mean have."

"Faith, you need." Herman showed that same sly expression as when he'd disclosed Manitou and Manitowocers and other spooky stuff to me that time in the greenhouse, my goosebumps coming back while he elaborated on the finger-spitty-whatever it was. "No choice do you have. It comes notcheral, once in great while," he said as if it was perfectly normal for me to singled out by some crazy-sounding thing. "Generals who think with their fingers, like Napoleon, born with it. Clark and Lewis maybe, explorers like us, ja?" The more he spoke, the more he seemed to be serious, while I wished he would just shut up. Ticket-holding passengers coming by to check out their routes on the map and happening to overhear any of this were giving us funny looks and stepping away fast.

"Captain Cook, how about, sailing the world around and around," he still was cranking it out, very much Herman the German in his accent at this point. "Must of had fingerspitzengefuhl, or *pthht*, shipwreck." I since have learned that what he was trying to describe with the word long as a boxcar might best be called intuition in the fingertips, instinct or genius or plain inspired guesswork tracing the correct course up from map paper there at the end of the hand. A special kind of talent that came from who knows where. He cocked that glass-eyed look at me as if I was something special. "You are lucky boy, Donny, to got it."

Unconvinced and uncertain, I rubbed my thumbs against my fingertips, which felt the same as ever. "And wh-what if I do?"

"Easy. You find us where to go." In demonstration, he waggled his fingers as if warming up to play the piano and shifted his gaze to the map over our heads.

I did not want any part of this. "Herman, huh-uh. Even if I stand on a bench I can't reach anything but Florida, and that's way to hell and gone in the wrong direction."

"Tell you what," he breezed past my objection, "I get down, you get up." Then and there, he squatted low as he could go.

I realized he wanted me to straddle his shoulders. Skittish, I couldn't help glancing at people pouring past in as public a place as there was, a good many of them staring as if we already were a spectacle. "Hey, no, really, I don't think I'd better," I balked. "Won't we get arrested?"

"Pah," he dismissed that. "America don't know hill of beans about arresting people. You should see Germany. Come on, up the daisy," he finished impatiently, still down there on his heels. "Pony ride."

Feeling like a fool, I swung my legs onto his shoulders and he grunted and lifted me high. Up there eight feet tall, the West was mapped out to me as close as anyone could want, for sure. Matter of faith or not, I had to go through the motions. Putting my hand against the map surface, slick as a blackboard, I tried to draw out inspiration from one spot or another, any spot. Certain the eyes of the entire depot were on me, I felt around like the blind man exploring the elephant. Easy, this absolutely wasn't. If Herman's Apache knight was anywhere around Tucson or Albuquerque, he didn't answering the call. Nor did the Navajo, around the four corners where Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado all met. Automatically my hand kept following the bus routes traced in bright red, drifting up, on past Denver, Salt Lake City, Cheyenne. Whatever the right sensation was supposed to be, it was not making itself known. By now I was stretching,



Wyoming at my elbow, with Herman swaying some as he clutched me around the ankles.

“Donny, hurry, ja? Getting heavy, you are.”

“I’m trying, I’m trying.” At least my hand was, moving as if of its own accord. I could tell myself I didn’t believe in the finger-guh-fool stuff all I wanted, but all of a sudden my index finger went as if magnetized to the telltale spot over the top of Wyoming.

“I got it!”

“Whereabouts?”

“Montana!”

“Good! Where in Montana?”

“Down from Billings a little.”

“What is there?”

“Crow Fair.”

“Hah? Go see birds? Donny, try again.”

“No! Let me down, I’ll tell you about it.”

Back to earth, or the depot floor anyway, I talked fast while Herman listened for all he was worth. “These Crows are Indians, a whole tribe of them on their own reservation and everything, and Crow Fair is their big celebration. They always hold it between the strawberry moon and the buck moon, something to do with the time of year when the berries finish growing but the buck deer grow new antlers.” I could tell I lost Herman more than a little there. “That’s about this time of year, see. We learned Indian stuff like that in social studies at Heart Butte. Crow Fair is a real big deal of that kind, it goes on for about a week. All kinds of Indians show up for it.”

Herman’s thick glasses caught a gleam. “All kinds Indians. You are sure?”

“Sure I’m sure. Hundreds of them. Thousands.”

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He had me stay out of sight while he bought the bus tickets to the map dot called Crow Agency--as he said, so any busy body would not remember us traveling together.

As a companion on the trip west, Herman <sup>proved to be</sup> was an adventure himself hour by hour. He happily gabbed with any other passenger who was half willing, proudly including me in the picture. "My nephew. Seeing the land, we are." When he wasn't at that, he looked out the window in fascination, even in Minnesota, at countryside he declared fit for a Karl May book. Then at the other extreme, he could sleep like a soldier, anytime and anywhere, just conk off. It took some doing, on my part, to keep up with his variations. Life with Herman was a size larger than I was used to, like clothing I was supposed to grow into.

But was it ever worth it, especially when I found out we had no money worries. "I got plenty," he confided at our first meal stop, when I sounded him out on what level of food we could afford. "Not cartwheels and four bitses, but the paper kind, hah." He patted the billfold in the inside pocket of his jacket.

"Really? How much?"

"Puh-lenty," said he as if that spelled it out for me. "Went to the bank, took out my share. Half for her, half for me, right down center. What is the words for that, same-sam?"

"Uh, even-steven. But I thought from what Aunt Kate said, you guys were about broke."

"Pah. Woman talk. We will live like kings, Donny."

All in all, this trip was turning into the best thing since Letty gave me that kisseroo.

Meanwhile I had work to do. In the Milwaukee depot he'd bought me a tablet with stiff backing, envelopes, and stamps, and across the miles of bus riding,

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I wrote letter after letter to Gram describing how my summer was supposedly going.

*Dear Gram--I am fine, I hope you are better. The weather here is hot. I am having a good time. Aunt Kitty took me to the show last night, TOMAHAWK with Van Heflin and Yvonne DeCarlo, it was real good. Did Uncle Du6ch tell you he changed his name back to Herman, which is what I call him? Anyway, he did. He has a greenhouse and I am his helper there...*

*Dear Gram--I am fine. I am writing in a hurry because Aunt ~~Ka~~ Kitty is taking me to the zoo. She is always doing things like that. We played canasta and almost skunked Gerta and Herda, 5000 to 450. Garden things are coming in, melons and peppers and other stuff we can't grow in Montana but sure are good eating....*

Aunt Kate would have surprised all the way to her back teeth at the number of kindly endeavors my imagination provided her.

It was at the lunch stop in Aberdeen, South Dakota, our second day on the road, when Herman pushed his half-finished plate away, lit up an el stinko and puffed away. Smoke clouding over him like a gathering thought, he asked, "When do you got to go to gymnasium?"

He pronounced it gim-nasium, and while I figured that out pretty quick, I still didn't understand what he meant. "Why would I have to go to the gym? Nobody plays basketball this time of year."

"Pardon my German," he looked put out with himself. "School, I am talking about."

"Oh, that. Not until after Labor Day. Tons of time until then, see."

"Too long," he thought that over with a puff, something in his tone putting me on guard. "Your grossmutter, hah, Donny?." Even without translation, I knew

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he meant Gram. "You must telephone. Make her think she don't got to worry about situation in Manitowoc."

That jerked me up in my chair. "Are you kidding? On top of writing to her until my hand is about to fall off, like I've been? Why?"

"Not kidding." Snubbing out his cigar decisively, he gandered around the terminal. "Phone booth, over there. Come on. We got time before bus goes."

I wasn't budging. Lying to Gram by letter was one thing, but doing it out loud, even across hundreds of miles of telephone wire, was nothing I wanted to attempt. "Herman, huh-uh. I--I don't think that's a very sharp idea."

"Must be done," he insisted. "Otherwise, what if she calls, talks to the Kate? *Ptthht.*, we are."

I had to take his point about our trip being kaput if that happened, and even more, the mile-deep trouble I'd be in if Gram got any inkling I was not where I was supposed to be. That fast, I was the one worried about the situation in Manitowoc, and surrendered to whatever scheme Herman had this time. "So, what do I say?"

He laid it out carefully, with me trying to memorize every word.

When I was installed in the phone booth to his satisfaction, he dug a bunch of change out of his pocket, saying "First thing is put in plenty money, so operator don't come on the line for more." *Ching ching ching*...he fed coins in until it was a wonder the phone box didn't burp. With the booth door cracked open so he could help out if I needed it, he oversaw my shaky dialing of the number of the Columbus Hospital pavilion ward, all the way away in Great Falls. "I keep track of time," he tapped his wristwatch.

I clutched the receiver to my ear, with one of Gram's sayings filling my head as if she was already on the line. *Here goes nothing from nowhere.*

The phone rang and rang until at last a highly recognizable voice answered. "This is Sister Carma Jean. May I help you?"





"This is, ah, Donal Cameron," I rushed past any civilities, "please can I talk to my grandmother?"

"Mrs. Blegen? I suppose so. She's at the other end of the ward. Hold on, I'll bring her in the chair."

That confused me. What, carry her in a chair? Sister Carma Jean must be one muscular nun. Then I caught on.

Meanwhile Herman was frowning into the phone booth at the lack of conversation, and I booted the door open. "They have to go get her, and besides, she's--"

Swearing in German, he squeezed into the booth alongside me and slugged some more silver into the coin slot. The *chings* had barely died down when I heard: "Donny? Is that you?"

"Gram? Are you in a wheelchair?" Caught by the sudden start of conversation, Herman had to stay crammed in with me and yank the door shut fast as the public address system announced a bus arrival.

"For now." Her voice did not sound quite right, it sounded like she was trying to make it seem sturdier than it was. "What was that noise on the line?"

"The radio. Aunt Kitty plays it a lot. How come you're in a wheelchair?"

"Oh Donny, what am I going to do with you?" That panicked me, the issue slambang like that in her own words. Luckily it turned out to be only Gram being Gram. "How many times do I have to tell you, don't worry so about me. I had a little setback, is all."

"Are you gonna be okay?" Herman had his ear down practically on top of mine, both of us waiting breathlessly.

"Of course I will, good as new. It just takes time." What she was saying did not match what I was hearing, the strain in her talk coming through despite her best effort. "All in the world that is happening is that I have so many stitches the

add  
sentence  
But it.

doctor doesn't want me exerting myself any, and they wheel me around. The nuns are giving me royal treatment."

"Uh, sure, it sounds great."

"This is a surprise, hearing from you like this."

"I--I was thinking about you."

"That's nice. Are you calling just to tell me that?" I could hear her real question behind that: *To make you head rattle?*

"No, no." I tried to think of a good reason why I might be calling. "To wish you Happy Birthday."

"My birthday is in November, Donal."

"Really? I must have got that mixed up."

"Now you know. If there's nothing else on your mind, let me talk to Kitty, please."

This was the memorized part. "She's, uh, too busy to talk to you, she said. Getting ready to go to her canasta party. Told me not to spend too much time on the phone with you because it's long-distance."

"She's going to be like that, is she," Gram turned huffy, which for once was a good development. "She certainly needn't strain herself to pick up the phone to talk to her own sister if she doesn't want to. I declare, I thought we were back on speaking terms. That woman." As worked up as she was, I hoped she didn't bust her stitches. But Herman, crammed in next to me, nodded approvingly at how it was going. We both heard the note of concern come into the voice at the other end.

"I hope you're getting along with her all right, Donny. She can be a handful. She and I don't have to have anything to do with each other, as long as she's treating you right."



"Oh, we're fine and dandy, her and me," I said, to more nods from Herman. "She's teaching me how to play canasta and everything." Herman shook his head at me not to overdo it.

"Playing 'nasty', is she," Gram evidently couldn't resist. "Anyway, tell her I'm dreadful sorry I missed her."

"Yeah, sure," I trailed off, my end of the conversation exhausted. "Gram, wait a minute, Herm--I mean, Dutch wants to say hello." He was shaking his head, but I thrust the receiver at him.

"Hallo? How is your operation?"

That induced enough from the other end that he only had to contribute a series of grunts. It went on a surprisingly long time until I heard my name mentioned. "Hah-uh, he is not geting carried away any too much. His head is level." He grinned and and I winced.

More expansive yet, Herman was doing all the talking now. "Donny fits right in with us, from day one. We're enjoying him like all git out."

My pained show of teeth told him. The time was ticking down.

"Must go, somebody at the door," he made up with an ease that impressed me. "Don't worry yourself. He is a good boy."

Hanging up, he bobbed his head in satisfaction. "Her and the Kate won't give each other time of day now. She sounds like quite the woman." He scooted me out of the phone booth for us to make the run for our bus. "Lead us to Crow Fair, Red Chief."

Herman kept asking "When are we in the West?" At suppertime that evening, I finally had the answer he wanted to hear. We had reached Miles City, far enough into Montana that the neon signs on bars showed bucking broncs

pestering  
me (to  
now)

kicking up their heels. "Guess what," I pointed out the window of the cafe section of the Greyhound depot to that evidence. "We're there now."

"Hah," said Herman, his eyes following a rancher in blue jeans that had seen better days and a beat-up Stetson who had come in for a cup of coffee and the latest gossip from the waitress. "I think maybe so."

I'll say for myself that I knew inspiration when I saw it. "Guess what again," I caught Herman's attention by gobbling the last of my piece of pie and shoving the plate away. "We need hats. C'mon, we've got half an hour until the bus goes."

The WRANGLERS WESTERN WEAR store was right across the street, and as we crossed, Herman was gamely peeking into his wallet until I told him, "Put that away, this is on me." It was rambunctious of me, not say impetuous, but the smaller sign on the storefront was irresistible: GREEN STAMPS ACCEPTED.

The clerk at the redemption desk pouched his lip and counted out my pages of stamps. "Hats, it is," he agreed, and led us over to the selection of Stetsons, where I chose the stockman kind and Herman grabbed a ten-gallon type. The clerk even trained them for us, working the brims in the steamer until we each had what we wanted--mine with a neat downward crimp in front, Herman choosing to have his curled up on either side like the cowboys on the cover of *Deadly Dust*.

Side by side, we looked at ourselves in the full-length mirror. "Get you," I laughed to Herman. "You look pretty good in Mr. Stetson's shade."

"Not so bad yourself," he grinned at me in the reflection. "We can go be paleface cow herders now, podner."

"Huh-uh, not quite," I piped up. I whipped out the autograph book and laid it open on the counter. All the letter writing had kept me too busy to hunt inscriptions on the bus and I was determined to make up for it. Seeing what I was up to, Herman started to say something, then didn't. The clerk stared at the spread

Now  
that  
we're  
here,

acceptance  
of store

change.



pages in confusion. "People have been putting stuff in it for me all summer, see, and on the ranch and at school before that," I reeled off, "I'm getting a real good collection, but I don't have any Green Stampers in it yet, so can you write something?"

The clerk stood on one foot and then the other, as if he couldn't decide even that much. "I've never been asked for this before. I don't know what to put in it, except--" He dipped his head shyly. "There's our song. We sing it at company picnics. Will that do?"

"Sure! Anything!"

*Oh, S&H, S&H,  
What would I do without you  
To stretch my wage?  
To trade for stuff  
page by page?  
Everybody craves 'em,  
I bet even Jesus saves 'em.  
Little green stamps, little green stamps.  
Sperry & Hutchinson  
Does wonders for my purchasin'.  
My book is full at last,  
I better spend'em fast.  
I'll get that lamp with the frilly shade,  
I'll fill the tub with free Kool-Ade.  
Oh, those bonus-givin'  
Guaranteed high-livin',  
Super excellent little green stamps.*

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

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



And so, determined to make up for my dumb jump to the wrong conclusion last night and mistaking her for Kate Smith--although was it my fault they both were the size of refrigerators and shared jolly numbers of chins and dimples and all in all looked enough alike to be twins?--I dressed quickly and headed downstairs.

*Nice manners don't cost anything*, Gram's prompting followed me down the steps. C'mon, Donny, Donal, Red Chief, I pulled myself together, it shouldn't be all that hard to remember to be polite and to speak mainly when spoken to and to not mix up when to look serious and when to smile, and similar rules of the well-behaved. Hadn't I gotten along perfectly fine with tons of strangers on the dog bus? Well, a couple of drivers, the ex-convict, and one fistfight aside. Surely those didn't count toward the main matter, which was to survive for the time being in a household where Aunt Kate seemed to wear the pants and Herman tended to his knitting in the company of beings with names like Winnetou and Old Shatterhand.

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

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

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

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

"Toast does not need help!"

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

sharpened. "She did? Oh, all right, if you insist." Industriouslly buttering my toast, I about dropped the knife when I heard:

"Donny, come to the phone."

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

"Hello? This is... he."

"I am Sister Carma Jean," the voice sounding exactly like you would imagine a nun's came as crisp as if it was in the room, instead of fifteen hundred miles away at Columbus Hospital. I was dazed, unsure, afraid of what I might hear next. "Your grandmother wished me to tell you yourself"--echo of *last wish* in that; I froze tighter to the phone--"she has come through the operation as well as can be expected."

I breathed again, some.

"Of course, there are complications with that kind of surgery," the sister of charity spoke more softly now, "so her recuperation will take some time." Complications. Those sounded bad, and right away I was scared again. "But we have her here in the pavilion," the voice on the line barely came through to me, "where she is receiving the best of care. You mustn't worry." As if I could just make up my mind not to.

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

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



Whoa. I backed off to the bathroom, out of range of the blowup in the kitchen, in a hurry. Staying in there a good long while, I ran the faucets full blast and flushed the toilet a couple of times to announce my presence, and finally cracked the door open to test the atmosphere. <sup>stark</sup> Silence. That was at least an improvement, and mustering all the courage I could, I approached the deadly quiet kitchen.

Herman was nowhere to be seen. Aunt Kate was sitting by herself there, in a peppermint-striped flannel robe and fuzzy pink slippers that would never be mistaken for part of Kate Smith's wardrobe, drinking coffee while reading the newspaper spread open on the table. "There you are, sugar plum," she looked up as if reminding herself of my existence, before I could say anything. That voice. She sounded musical simply chanting that. "Did you sleep all right, poor tired thing?"

Nervously I met that with, "Like a log."

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

"Now then," Aunt Kate said with no urgency, licking her finger and turning a page of the newspaper, "what in the realm of possibility can we get you for breakfast, mmm?"

Around Gram, that question never came up. I simply took my place at the long table along with Meredice Williamson and Sparrowhead and the riders and

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the choreboy, and ate what a ranch cook cooked, mush and hotcakes and fried eggs and bacon or sidepork and cinnamon rolls if a person still had room. There was no reason to think past the end of a fork. Surprised to be asked such a thing, I answered with more manners than good sense, "Oh, just whatever you've got."

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

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

Finally I saw no choice but to ask, polite or not. "Suppose I could have a piece of toast, please?"

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

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

un-pitched



My mention of him did change matters, though, because at the cellar stairs she whipped around to me, with a different look in her doll eyes.

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

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

“Maybe I’ll go say hi,” I mumbled, and trooped out to the back yard where the odd shed of glass gleamed in the sun. Already at that time of the morning the air felt heavy to me, as if it could be squeezed out like a sponge, and I plucked at my one wearable shirt of the moment and unbuttoned my sleeves and rolled them back onto my forearm for a bit of ventilation as I crossed the lawn, Herman’s big footprints ahead of me fading with the last of the dew.

I had been curious about the mystifying structure when the DeSoto’s headlights reflected off it as we pulled up to the house the night before, which

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saving for posterity milk-complexioned women and bearded men and sometimes entire families down to babies in arms, everyone in their Sunday best, sitting for their portraits way back when and now turned into apparitions keeping company with the pair of us and the vegetable kingdom.

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

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

"Who are they?"

"Manitowocers," he said around the stub of his cigar. At the time, I assumed he merely meant those who had but to walk around town to hear their blest souls talk, according to the cross-stitched sampler hanging in the living room. I was disappointed the figures preserved in glass were as ordinary as that, but maybe that was Manitowoc for you.

Just then, the back door of the house banged like a shot, making me nearly jump out of my skin, Herman reacting with a jolt too, the ash spilling off his

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

With an opening like that, how could I resist?

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

"Heart? Like gives us life, yah?"

"Yeah--I mean, yes, that's the thinger."

Herman leaned way toward me, cigar forgotten for the moment. "Heart Byoot. Byootiful name. Tell more."

I didn't bother to say that was the only thing of any beauty at the remote and tough little Blackfoot Reservation school where, around Louie Left Hand and Johnny Rides Proud, I wisely kept my trap shut about my Red Chief nickname and endured being called Whitey and Brookie for the freckles that reminded them of the speckles on Eastern brook trout. That Heart Butte schoolyard with its rough teasing and impromptu fistfights was at least as educational as the schoolroom. But if Herman was gaga about things Indian, here was my perfect chance to confide the Red Chief nickname to him.

He was impressed, more so that he really needed to be, I noted somewhat apprehensively when I was done. "Up there with Winnetou, you are," he exclaimed, slapping his knee. "Young chiefs. No wonder you got the fancy moccasins."

Byoot

Dwayne

"Yeah, but"--I stole an uneasy glance at the pile of Karl May books--  
"who's this Winnetou anyway? What tribe he's from, even?" If he was  
Blackfoot, my Red Chief tag might as well shrink back to Heart Butte invisibility  
in comparison.

Herman puffed on his cigar, maybe seeking smoke signals, as he thought  
how best to answer. Finally he said, "An Apache knight, he was."

I tried to sort that out, never having heard of an Indian clanking around in  
a suit of armor, and said as much.

Herman laughed. "Not iron clothes, hah. Leather leggings and a hunting  
shirt, he dressed in, and, best yet"--he nodded approvingly at me--"fancy  
moccasins." Turning serious again, he went on, "Karl May calls him a knight  
because he was honorable. His word you could trust. He fought fair. Like a  
chief supposed to, yah." He nodded at me gravely this time.

"Uhm, Herman, you better know." In all this Indian stuff, I didn't want  
to end up chewing more than I could bite off. "I haven't had much practice at any  
of that, see. I mean, with me, you can tell where the Red came from"--I flopped  
my hair--"but the Chief thinger is just from my dad. Sort of kidding, in a way, is  
all."

"Maybe not all," he gave me one of his cockeyed glances through the thick  
glasses. "Maybe he thought the name fit more than"--he kept a straight face, but it  
still came out sly--"your scalp."

One thing about hanging around with Herman, time went by like a breeze.  
That noontime, with Aunt Kate gone to canasta, the house was without  
commotion as Herman assembled lunch, laying out the kind of store bread that  
came sliced and without taste, but cutting into a loaf of what I figured was  
lunchmeat. I stayed out of the way by reading the funnies in the newspaper and so



didn't pay any attention to what he was making until he called me to the table.

"Meal fit for an earl." When I looked blank at that, he winked and said, "Earl of Sandwich, invented guess what."

I peeked under the top slice of bread at a gray slab pocked with gelatin and strange colonies of what might be meat or something else entirely. "Is this"--I couldn't even ask without swallowing hard--"headcheese?"

"Yah. A treat." Herman took a horsebite mouthful of his sandwich. "The Kate won't eat it," he said, chewing. "She calls it disgusting, if you will imagine."

I was pretty much with her on that, for I had seen the ingredients of headcheese, each more stomach-turning than the next, come off the hog carcass at butchering time when the animal's head and feet and bloody tongue were chucked in a bucket for further chopping up. But at any mealtime Gram's voice was never far distant, *If it's put in front of you, it's edible at some level*, and by not looking at the jellied pork rubbish between the sandwich bread, I got it down.

This Wisconsin incarceration evidently requiring digestive juices of various kinds, I stayed at the table stewing on matters, trying to assimilate what all had happened since my arrival into this unnerving household, while Herman potted at washing up our few dishes. When he was done and hanging up the dish towel in a fussy way not even the Kate could criticize, I ventured: "Can I ask you a sort of personal thing?"

"Shoot," he responded agreeably enough, pointing a finger and cocked thumb at me like a pistol, which I figured must be something he picked up from a squarehead western.

"Right. How come you don't go by the name 'Dutch' any more?"

He pursed his lips in and out a couple of times as if tasting the inquiry, then came and sat at the table with me before answering, if that's what it was. "It went down with the ship."

He appeared to be serious. Oh man, I thought to myself, first the Gitchy thinger, walking around dead, now this. Was this a squarehead joke, to the effect that Dutch was a word that never learned to swim?

"Sounds funny, yah?" Herman conceded. "But when the *Badger Voyager* sank, my name 'Dutch' was no more, after." Again he made the *pthht* kaput sound. He folded his big hands on the table as he looked straight across at me in that uneven gaze of his. "On shore, 'Herman' got new life."

I still didn't get it, and said so.

"Idea," he announced as if something had come to him when he wasn't looking. Purposively the former 'Dutch' reached for the sugar bowl. "You know about ore boats any, Donny?" At the shake of my head, he instructed, "This is ore boat. *Badger Voyager*, pretend. Table is Great Lakes. Gee-oh-graphy lesson, hah?"

Plotching a hand here and there across the table top, he named off the bodies of water--Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, Ontario--while I paid strict attention as if about to be called on in class. Done with that, he steered the sugar bowl toward me.

"Where you sit is Duluth. Full of iron mines. How it works, *Badger Voyager* comes, loads ore, takes it maybe here, maybe there"--he maneuvered the sugar bowl in winding routes to various ports of call where he told me the ore was turned into steel, Chicago, Cleveland, all the way to Buffalo.

"But what about--"

"'Dutch', yah. Coming to that." He peered at the sugar bowl through his strong glasses as if encouraging me to have a close look, too. "He is on the ore

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boat, see. Me, I mean. Twenty years." Pride shown out of him as he sat back, shoulders squared to practically burst out of his shirt, in making the pronouncement, "A stoker I was."

I puzzled over that. Like stoking a stove? A cook's helper, like I sometimes was in kitchen chores for Gram? He pawed away that supposition, explaining a stoker's job in the boiler room of a ship. "Mountains of coal have I shoveled."

"But you don't do that any more," I said, thinking of Aunt Kate's mocking response when I asked about his job.

"Hah, no. I am on shore, so 'Dutch' is no more. No shipmates to call me that. I change to 'Herman', who I was before."

This was a whole lot more complicated than my Red Chief nickname coming and going at will, I could see. Still, something had been left out of the story, and my guarded silence must have told him I knew it had. Herman, who looked to me as if he could still stoke coal all day long if he wanted to, read my face, studying me with that unsettling cockeyed gaze. "The Kate did not blabber it to you? Something wrong. Her tongue must be tied up."

He sat back and folded his arms as if putting away the hands that fit a coal shovel. "A settlement I have."

Thinking the word through, I took it apart enough to ask hesitantly, "Wh-- what got settled? Like a fight?"

"I show you."

He navigated the sugar bowl back to the Lake Superior territory of the table, then began wobbling it so drastically I thought it would spill.

"Strait of Mackinaw," he pronounced the word that is spelled *Mackinac*. For some moments, he didn't say anything more, a tic working at the corner of his eye as if he had something in it, all the while staring at the imaginary piece of water.

At last he said in a strained voice: "Bad place any old time. Bad and then some when the Witch of November comes."

Another one of those? One more Great Spirit of Gitche Gumee or whatever, I didn't need. "Herman, hey, really, is this like Manitou, because I don't think we ought to be fooling around with--"

All seriousness, he cupped his hands around the sugar bowl vessel as if protecting it. "Witch of November is big storm. Guess what time of year."

I had been through the kind of Montana blizzards that people talked about all their lives, so I was not impressed. "Yeah, well, how big?"

"Wind like you never saw."

Still not that impressed, I nominated the most serious wind I could think of. "Like a chinook, maybe?"

"I don't know schnook. Is what?"

Not exaggerating, I told him about the thawing wind you could hear roaring down from the mountains a dozen miles away, strong enough to blow outhouses over.

"Sounds a little same," he granted. "But when Witch of November comes, you are on the boat, no place to go"--he opened his hands to expose the fragile sugar bowl--"and waves big like hills hitting the deck, send you over the side if you don't hang on hard as you can."

That made quite a bit of an impression, I had to admit. We still weren't anywhere near how the name Dutch went down with the ship and Herman was sitting there big as life. Maybe I was being a sucker, but I said, "Go on,"

"Night of thirtieth of November, *Badger Voyager* gets to Strait of Mackinac," his voice growing husky as he maneuvered the sugar bowl. "We feel lucky, no Witch that year. Then big storm comes up, middle of night--Witch of November saving up all month, hah? Worst I was in, ever." Sugar shook from the

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bowl, he quivered it so hard. "The *Badger Voyager* sank, like I say. Big waves broke her in half," he lifted his hands and mimicked snapping a branch.

I was on the edge of my fruit box for the next part. "Raining and wind blowing like anything when order comes, Abandon ship," he continued slowly as if retelling it to himself to make sure he got it right. "I go to climb in the lifeboat, and a pulley swings loose from the davit and hits me, like so."

All too graphically, he clapped a hand over his left eye and I couldn't help flinching in horror.

"Hits 'Dutch', yah?" he made sure I was following all the way. Now he removed his glasses, set them aside, and took the spoon out of the sugar bowl. Reaching up to his left eye with his free hand, he held his eyelids apart. My own eyes bugged as he tapped his eyeball with the spoon handle, *plink plinkety-plink-plink plink-plink* distinct as anything.

Wowed, I let out loose with "Holy crap, Herman, doesn't that hurt at all?"

Grinning and even winking with that false eye, he shook his head.

"That's really something! Ace work! Can you do it again?"

He obliged. I couldn't get over the stunt; the carnival sideshow that set up camp in Gros Ventre at rodeo time didn't have tricks nearly as good as playing *shave and a haircut, four bits* on an eyesocket. Still overcome with enthusiasm, I pointed to that left eyeball or whatever the substitute ought to be called, politeness gone to hell. "What's it made of?"

"Glass," he said drily, donning the eyeglasses again. "Like a greenhouse of the head, hah? Only it grows this, from the ship company." He rubbed his thumb and fingers together, which with a penniless pang I recognized meant money.

"Dutch is name buried at sea. Herman stays on land, no more Witches of November."

Chair

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That was Herman in the ways most meaningful that first adventurous day, or so I thought. I can't really say a glass eye he could play a tune on sold me on spending a stifling summer in Wisconsin, but you can see he did make things more interesting than expected.

Aunt Kate was another matter, a sizable one in every way. After the morning's disaster with my money and our general lack of meeting of minds--if she even thought I had one--I didn't know what I was going to be up against when she came home from canasta, but suspected it probably would not be good.

So, after lunch when Herman went off for a nap--"Shuteye is good for the digestion," he surprised me yet again--I figured I had better show some progress on the jigsaw puzzle or I'd hear about it from Aunt Kate when she came home.

Spilling out the pieces that half covered the card table and sorting the ones of different colors with my finger, I had quite a stretch of the sky-blue top edge fitted into place, strategy recalled from having done the damn thing before, working my way down onto George Washington's acre of forehead, when I heard the DeSoto groaning up the driveway and then Aunt Kate's clickety high heels on the kitchen floor, instantly stilled when she reached the plush living room rug.

"Yoo hoo," she called as if I wasn't just across the room from her.

"Yeah, hi." Figuring it couldn't hurt, could help, I tried a slight initiative that might be construed as politeness. "How was the, uh, card party?"

"A disaster," she moaned. "It ruins the whole summer. Of all the bad luck, why, why, why did this have to happen on top of everything else?"

Continuing the drama, she dropped heavily into the recliner beneath the Manitowoc sampler, whipped around to face me where I was stationed at the card table, and cranked the chair back until she was nearly sprawling flat. In the same stricken voice, she addressed the ceiling as much as she did me: "It's enough to make a person wonder what gets into people."

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Apprehensively listening, a piece of George Washington in my hand, I contributed, "What happened? Didn't you win?"

Now she lifted her head enough to sight on me through the big V of her bosom. "It's ever so much worse than that," she went on in the same tragic voice. "Years and years now, the four of us have had our get-together to play canasta and treat ourselves to a little snack. Religiously," she spiked on for emphasis, "every Monday. It starts the week off on a high note."

To think, Kate Smith might have uttered those exact last couple of words. But this decidedly was not America's favorite songstress, with me as the only audience trying to take in what kind of catastrophe a dumb card game could be.

"And now, can you believe it, Minnie Zettel is going off on a long visit," Aunt Kate mourned as if Minnie Zettel was also going off the rails. "Why anyone would be gallivanting off to St. Louis in the summer, I do not know. She will melt down until there is nothing left of her but toenails and shoe polish, and it will serve her right." Her chins quivered in sorrow or anger, I couldn't tell which, but maybe both--they were double chins, after all--as she fumed, "The other girls and I are beside ourselves with her for leaving us in the lurch."

Having been beside herself with me not that many hours ago, she was having quite a day of it, all right. Getting left in the lurch seemed pretty bad, whatever it meant. I made the sound you make in your throat to let someone know they have a sympathetic audience, but maybe I didn't do it sufficiently. Still practically flat in the recliner, Aunt Kate blew exasperation to the ceiling, wobbled her head as if coming to, and then her sorrowful eyes found me again, regarding me narrowly through that divide of her chest.

"Donal," she startled me by actually using my name, which I think was a first time ever, "do you play cards?"



"Only pitch, a real little bit," I said very, very carefully. All I needed was gambling added to the rest of my reputation with her. "Gram and me at night sometimes when there's nothing on the radio but preachers in Canada."

"I thought so," she mustered the strength to nod her head. "When we were girls, Dorie was always one to haul out a deck of cards when nothing else was doing. I must have caught it from her."

That'd be about the only thing she and Gram were alike in, I morosely thought to myself, minding my manners by nodding along in what I took to be her bid for sympathy while I kept at the jigsaw, nine hundred and fifty or so pieces to go, when all at once she swelled up and exhaled in relief. "Good. Then you can learn canasta and fill in for Minnie."

I don't know if my hair stood straight on end at that or what. While I didn't actually think she was ordering me to put on a girdle and a dress and sit for hours on end in some wacky card game with three gossip old women, it amounted to the same. Instinctively I was filled with misgivings and couldn't help that it was written all over me.

Aunt Kate busily began dismissing my swarm of doubts before I could sputter them out, cranking her chairback up higher with every burst of sentence. "There's no way around it, we need a fourth for canasta and that's that." Upright in the chair by now and facing me dead-on, she manufactured a sort of smile. "You needn't look so alarmed, I'll teach you the ins and outs of the game. We have an entire week for you to learn, isn't that lucky? It will help take your mind off your imagination, mmm?"

Still speechless, I tried to think how to head her off in more ways than one as she heaved herself out of the recliner and quickstepped over to me. "Now then. It's too bad, but we need the card table." Before I could come out of my stupor, she was crumbling the sky-blue edge and George Washington's forehead

Mmm,

better



and scooping the pieces along with the rest of the puzzle into its box. "Don't worry, child, you can start over on it once you've learned canasta."