

Last Bus - notes by Carol Doig  
april 2015 - after Ivan's death

The random white pages were pulled from the working ms. as Ivan made changes, and replaced by edited pages.

Yellow pages represent seminal thoughts and jottings, some of which would work their way into finished ms.

Ivan often used blue pages to indicate scenes he'd written later than the ms. pages around them; in this case they are questions to be answered (e.g. see handwritten decision that Donny will grow up to be a rodeo announcer.)

Ivan stacked these pages atop a file cabinet as he discarded them, so the bottom ones would be the oldest.

Swags of fishnets hung from the entire ceiling like cloudbanks. Crossed  
over the doorway  
were  
harpoons, and along the wall opposite the bar were nailed up rope knots of  
was decorated with of every magical  
of  
twist and coil sailor's fingers were capable of.. Her3 and there would be a  
whales's tooth/walrus tusk carved into scrimshaw, or one of those heavy yellow  
amazing  
slicker coats called sou-westerns that seemed to dare the With of November  
or any other or grappling hooks or old photos of the most famous grt L ore boats  
and bearded crews. I ~~was~~ immediately fell for the place, and I could tell  
H felt at home just entering its briny atmosphere.

You mustn't be careless with (yr) money.

Snow Snake. I rode but only placed. That smarts, too. The lady is sort of  
Luckily there was a kind of  
a consolation prize. waiting.

You're sure your's wtron enough?  
Sure as shooting. Come on, get on.  
Strong as OO, we must be.

That's OK, we don't want clothes, just hats  
want hats, not clothes.

Hats are a clothing accessory.

What my OO said. Not clothing. Show us hats.

They had grandchildren & nephews & nieces up the wazoo, and I have  
belatedly figured out that Aunt K wanted to show me off, if I could possibly  
be shown off.

Never. I mean, you're so good at it, I wdn't even try. What I want to be  
is a rodeo announcer.

in my sheer panic oblivs to the existence of a city phone book over in that  
GL booth

& I have wondered, then & subce, whether she secretly liked (being mistaken for  
KS/resemblance, since she was that size anyway.

as if catapulted out of her seat.

that crooning tone (coaxing) again

Not shabby cd be a Donny exclamation  
Sheesh

bad guys

That startled me. Germans still were the ~~hated enemy~~ from the last war,  
as for ss I was concerned. Fiends all the way up to Hitler, and down to  
the enemy soldiers my family had a personal reason to hate forever. Maybe  
being among *statured in that so country beat*  
that facing the Chinese, but I didn't see it as much better  
The ch were an enemy I had not quite caught up with, but I had a healthy  
from being a little kid during the war news I had

fuoo of animosity against the Gs. <sup>WWT</sup> built up full fantasies

*hastily anyway*

knowing no more of phone booths than S's

only as where S'man changed clothes in th  
Sunday funnies, ... was beyond me.

must have been like Jeru-salem to them.

I didn't know anything abt J except it was in there with B in Xmas pageants.  
the story.

I thin he was a Wegian.

*en  
M  
m*

"All quarters, of course." No half dollars or nickels.  
You know a remarkable amount about it.

This was already way risky, trying to figure out how to claim what I was convinced was my rightful share of the canasta winnings.

in my eyes & H's fully as

totally

as stalwart as any hero who ever faced a six-shooter, to take me.

nearly H's height, but couldn't have been built more differently, w/ what's called a cracker butt, with nothing back there as if that share of the anatomy had gone onto his front in a hanging belly.

the his

w/ a snopy hooked nose that probably won him that nickname.

Skeeter had sniffed out that ordinarily she ran a backyard laundry in town...

She was a desperation hire--ranches had to do that a surprising lot--and Jones surely gritted his teeth (just to have someone slinging hash when haying started.

Life ks a crooked journey, they say.  
Not much straight and easy on the way.  
The wrinkles in the map are worth it, though.  
Spelling out the OO of where we go.

zi zags

twists and turns

bringing us through

But the wrinkles in the map  
But there are wrinkles in a map for a reason

And that brings my telling, as <sup>is</sup> the G wd have called it, to its final episode, the ending foretold in the beginning. o my zigzag journey

In my estimation, she didn't know how gd she had it, the cook shack here easily twice as big & nice as the D W's.

Mrs. C bustling toward the kictehn, "Good golly, is it that time alaready? evidently having missed the OO in the yard in favor of Ma Perkins.

resorted to canned tomatoes in amazing ways

Kate catches him at having cut up fur glove: "Then what's this." She has the arrowhead pouch. Left in his pants for laundry? Laundry was going to be the destruction of me.

snapped me awake from the midst of a n'mare. In it I was trying to hide from WW in some big awful building, but every time I ran down a long hallway or up a staircase, he wd pop out of a room and say, where's that arrowhead, Hand it over or I'll tell your flks.  
barge

My blurt startled both me. "She was on the bus, I mean, and I met here and she was really nice to me."

"Oh, for Christ's sake good," the sheriff said OO. Now she's running around the countrysidex too. What is it about you two?

The prisoner ignored all that. Fixing me in his steady gaze, he asked, leaning forward intently to see around the sheriff, unlight glinting off his handcuffs. As if he was handling the case of himself & Letty, he questioned me: Why was she on the bus, Red? Start at the beginning."

*suppity*  
She got sick and tired of chintzy customers at the Buster hotel, so she's gonna try Havre.

this time  
The canasta party was at Herta at

*love down.*

You suppose Manitou was here? Shining  
I betcha (he was)

I was down in the mouth

That's very generous of you, Gerd. Donal does his best to be a little gentleman, but sometimes it's hard.

continuities/mentions needed:

177, Big Hole, Donny "sure as shootin'" (Herman must use earlier)

--horrorfied; Herman shd use in Man'c or early in trip; Don't be horrorfied.

--in Big Hole, Donny has to think of Aunt Kate at least once

--autograph album must be mentioned in Big Hole. Possibly Herman writes the Roses in the snow inscription when it appears he's going to leave w/ the hoboes.

--fingerspitz...matter of faith needs to be mentioned early (in the trip?), maybe more than once, as a Herman saying.

--Herman's cigar smoking; needs reprise during the trip, maybe even at ranch or in the Watering Hole

--Donny maybe needs to say "Really truly?" early in ms to set up use in phone conversation w/ Gram

Herman & imagination: abt K--"She don't like to think outside herself."  
--his: runaway imagination

\$50: These days that sounds like scarcely any \$ at all, but (coffee cost a dime).

Scotty was on his way to GF to arrange loan for 2nd piece of equipment (or bigger Cat?)...Gram looked at finances and said We'd be on our way to the poor house for sure is that (deal) had gone through.

~~Donny folks~~ Herman & Kate met in waterfront jobs? He had settlement from loss of his eye; they courted, married, went to Chicago (honeymoon)... (Can Herman be pensioned, by union?) by ship company responsible for his accident?)

Describe the M'woc n'hood; Polacks w/ rowdy teenagers. No other kids D's age?

change D's boarding out, or not?

--if so, parents did everything possible to stay together @ constcn camps etc.

--if not, D has to be fearful of a life of boarding out, as ward of county and in hands of Aunt K who doesn't want him

Bring the sheriff back into story, in Big Hole, in pursuit of Harv?

--if so, in 1st scene insert something like "Stacking hay is about your speed."

--rancher & Harv speak up for Herman & Donny (abt Scotty: "You know haw it is, nicknames just sort of grow." (the sheriff's is LP for Little Prick.)

Have Donny worry about being put in an <sup>state-run</sup> orphanage, not foster care?

"He's going to the other side of the mountains." (Kalispell) Fruit orchards

--Kate mentions she & Dorie were raised in one. When you're young, you (adjust), mmm?

--Picking cherries did not sound like

--it's in Kalispell to get kids out of Butte; reputation of tough kids

Crow Fair: to Gaz reporter--Donny's name: "I don't give that out." (Or some derivation from Meriwether Lewis)

"I wanted to be ~~schl~~ teacher." *School man.*

Miles City: "This is on me." (hats, green stamps)

"Rags! I mean, Mr. Rasmussen. Can I get your autograph?"  
(last ch., D in Who's Who as well as Hall of Fame?)

--D has worn out earlier enthusiasms for jigsaw puzzles, board games, pen pals...

--after the experience w/ the nosy lady, D anticipates being talked at the whole journey, and decides to get something out of it by having seatmates sign his autograph book. However, after the bus leaves GFalls he doesn't have seatmates and starts feeling lonesome (brief description of bus routine: rest stops, quick sandwich lunch in Havre depot, etc.)

--Then at Glasgow, again without a seatmate as the passengers file on, he's fairly close to the front where he hears the driver say something to someone about to get on pp.10-11, sheriff

--2 or 3 adventures w/ other passengers or in depots when he has to change busses-- maybe St. Paul, certainly Milwaukee, before he gets to Manitowoc. He continues to make up things when he talks to seatmates and so on, and maybe as with the Sheriff, he finds he's believed ~~when~~ when he's making things up and doubted when he's telling the truth.

--life in Manitowoc with great-aunt Aggie and Great-uncle Herman will take up the middle third or fourth of the book. I have yet to make up most of that, but one thing that will happen is D's discovery that H fought on the German side in "the war." He's horrified that H might have been shooting at his father on D-Day, and only eventually realizes H was in "the Great War," WW Ein. Then it turns out he was at Dead Man s Hill, near Verdun, where Wes Williamson ~~got~~ won his medal and the Montana Brigadê...again, truth stranger than what can be made up.

--Ultimately D falls afoul of Aunt Aggie and is shipped home early, as in the prospectus, only to be joined by Herman. I'm changing H's evident suicide to just going back to Germany, I think...

Questions to be resolved:

--where do they travel to in the West? (Custer Battlefield, surely, but is the rest strictly Montana? Do they go to Yosemite to see the fire fall?) Towards the end, they are in Montana, in the Big Hole Basin

--how does it end?

--what does D turn out to be? writer? professional story teller? *rodeo announcer*

--if he is a famous rodeo announcer, in the Rodeo Hall of Fame, a buckle bunny barrel racer cd ask for his autograph at the end. (or he can have given out hundreds/thousands in course of his career.)

--You boarded out & did fine

w that one whole school year

At low ebb,

D's imagination is tidal. At high tide, he's convinced Gram was going to die. Bay of Fundy...This stretches the comparison, but not much. There are places in the world.

He misses the bus--it pulls out without him--has to catch up somehow.

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 chicken hunter. 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."

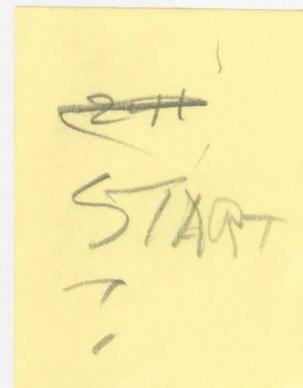
"Different case, that is," his expression changed, in my favor. He cast a look around the rodeo grounds and that horse-high hogtight fence. "We must get you away."

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 tight 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.



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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."

"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.

~~camper~~  
camper  
pickup >

“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 them freckles of yours are a long way from Indian.”

“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, then," 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 git 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 arrowhead and Sparrowhead, 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 chase 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. "Dearie dearie goddamn" he expressed, which went straight into my cussing collection. "How did I git myself into this, fixing you up as a fancy dancer? Gonna take some doing," he laughed so low it barely came out, "but it'd be a helluva good joke on these Crows, wouldn't it. They was 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.

Tuffies

I just about dissolved at that, but it galvanized Louie Slewfoot. "Git 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 really woolly leggings--"Them other kids can have their plain old goatskin, this here is pure angora"--and jingle bell anklets and a bunch more onto me. As he draped a sort of harness made up of shiny disks bigger than a silver dollar around my neck, I wondered, "Are these real silver?"

"Naw, snuff box lids. Stand up straight, can't you."

I was starting to feel as weighted down as a deep-sea diver, but he kept on digging out items and fastening me into them, until we both froze in position 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 shout 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 costumery, and the next thing I knew, I was top-heavy in a turban-like feathered headdress that covered my hair and came halfway down to my eyes. "That's better. Now we 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."

Along with a knock on the back door came Herman's urging, "Coast is clear, better hurry."

"Yeah, yeah. We're about done. Turn around a half mo, Red Chief." When I did so, Louie strapped something large and feathered on my back, patted me on a shoulder epaulette the size of a softball and told me, "There you go, chiefie. The rest of this is up to you."

"Donny, is that you?" Herman met me with astonishment when I hopped out of the camper. Overcome with curiosity myself, I stretched my neck around to glimpse the thing on my back, and blinked at the unmistakable mottled black and white feathers arrayed almost to the ground, fanned out as if in full flight.

"Holy wow! The bald eagle wing thinger!"

"You been to Heart Butte basketball games, sure enough," Louie Slewfoot granted. Heart Butte had cheerleaders in skimpy skirts like any other high school, but also famously or notoriously, depending on your point of view, a boy dancer rigged up pretty much as I was, stationed at the top of the stands every game who at crucial points would whirl around and around letting out the hair-raising staccato eagle screech, *nyih-nyih-nyih*. Before a player on the other team was about to shoot a free throw, preferably.

"Never been able to sell the bald eagle getup to these cheapskates down here," Louie was saying philosophically, "so you might as well give it a little use. Yeah, this too." He tossed me a small sack leather sack on a thong. "Medicine pouch. Hang it around your neck and put the arrowhead in." Turning to Herman, he rubbed his thumb and forefingers together. "Speaking of medicine, where's that twenty?"

Herman paid up, but we weren't done with Louie Slewfoot yet, nor he with us.

insert -  
set mid  
of them  
(French  
letter)  
Pmick

“Hokay, now we need to git Fancy Dan here past the rodeo chief,” he instructed as he set off toward the bucking chutes, motioning us on behind. “Henry Scalp Hunter. He’s not a real chief, but he’s a bossy SOB even for a Crow and somebody has to run the show.”

With my outfit jingling and jangling and Herman fretting that he hoped nothing happened to the moccasins in this, we trailed after Louie’s slewfooted gait, both of us unsure how this was going, especially when he did not turn aside at all as the biggest Crow policeman imaginable, black braids down to his shiny badge, appeared from the back of the chutes and beside him, complaining loudly about the lack of arrest of a certain thieving runt of a kid, Wendell Williamson.

The shaking of my feathers and ankle bells had nothing to do with dance steps. I was convinced my life was going to end then and there, amid horse manure and moccasin tracks. In that big word incarceration, one way or another.

“Th-that’s Sparrowhead,” I quavered to Herman, wanting to turn and run.

“Ja, I thinked so,” he grunted back, keeping right on toward Louie and the oncoming lethal pair. “Don’t be horrified,” he bucked me up as if being scared to death was that easy to be rid of. “This is where you are Red Chief, brave as anything,” I swear he sounded straight off a page of Karl May. “Big medicine in your pouch, remember,” his words made me feel the presence of the arrowhead resting against my chest. “Walk like Winnetou and Manitou are with you, the earth is your hunting ground.” I couldn’t match his steady stride, but I did square my shoulders beneath the epaulettes and skin shirt and work my eagle wing rig as if flying on the ground and marched to the jingle of my bells.

Still, as Louie barreled along on his collision course with Sparrowhead and the Crow version of a harness bull, I said tremulously out the side of my mouth, “Is he gonna turn us in?”

“We find out. Keep walking like you got no business but dancing fancy, Red Chief.”

Of all things, Louie planted himself in the path of the oncoming two men. Hunched like a bear spotting prey, he gave the Crow policeman a wicked grin and said:

“Howdy, constable. Glad to see you keeping the peace. No ghosts of Custer around or anything.”

The big Crow cop glared, snapped “I don’t have time for fool talk,” and stepped around him. Giving the Indians an exasperated look, Wendell Williamson sidestepped along with the cop and kept on ragging him about finding a purple-shirted kid who stuck out like a sore thumb. Meanwhile, Herman and I swept past unnoticed.

“That was sort of close,” Louie Slewfoot remarked when he caught up with us at the bucking chutes. “Hokay, next act. Git in back of the green elephant there and stay out of sight until I tell you,” he pointed me to the big trash bin where we hid before, and as for Herman, “You can make yourself useful by standing at one end and sort of blocking the view. Pretend like you’re watching the rodeo and you don’t know him or me from Sitting Bull.”

We took our places, and Louie clomped around to face the platform above the bucking chutes, cupping his hands to his mouth. “See you about something, Henry?” he hollered up to the man in charge. “Won’t take time at all.”

Peeking past the edge of the trash bin, I could see the rodeo chief turn to him, stone-faced behind the dark sunglasses, his braids more than ever like whips of authority down over his shoulders. “You again, is it, Slewfoot. I gave you the booth spot you pestered the crap out of me for. What’s eating you now? If you

weren't so frigging good at the squaw work, I wouldn't let your blanket-ass butt in here."

"Big frigging *if*, Henry, and you know it," Louie gave no ground. "Don't be giving me a bad time when I'm trying to be nice to you by perking up your rodeo with something special, huh? My nephew, Donny. Brung him to show you spazzes how dancing's done at Heart Butte."

Henry Scalp Hunter laughed without any humor whatsoever. "Pull my other one, Louie. Nothing doing, we have all the entrants we need." Herman, nearly toppling over in their direction to hear this, looked as anguished as I felt.

Louie ignored the turndown and called out, "Donny! Come show Mr. Scalp Hunter what a fancy dancer looks like."

I stepped out from behind the green elephant.

From his platform perch, the head Crow looked me over for half a minute, whipping off his dark glasses to see if the feathered rig on my back was truly the bald eagle wing outfit, and stopping at my moccasins. My heart thumping a mighty rhythm, I jigged enough to make the eagle feathers shimmer and the anklet bells ring-a-ling-ling. Helpfully or not, Herman abandoned his fixed casualness of staring into the arena to turn around and exclaim, "Some outfit!"

With a dip of his head, Henry Scalp Hunter had to agree, conceding to Louie: "He's got it all on, for sure. Fine, chuck him in with the other kids. But at the tail end."

The gaggle of fancy dancers that had been at the refreshment stand was now bunched at the passageway gate beyond the chutes, where the rodeo clown and anyone else who needed access to the arena could come and go. Wishing me luck-- "Git out there and show 'em how the cow ate the cabbage," said the one; "Let Manitou in moccasins with you, hah?" said the other--Louie and Herman left me to

it, and so, ankles tinkling and snuff lids clattering, I shuffled down the passageway to join the gaudily outfitted assemblage.

Not that the group of them, waiting for their time of glory in the arena, could particularly hear me coming. They jiggled and jangled and jiggled and jingled--maybe other jittery *j* words, too, but I don't know what those would be. These were some wound up-kids. Nonetheless, I couldn't help but be noticed as I tucked myself in with them. The biggest one of the bunch, an ornery-looking high school kid with a jackknife face, spotted me at once, my black and white wing outfit standing out amid their feathers of the mere golden eagle, dime a dozen out there on the plains. Enviously he looked down that long blade of nose at me, his eyes narrow as the rest of his unwelcoming mug. "Who're you ? Little Beaver?"

Ordinarily those were fighting words, but these were not ordinary circumstances. Trying to make nice, I started to respond, "Donny Ca--" and just in time managed a coughing fit. "Sorry, frog in my throat," I barely rescued the name situation. "Anyway, Donny, but my dancing name is Slewfoot."

"Tanglefoot is probably more like it," the ornery kid, head and shoulders taller than me, suspiciously eyed what he could see of me under all the costume. "So, Donny Frog in the Throat, where'd you dig up the bald eagle rig?"

There comes a point, in something like this, where you just do not want to take any more crap. "That's for me to know and you to whistle through the hole in your head to find out," I retorted to Jackknife Face.

"Gotcha there, Ferdie," the other rigged-up kids hooted, more curious about me than hostile. Giving me a good looking-over, they concluded: "You're not from here."

"That's for sure," I verified, and let drop: "Heart Butte."

"Blackfoot," Jackknife Face snickered. "That explains a lot."

The others, though, were as impressed as I'd hoped. "Whoa, the war whoop hoopsters, like in the papers! Neat! You play basketball?"

"Damn betcha," I may have fluffed my feathers some in composing the brag. "We shoot baskets for an hour after school every day. Everybody does, even Shorty the janitor."

"Bunch of crazy gunners," my original skeptic tried to dismiss Heart Butte's famous basketball proficiency. The others hooted again. "Yeah, they shot the living crap out of you, Ferd. What was that score the last game, about 100 to 20?"

The jackknife-faced one was back at me. "So, baldy. What are you, an apple in reverse?"

Not up on that in Indian talk, I dodged. "Ever hear of speaking English?"

"Come on, pizzlehead, you know--white on the outside and red on the inside?"

"Oh, that. Sure, why didn't you say so." That fit fine. Maybe he was going to acknowledge me as an honorary Indian after all, and that would be that.

"I still don't go for this," Jackknife Face took a turn for the worse, though. "We've practiced our butts off together and you just show up to do the eagle dance, big as you please? Why should we let you horn in?"

Uh oh. That didn't sound good. If I got kicked out, I was right back to being searched for all over the rodeo grounds by every Indian policeman. In a panic, I started to protest that the rodeo chief himself had let me into the fancy dancing, but Jackknife Face was not about to give that a hearing. Pointing to me, he called out to the dance leader waiting at the gate, a tribal elder with a skin drum, "Hey, Yellowtail, how come he gets to--"

He was drowned out by a shout from Henry Scalp Hunter, up on the platform. "You there, bird boy! I thought I told you to stay at the back."

"See you at the dancing," I told Jackknife Face as I scooted to the rear of the bunch.

"And now, a special treat, courtesy of Crow Fair," the announcer's voice crackled in the nick of time, "for your entertainment, the fancy dancers of the Crow nation, junior division!"

"Here we go, boys, do yourselves proud," the dance leader intoned, simultaneously starting up a rhythm with his drum like a slow steady heartbeat and the entire group of dancers with one exception--me, the straggler in more ways than one--burst into "Hey-ya-ya-ya, hey-ya-ya-ya." I caught up, more or less, as the whole befeathered and jinglebob collection of us pranced into the arena, and in the soft dirt each began to dance to the chant and drumbeat.

Did I have any idea of dance steps to do, fancy or otherwise, there in front of thousands in the packed grandstand and the eyes of the Crow nation and the worldbeating bronc rider Rags Rasmussen? No, yes, and maybe. For although I was merely a make-believe Indian in pounds of costume, I did remember the whirling and twirling of the Heart Butte mascot while he scared the neck hair off opponents at basketball games with the high-pitched eagle screech, and may have invented swoops and swirls of my own as I swept rambunctiously around in jiggling circles with my arms out like wings and the array on my back aquiver in every beautiful black-and-white feather. Caught up in the drum music and the *hey-ya-ya-ya* but most of all in the moment where imagination became real, I danced as if my flashing beaded moccasins were on fire. I danced as if the medicine pouch with my arrowhead in it was a second heart. I danced for Gram in her hospital bed and wheelchair, danced for Herman the German and his monumental little thinks, danced for shrewd Louie Slewfoot, danced for the threesome of soldiers fated to Korea and for Leticia the roving waitress and for Harvey the romantic jailbreaker

and for the other traveling souls met on the dog bus and inscribed in the memory book, all of us who were hunched up and taking it in slumgullion lives.

So, I suppose I was me, nerved up to the highest degree, but in the moment I was also Red Chief, and who knows, maybe some kind of ghost of Manitou bursting out of wherever a spirit walks through time. Possessed as I was, my moccasined feet knowing no boundaries and my high-pitched eagle shrieks of *nyih-nyih-nyih* puncturing their chant, I spooked the other fancy-dancing kids away from me as I plain and simple outcrazied them.

By now I could hear as if in a dream the announcer singling me out, calling me Woolly Leggings. "How about that boy, part angora and part bald eagle, quite the combination! Look at him go! He's got more moves than a Scotchman trying to sneak under the door of a pay toilet. Folks, what you're seeing here today holds special meaning. These dances go back a long way--"

On the dust cloud raised by the pack of dancing kids, my moment of fame forever with me, I jiggled my way from the arena as the exhibition ended and on out the gate of the rodeo grounds, still hopping and writhing, past the stern-faced Indian police watching for a purple shirt and red hair.

Herman was waiting a little way beyond the gate, and immediately gathered me in front of him, herding me to the parking lot near the tepees. "Quick fast. Louie has camper out, you can change there."

Sweat running off me in streams, as tired as I had ever been, I stood there slack like a horse being unharnessed as Louie took the costume off me piece by piece.

"You did pretty good for a redhead," he allowed. As I slowly dressed in my own clothes, he excused himself, saying he had to try to wangle the same booth spot out of the Crows for the next day, it was a sort of lucky location.

2

to  
camper

That left Herman, sitting on the narrow bunk at the front of the camper cabin with his arms folded across his chest, saying nothing as he watched me button my rodeo shirt and settle my Stetson on my head. The last thing I did was to make sure the arrowhead hung straight in the medicine pouch under my shirt, where it felt like it belonged. My watcher still had said nothing. Timidly I broke the silence.

“Are--are we gonna keep on?”

Herman took off his glasses, breathed on one lens and then the other and cleaned both with deliberation, using the tail of one of Louie’s costume garments lying there. Settling the eyeglasses back in place, he gazed at me as if newly clear-sighted. “On with what, Donny?”

“On with our trip?” my voice was uncertain. “On the bus?”

Deliberately or not, he kept me in suspense a while more. Finally he said, “More to see out west here, there is. Dog bus is how to get there, ja?”

Overcome with relief, I still had to make sure. “You’re not too mad at me for getting us in that fix? By taking the arrowhead, I mean?”

He shifted on the bunk, his glasses catching what light there was in the cabin. “I am giving it a think, sitting here while you was putting clothes on. You know what, Donny? Not for me to decide, how right or wrong you taking the arrowhead comes to. You are good boy where it counts, by sticking with me. I must do same by you, hah?”

I just about cried with--what, gratitude, happiness? Some feeling beyond that, inexpressible elation that he and I would hit the road together again? In any case, it was the kind of situation where you duck your head because there is no way to say thanks enough, and move on.

“Yeah, well, gee, Herman--what do you want to see next?”

unintended  
?

“Something without police breathing on us,” he thought. “Notcheral wonders, how about.”

*Dear Gram,*

*The dog bus was really something, with all kinds of people like you said. Aunt Kate, as I call her but everybody else says Kitty, and Uncle Herman, who does not go by Dutch any more, found me in the depot fine and dandy and we went to their house and had what they called a Manitowoc dinner, what we call supper. It takes some getting used to here.*

Gram had made me promise, cross my heart and so on, to write to her every week, but doing so when she was in the middle of complications after her operation stayed my hand from so much I really wanted to say, none of it good news as far as I was concerned. Carefully as I could, I was doctoring, to use that word, life with Aunt Kate. If word ever came from that intimidating nun, Sister Carma Jean, that the patient was better, maybe I could somehow sneak a phone call to let Gram know I was being bossed unmercifully, from being kept flat broke to being stuck in the attic. On the other hand, what she could do about it from a hospital bed when Aunt Kate was right here, always looming, seeming as big as the house she dominated top and bottom and in between.



25

Already she had stuck her head in to make sure I was keeping at it on a space of the card table that didn't have presidents from Mount Rushmore staring at me with scattered jigsaw eyes. She left me to it but not before crooning, "Don't forget to tell her the funny story of mistaking me for Kate Smith, chickie," which wild horses could not drag out of me to put on paper. Instead:

*Aunt Kate and I play cards some, not pitch like we did in the cookhouse but a different game I'll tell you about sometime.*

Herman wore a broad grin when I told him he and Hoyle had bushwhacked Herta and especially Gerda, to the Kate's satisfaction. "Did you know they play canasta for money?"

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

It was laborious to fill the whole page of stationery with anything resembling happy news. Herman's greenhouse gave me a chance to list vegetable after vegetable growing under glass, which helped, and I recounted the antics of Biggie the budgie as if Aunt Kate and I had simply paid a social visit to old friends of hers. There was so much I had to skip not to worry Gram in her condition--the Green Stamps bargain with Herta, Herman's talent at tasting beer, my broken front tooth from the scuffle with the campers, and most of all, Aunt Kate throwing away every cent of my money--it would have filled plenty of writing paper. But if the Reader's Digest could condense entire books, I supposed I could shrink my shaky start of summer likewise.

*The Fourth of July is coming, and Aunt Kate is taking me to the big celebration here where they will shoot off fireworks of all kinds and a famous band whose leader is Lawrence somebody will play music. It should be fun. I hope you are getting well fast and will be up and around to enjoy the Fourth like I will.*

*Your loving grandson,*

*Donny*



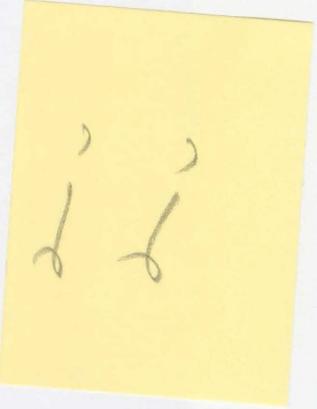
“Oh, I was going to look it over to check your spelling.” Aunt Kate pursed up when I presented her the sealed and addressed envelope for mailing. The look-it-over part I believed, which is why I licked the envelope shut.

“Aw, don’t worry about that. I win all the spelling bees in school,” I said innocently. “Miss Ciardi says I could spell down those Quiz Kids that are on the radio.”

“Well, if she says so,” Aunt Kate granted dubiously. “All righty, I’ll stamp it and you can put it out in the box for the mailman. There now, you can get right back to your puzzle, mm?”

The real puzzle, of course, was how I was going to get through a summer of thousand-piece jigsaws, old *National Geographics*, and canasta without being bored loco or something worse happening. That latter hazard in particular, because at the next hen party after I paid off the bribe to Herta with my Green Stamps, I was going to be no match for the merciless sharpies in not one canasta game but two, and it took no great power of prediction to guess Aunt Kate’s reaction to that. The Witch of November, in a muumuu, was on that horizon.

So the next couple of days after writing Gram how fine and dandy everything was in Manitowoc, I hung around with Herman in the greenhouse as much as possible to keep my morale up. He was good company, better and better in fact, as he read up some more from Karl May and other books in his corner stash and gabbed with me about cayuses and coyotes-- relying on me to straighten him out on which were horses and which were canines--and the wonders of Winnetou as a warrior and the spirit of Manitou living on and on and making itself felt in mysterious ways. “Here you go, Donny, Indians believed Manitou lived in stones, even, and could come out into a person if treated right, if you will imagine.”



With the fervor of an eleven-year-old carrying an obsidian arrowhead in his pocket, condom wrap notwithstanding, I certainly did turn my imagination loose on that, seeing myself riding the dog bus west sooner than later to a healthy and restored Gram, with a job cooking on some ranch where the rancher was no Sparrowhead, orphanage and poorfarm out of the picture, this loco summer cut short and me back at things I was good at, like hunting magpies and following the ways of cowboys. In other words, in more luck than I was used to lately.

It is said a blessing sometimes comes in disguise, but if what happened in the middle of that week was meant to be any kind of turn of luck, it made itself ugly beyond all recognition when it came.

At first I thought it was only the household's usual ruckus at breakfast while I was parked on the living room couch as usual that time of morning reading a *National Geographic*, this time about "Ancient Rome Brought to Life," where according to the paintings shown, people sometimes went around even more naked than in Bali. I was pondering an illustration of a roomful of women mostly that way and the caption with some ditty from back then, "Known unto All Are the Mysteries, Where, Roused by Music and Wine, the Women Shake Their Hair and Cry Aloud," those mysteries unfortunately unknown to me except for that smackeroo kiss Letty and I exchanged, and I did not notice her shaking her hair and crying aloud from it. Just then, though, I heard a mysterious outburst where a woman was definitely roused, but not that way.

"Have you lost half your brain as well as that eye?" Aunt Kate was yelling in the close confines of the kitchen.

"Does not take any much brain to know you are talking crazy."



“Oh, I’m the one, am I. I’ve told you before, don’t be filling his head with useless things. When I was out seeing what flowers I could cut for our next little party, I heard you telling him more of that Manitou nonsense.”

“Is not nonsense. You think you are more smart than Longfellow? Not one chance in a million.” Herman went on the attack now. “You are the one filling him up with canasta nonsense and putting him on spot in your hen parties. Let the boy be boy, I am telling you.”

In a kind of stupor as I realized the knockdown dragout fight was about me, I crept to the hallway where I could peek toward the kitchen. They were up on their feet shouting at close range across the table. I’d heard them having battles before, but this sounded like war. More so than I could have imagined, because as I watched in horror Aunt Kate leaned across the table almost within touching distance of Herman and screamed one of the worst things I had heard in my life.

“Don’t get any ideas about who’s in charge of our little bus passenger for the summer. You’re not wearing a Kraut helmet any more. So don’t think you’re big and important.”

Herman’s face darkened, and for a few frightening seconds, I wondered whether he was going to hit her. Or she him, just as likely, given the way her fists were clenched and ready.

Then Herman said in a voice barely under control, “What I am, you did not care when you wanted your bed kept warm after Fritz.” With that, he turned his back on her, heading out to the refuge of the greenhouse. Aunt Kate followed him far enough to get in a few more digs before he slammed the door and was gone.

Shocked nearly senseless as I was, by instinct I scooted for the stairs and scuttled up to the attic while she still was storming around the kitchen. I would have retreated farther than that if I could, after what I had heard. Before long, Aunt

scuttled  
upstairs

Kate's voice was raised again, this time in my direction and straining to sound melodious.

"Don-ny. Yoo hoo, Donny, where are you? Let's go for a little outing and do the grocery shopping, shall we?"

I stayed absolutely still, gambling that she would not labor up the stairs to seek me out. And if I could make her think I was at the greenhouse with Herman instead, she likely wouldn't want another shouting match out there. Silence, rare as it was tried in this household, might save me yet. After some minutes, I heard the DeSoto pull away, and I slumped down onto the bed to try to pick up the pieces of myself and the shattered remnants of my summer.

The shouting match in the kitchen had turned me upside down in my loyalties. I felt like a dunce. If what Aunt Kate leveled at him meant what I thought it did, Herman was the farthest thing from Dutch or some other harmless squarehead nationality. He was a German, and from every sound of it fought on their side as well. My head spun with the realization. Back when he had two good eyes, he must have been sighting in on Americans like my father, in my fevered imagination maybe at Omaha Beach itself, where the German army poured in to try to stop the invasion.. No wonder he was interested in last stands like Custer's, he must have been in one.

Hurt and mad at being deceived, even if I had done it to myself, I raced down the stairs two and three at a time, bound for a showdown in the greenhouse.

"You look not happy, podner," Herman said beneath his usual cloud of cigar smoke. The only sign that the battle royal in the kitchen might still have him agitated was the sharp strike of his spoon against the pot rims as he fed fertilizer to the cabbages. "Something the Kate did, hah?"

cut 2

I wanted to holler at him, *No, something you did, turning out to be a German!* Swallowing hard, I managed to restrict myself to saying, "I-I heard Aunt Kate bawling you out in there."

"Habit," he wrote that off and tapped his cigar ash onto the floor. "She wouldn't have nothing to do if not yelling her head off at me."

I had to know. The words almost strangled me, but I gulped them out. "Did you really fight on the Kraut side, like she said?"

Wincing at that language, he looked up at me in surprise. "She should wash her tongue." The big shoulders lifted, and dropped. "But, ja"--which I finally heard for what it was instead of ~~Yah~~--"that is one way to put it."

"So you really truly are a"--I had trouble even saying it--"a German?"

He chuckled. "What did you think I am, French?"

"But, but how come you don't talk like they do in the movies? The Nazi bad guys, I mean."

"Pah, those Prussians, they speak like they are chewing a dictionary," he dismissed that. "I am from elsewhere. Emden, on the North Sea. Netherlands is next door, the Dutchies are a spit away, we say."

"So aren't you sort of Dutch, any?" I seized on what hope there was. "Like when you were called that before it went down with the ship?"

"No-o-o," he drew the answer out as if calculating how far to go with it.

"'Dutch' was sailor talk for 'Deutsch,' which means 'German.' Better than 'Kraut,' but not much."

That clinched it. A Kraut by any other name, even his shipmates recognized it. Imagination did me no favors right then. My head filled with scenes, of landing craft sloshing to shore under a hail of gunfire from Hitler's troops, and sand red with blood, and a figure on crutches in the hallways of Fort Harrison hospital

Soldier  
1

4  
172

He  
made a  
face

trying to learn to walk again, which was not imaginary at all. Giving Herman the German, as he now was to me, the worst stink eye I was capable of, I demanded:

“Tell me the truth. Were you one of them at Omaha Beach?”

“Hah? What kind of beach?”

“You know. On D-Day. Were you there shooting at my father, like the other Germans?”

Realization set in on him, his face changing radically as my accusation hit home. “Donny, hold on to your horses. I am not what you are thinking. The Great War, I was in.”

What, now he was telling me it was great to have been in the war where my father got his legs shot to pieces? I kept steadily giving him the mean eye, hating everything about this Kraut-filled summer and him along with it, until he said slowly so I would understand, “World War Eins. One.”

I blinked that in. “You mean, way back?”

He looked as if his cigar had turned sour. “You could say. I was made a soldier thirty-seven years ago,” which I worked out in my head to 1914.

Slowly I sat down on a fruit box as he indicated, a whole different story unfolding than what I had imagined. “No choice did I have, Donny, back then.” He gazed up at the photographic panes of glass holding olden times in the poses of the portrait sitters, as if drawing on the past from them. “You have heard of the draft, where government says You, you, and you, put uniform on, ja? Kaiser Wilhelm’s Germany in the Great War was very drafty place,” the joke made a serious point. “There I was, young sailor on the North Sea and before I knowed it, foot soldier wearing a pickle stabber.” He put his hand on top of his head with the index finger up, indicating the spiked helmet of the Kaiser’s army.

Comical as that was, I was not deterred from asking, “So, were you in any big battles?”

He puffed out cigar smoke that wreathed a rueful grin. "With my corporal, many times."

"Aw, come on, you know what I mean. Real fights. Like Custer and the Indians."

"Shoot-them-ups, you want," he sighed. "Karl May should write Western Front westerns for you."

At first I thought he was not going to answer further, but finally he came out with, "I was at Hohe Toter Mann, was enough."

That didn't sound bad, nothing like Omaha Beach. Disappointed at his evidently tame war, I said just to be asking, "What's that mean, Ho-huh whatever you said?"

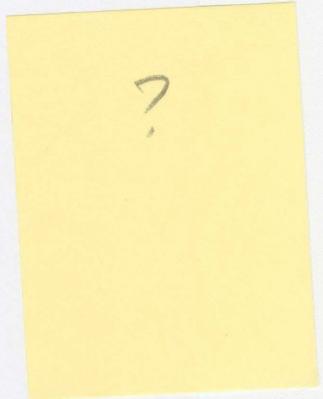
He half closed his good eye as if seeing the words into English. "Dead Man's Hill, about."

That sat me up, all attention again. "Yeeps! Like Boot Hill, sort of."

"More ways than one," he evidently decided to give me Herman the German's side of the war. "Hohe Toter Mann was fought over time after time, back and forth, forth and back, Germans and French killing each other all they could." He grimaced, and after what he said, I did too. "You could not see the ground, some places, dead men or parts of them was so thick."

I'd wanted to know the blood-and-guts truth about him a soldier, had I. That would do. "H-how come you weren't killed there?"

"The shovel is sometimes better friend than the rifle," he said simply. "Learned to dig such foxholes, I did, could have given fox a lesson." He paused to frame the rest of that story. "Here is a strange thing soldiers go through. The more of my comrades died on Hohe Toter Mann, the more it saved my life. My outfit, I think you call it?"--I nodded--"Second Company, lost so many men we was moved to rear guard duty. Behind the lines, we had chance to survive the war." His face

A yellow sticky note is placed on the right side of the page, partially overlapping the text. It contains a single, large, hand-drawn question mark.

took on an odd expression, as if skipping past a lot to say: "And here you see me, in America."

"Yeah, well, good," I spoke my relief that he had been in a separate war from my father. Now I could be curious about things less likely to bring the whole summer crashing down. "My dad was a Private First Class--what about you?"

"Private No Class, my soldiering was more like," he told me, memory turning toward mischief now. "Not what you might call hero.' Mostly, behind the lines I was chicken hunter."

"Uhm, Herman, that sounds awful close to chicken thief."

"In peacetime, ja. In war, is different. When rations are short, you must, what is the word, when cattles go here and there to eat grass?"

"Forage?"

"Sounds better than 'thief,' don't it," he went right past that issue without stopping. "Same eye-dea, though. Go find what you need to survive. 'Sharp eyes and light fingers,' was the saying. When night came, so did chance for hunting. You must understand, Donny," he could see I still was trying to sort this out from chicken thievery, "we was being fed a pannikin of soup like water and slice of bread per man, day's only meal, before armistice came. Starvation ration, too bad it don't rhyme better." He looked contemplatively at his private garden of vegetables under glass. "I grew up on little farm at Emden, cows lived downstairs from us and chickens loose outside, so I understood where food could be rustled. Even horsemeat is not so bad as you might think," he sounded like he was kidding but I could tell he wasn't, "if you boil it first."

We heard the DeSoto jouncing up the bumpy driveway. "Tell you what, podner," Herman suggested rightly even if it was not what I wanted to hear, "go help the Kate with the groceries, hah? Keep her off the warpath for once."



~~\_\_\_\_\_~~

I went through that day of Aunt Kate's bossy supervision--here, honeybunch, help me with this; there, sweetums, do this for me--with Herman's words outlasting anything she had to say. *Sharp eyes and light fingers*; there is no switch you can reach in your brain to turn something like that off. It fit with me, for if I hadn't been what he called a hunter, the black arrowhead still would be on the hall table at the Double W instead of within the touch of my fingers in the security of my pocket. Even after a supertime so tense I wondered whether one of them might throw the sauerkrkaut at the other, and another march to bed when I was wide awake, a tantalizing possibility kept coming to mind, like an echo that went on and on: *Go find what you need to survive.*

When I went to bed, my eyes not only wouldn't close in favor of sleep, they barely blinked. Put yourself in my place, doomed to screeching bedsprings and attic confinement for the rest of the summer and no mad money to see a great movie like *Tomahawk* or do anything else that was halfway interesting, and see if your mind doesn't become a fever field of imagination and you don't turn into an eleven-year-old desperado. I ignored the plaque on the wall that preached getting down on my knees and praying as the one and only answer, and instead saw through the house, to put it that way, to the sewing room. Where Aunt Kate kept her purse and maybe significantly more. Those quarters that jingled all the way home from the canasta party had to live somewhere.

It is too much to say I waited for the cover of night the way Herman had poised himself behind the lines to go out into the dark of war to forage, but I did make myself hold back, tingling to go and do it, until long after everything in this battling household went quiet.

Finally swinging out of bed, I hurried into my clothes, Tuffy-wrapped arrowhead in my pocket for luck, and slipped into the moccasins. Cracked the

door open, listening for any sound downstairs. There was none whatsoever except that nighttime not-quiet-stillness of the house holding people deep asleep. Quiet as a shadow I crept down and into the sewing room. I didn't know what I was going to say if I got caught at this. Something would have to come. It usually did.

Almost the instant I entered the small darkened room, I blundered into the cot, barking my shin on the metal frame and causing a thump that seemed to me loud as thunder.

Sucking in my breath against the hurt, I froze in place for what seemed an eternity, until I convinced myself the sleepers had not heard. Antsy as I was to get this done but not daring to put on the lights in the room, I waited until my eyes adjusted to the dark and the furnishings in the room took form, if barely. What I was after had to be somewhere in here. Aunt Kate's purse hung on a clothes rack next to the door as always, but I knew better than to risk going into it. Tightfisted as she was, she would keep track of every cent she was carrying. No, in any household I knew anything about, there was a Mason jar where loose change, the chickenfeed, was emptied into when people cleared out their pockets or purses of too much small silver. Normally kept in a kitchen cabinet or on a bedroom dresser, but from what I had seen, not in this case, undoubtedly to keep even the least coins out of Herman's reach. That stash must be, ought to be, *had* to be in here in the vicinity of her purse, something like hunter instinct insisted in me.

Summoning my courage before it left me entirely--this already was way risky, being in here at all in the middle of the night--I cautiously hobbled over to where the sewing machine was located. If I was right, a Singer model this fancy might have a small light beneath the arm of the machine to shine down on close work. My blind search ultimately fumbled onto a toggle that switched on a small bulb above the needle and router, perfect for my purpose. Now I could pick out

cot

middle

Am its glow?

objects shelved around the room, stacks and stacks of cloth and pattern books and such. But nothing like a jar holding the loose change of canasta winnings.

Doubt was eating away at my courage pretty fast--maybe I was loco to even try this and ought to scoot back upstairs to bed. Instead, Manitou or some similar spirit of the miraculous guided my hand into my pants pocket where I squeezed the arrowhead for all luck it might have. That steadied me enough to take another look around the room. My last hope, and it did not appear to be much of one, was a standard low cabinet next to the sewing machine, designed to hold thread and attachments. Quietly as possible I pulled out drawer after drawer, encountering a world of spools of thread and gizmos for making buttonholes and ruffles and so on, until finally I reached a drawer that jingled when I opened it.

I dipped my fingers into the discovery, very much like a pirate sifting gold doubloons in a treasure chest if imagination wants to be called fully into the scene. This was it, coins inches deep and loose and rattling to the touch, nickels, dimes, even pennies, and quarters, quarters, quarters. My heart rate and breathing both quickened like crazy. There was so much accumulated small silver a mere two dollars and fifty cents missing would scarcely make a dent in it.

Biting my lip in concentration, I sorted out onto the platform of the sewing machine in the pool of light about the same proportion of quarters and dimes and nickels to mke the drawer's holdings seems as even as ever. There. I had it knocked, my rightful share of the hard-won canasta pot. I was wrapping my withdrawal, as I saw it, in my hanky and about to pocket it for the journey through the dark back up to the attic, when the voice came:

"Are you done, you little thief?"

#



She was practically filling the doorway, in a nightdress as tentlike as the muumuu and wearing those fuzzy slippers which were noiseless on the living room rug. At first my tongue did fail me as I stared at a greatly irate Aunt Kate and she at me, an outpouring of words no problem for her. "I was on my way to the bathroom when I noticed this funny little glow from in here. It's not like me to leave the sewing machine on like that, is it. And what do I find, Mister Smarty Pants, but you stealing for all you're worth."

I didn't know anything to do but fight back. "Why is this stealing when I won the pot in the canasta game just as much as you did, remember? I bet Minnie Zettel got her share every time the two of you won. So why can't I?"

"I went over that with you in the car--"

"And you told me you and Herman were headed for the poorhouse, but looky here, you have money you just throw in a drawer."

"--will you listen, please." She was growing loud now. "You need to get used to not having your own way all the time. I hate to say it," but it was out of her mouth as fast as it could come, "Dorie has spoiled you something serious, letting you behave like a bunkhouse roughneck or worse."

That infuriated me, not least for her picking on Gram while she was fighting for her life in the hospital. "Gram's done the best she can, and I am too, here. But you treat me like I'm a bum you took in. If I had that money you threw in the garbage, none of this would've happened."

"That is no excuse for stealing," she said loftily, advancing on me with her hand out for the hanky-wrapped coins.

"I don't think it's stealing," I cried, "when you won't give me anything and I'm only taking my two and a half bucks of what we won as partners. Why isn't it stealing, just as much, for you to keep it all for yourself?"

"Donny," she warned, all her face including the chins set in the kind of scowl as if she was battling with Herman over toast, "you are getting into dangerous territory and had better mind your manners, or--"

"The boy is right. Why do you have to be money pincher so much it is ridiculous?"

The figure in the doorway now was Herman, in pajama bottoms and undershirt, coming to my rescue if there was such a thing as rescue from the bossypants of our existence. Aunt Kate lost no time in turning the furious scowl onto him. "Brinker, this does not concern you."

"Pah. Why do you talk so silly? You like being wrong?" A thrill went through me when he didn't back down, one hunter of what was needed to survive coming to the aid of another hunter, if I wanted to get fancy about it. "I live here, Donny lives here, and as far as anybody in whole wide world knows, he is my grandnephew too." I couldn't sort out the tangle in the middle of that sentence, but it didn't seem to matter as Herman kept at her. "You talk big to him about behavior, but you should fix up your own while he is our guest."

Aunt Kate had to work her mouth a few times to get the words out, but inevitably she managed, double-barreled. "That is enough out of both of you. We will sort this out in the morning. Donny, put that money back and go to bed. As for you, Brinker, keep your opinions to yourself if you're going to share my bed."

Neither of us wanting to fight her all night when she showed no sign of being reasonable, we complied. Herman waited at the doorway and put his hand on my shoulder as I trudged to the stairs, saying low enough that Aunt Kate couldn't hear as she fussed around with the sewing machine and the change drawer, "Don't let silly woman throwing a fit get you down, podner."

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It did, though. The next couple of days were a grind, with me sulking in my attic version of the stony lonesome or spending every minute I could out in the greenhouse with Herman, after Aunt Kate started right in on me again as soon as I showed up for breakfast that next morning.

While I hadn't said a word to her as I mushed up puffed rice and sugar, she in turn kept her head down over the *Herald-Times* to say as if my behavior was reported in the newspaper, "Donny, last night was very upsetting to me and I hope nothing like it happens again."

"I didn't like it any either. You were futzing at me and Herman like we were criminals of some kind," I responded, unable to resist giving her a dose of stink eye.

She sighed so strenuously it threatened to bulge her out of her robe. "That's exactly the sort of thing I warned you about after the canasta game. Uncalled for remarks. You don't seem to listen when I try to improve your manners a teensy bit. Sometimes," she took a slurp of coffee for the chance to sight in on me over the cup, "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, how about?" I answered quick as a shot.

I suppose I was being a handful with that, although to me I was only speaking up for myself. And what was she being, parked there on a kitchen chair with her hippo rear end hanging over on both sides, waiting to pick a fight as she always did with Herman? I braced for another go-round about a handful of quarters. But she merely set down the coffee cup and returned to the newspaper, saying more to herself than to me, "We'll have to see about that."

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Saturday came, after those days of the two of us being as cautious as scalded cats around each other, and I could hardly wait to go with Herman again on his 'medicine' run for a change of scenery, not to mention atmosphere. This morning, she was more than fully occupying her chair in the kitchen as usual but fully dressed for going out. Herman was nowhere around, but that was not out of the ordinary after their customary breakfast battle. In any case, Hippo Butt, as I now thought of her, actually smiled at me, a little sadly it seemed, as I fixed my bowl of soupy cereal, and naturally I wondered what was up.

I found out disastrously soon when she cleared her throat and said:

"Donny, I have something to tell you. After breakfast, pack your things. I'm sending you home."

Home? There was no such thing. Didn't she know that? Why else was I here? I stared at her in incomprehension, but her set expression and careful tone of voice did not change. "Hurry and eat and get your things, so we don't miss your bus."

"You can't just send me back!" My shock and horror came out in a cry. "With Gram laid up, they'll put me somewhere! An orphanage!"

"Now, now." She puffed herself up to full Kate Smith dimensions as she looked at me, then away. "This hurts me as much as it does you," which was something people said when that wasn't the case at all. "After the sewing room incident, I wrote to your grandmother saying I have to send you back, without telling her that was the reason, so you're spared that. I didn't tell you before now because I didn't want you to be upset."

Talk about a coward's way out. She did the deed by letter instead of telephone so there could be no argument on Gram's part. And to keep clear of

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that starchy nun Carma Jean asking where here sense of charity was. And 'upset'? How about overturned and kicked while I was down?

"But, but, it's like you're sending me to jail, when you're supposed to let me be here all summer," life had flipped so badly I was desperately arguing for Wisconsin.

She had the decency to flinch when I flung that charge at her, but she also dodged. "Donny, dear, it won't be as bad as you think. We have to believe that your grandmother will recuperate just fine and be able to take care of you again, don't we. But in the meantime, there are foster homes that take in children for a while." That sounded to me like nothing more than a bus drop stop on the way to the orphanage. "To make sure, I went to the county welfare authorities here and got a list of such places in Great Falls. It's all there in my letter. Your grandmother will only have to fill out a form, and you'll give a temporary home until she gets well."

If she ever did. With Gram's life in the balance, my only other living relative was throwing me to the winds, sending me to strangers who had no more interest in me than the price tag for taking me in. That outlook would curdle anyone, and I must have given my no sworn enemy a gaze with hatred showing.

"Please don't look at me that way," she fussed at creases in the newspaper that needed no fussing at. "The nuns will help out if need be. They'll have to when you show up. Now eat up and we'll have to be going."

I pushed aside my breakfast, too sick at heart to eat, and went for my suitcase for sixteen hundred and one miles of agony ahead.

We were at the car before I came out of my shellshock enough to realize the missing part in all this. "Wh-where's Herman? Isn't he coming with us?"

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“You shouldn’t ask.” She sure couldn’t wait to tell me, though, as she impatiently gestured for me to climb in the DeSoto. “He sneaked off on the city bus for that ‘medicine’ of his. Threw the car keys to me and told me to do my--my dirty work myself.”

She got the rest off her chest, more than a figure of speech as she heaved herself into position behind the steering wheel and said over the grinding sound of the starter, “That man. He says he can’t bear to tell you goodbye. I don’t know why not, it’s just a word.”

Any piece of my heart still unbroken crumbled at that. Abandoned even by Herman the German. I meant less to him than a couple of beers at the S~~A~~chooner. Brave survivor of Hohe Toter Mann, hah. If there was a Coward’s Corner on Boot Hill, that’s where he deserved to end up.

At the bus depot, everything was all too familiar, benchfuls of people sitting in limbo until their Greyhound was ready to run, the big wall map of THE FLEET WAY routes making my journey loom even longer. Forced to wait with me until my bus was called, Aunt Kate turned nervous and probably for her sake as much as mine tried to play up what lay ahead of me. “Just think, you’ll be there in time for the Fourth. They’ll have fireworks and sizzlers and whizbangs of all kinds, I’m sure.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about whizbangs,” I said loudly enough to make passing busgoers stare and veer away from us.

“Donal, please.” She looked around with a false smile as if I was only being overly cute. ”This is the kind of thing I mean, you can see it just isn’t right for you here.”

It would take a lot to argue with that, but before I even had any chance she had her purse up and was diving a hand into it. “Oh, and take this.” She pressed



some folded money into my hand. In amazement, I turned the corners of the bills back, counting. Three tens. The exact same sum as had been pinned inside my discarded shirt.

“What--how come--”

“No, no, don’t thank me,” she cooed, while all I was trying to ask was why she hadn’t done this in the first place, like maybe as soon as we both realized she had thrown my summer money in the garbage.

She burst into tears. “Donny, I wish this would have worked out. But you see how things are, Herman and I have all we can do to keep ourselves together. I--I may be a selfish old woman, I don’t know, but my nerves just will not take any more aggravation. Not that I blame you entirely, understand. It’s the, the circumstances.” Still sniffing, she pulled a hanky from her purse and blew her nose. “This is the best thing all around. You’ll be back there where people are more used to you.”

Yeah, well, it was way late for any apology, if that’s what this amounted to. All it did was delay us from the departure gate where passengers already were piling onto the bus with MILWAUKEE on its roller sign. For me, there’d be another one with WESTBOUND after that. I did not look back at her as I handed my ticket to the driver for punching, left the wicker suitcase for him to throw in the baggage compartment, and climbed aboard to try to find a seat to myself to nurse my misery.

If she hadn’t cried, I would have given in to tears. As it was, I sat there trying to hunch up and take it, one more time. ~~#~~ Two days and a night ahead on the dog bus, doom of some kind waiting at the Great Falls depot. Convinced that everything that could go wrong was going wrong, I sent a despairing look up the aisle of the bus. All the situation needed now was something like that bunch of

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hyena campers to torment me. But no, my fellow passengers mainly were men dressed up for business, a *Manitowoc Herald-Times* up in front of someone like a last mocking farewell reminder of Aunt Kate, and a few couples where the women were as broad-beamed as seemed to be ordinary in Wisconsin. Nothing to worry, I thought bitterly of Herman's wording.

The bus growled into action, and was at the outskirts of Manitowoc, the radius of my summer failure, when I heard the sort of *oof* of someone dropping down next to me. Oh, swell. Exactly what I did not need, a gabby seat changer. With so much else on my mind, I'd forgotten to place my jacket in that spot and now it was too late. Two full hours ahead to Milwaukee yet, and I was in for an overfriendly visit from some stranger with nothing better to do than talk my ears off. Goddamn-it-aaato hell-anyway, couldn't life give me any kind of a break, on this day when I was being kicked down the road like an unwanted pup? I didn't even want to turn my head to acknowledge the intruder, but sooner or later I had to, so it might as well be now.

"Hallo."

Out from behind the newspaper, Herman the German was giving me the biggest horsetooth smile.

I rammed upright in my seat. "What are you doing on here?"

"Keeping you company, hah?" he said as if I had issued the invitation.

"Long ride ahead, we watch out for each other."

"Y-you're going to Montana with me?"

His shoulders went way up, the most expressive French salute yet. "Maybe not to Big Falls. We must discuss."

So flustered I was trying to catch up with things in no particular order, I craned my neck back toward Manitowoc as if Aunt Kate was on our trail. "Does she know you're here?"

“Puh.” That translated different ways, as Of course not and It didn’t matter, take my choice. “Left her a note saying I am gone back to Germany, we are you know what.” Kaput? I goggled at him. Just like that, he could walk out of a marriage and hop on a bus in some other direction from where he said he was going? Man oh man, in comparison I was a complete amateur at making stuff up.

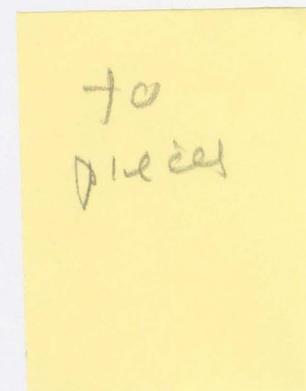
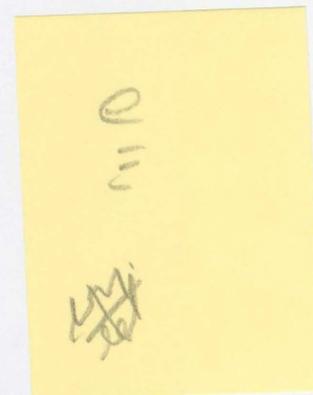
“Today was the last straw on camel’s back,” he said next, the words echoing enough’s enough. I listened open-mouthed as Herman continued in a more satisfied tone, “The Kate will run around like the chicken with its head chopped off a while, but nothing she can do. I am gone like the wind.” He included me with a wink of his bad eye. “We are on the loose, ja?”

“I guess you are. But Hippo Butt, I mean the Kate got it all set up that my grandmother has to stick me in a fostr home ahead of the orphanage as soon as I get to Great Falls and--”

“No, she does not. Silly eye-dea. I kiboshed.”

He had to repeat that for it to make any sense to me. As best I could follow, what it came down to was that he had guessed what she was up to when he saw her writing a letter. “Unnotcheral behavior,” he sternly called it. The rest was pretty much what you would think, him sneaking around from the greenhouse after she put the letter to Gram out in the mailbox, swiping it and reading it and, he illustrated triumphantly to me by fluttering his hands as if sprinkling confetti, tearing the thing up. “Evidence gone, nobody the wiser, hah?”

It sunk in on me. No one in the entire world knew that the two of us were free as the breeze. Herman wasn’t merely flapping his lips; we really were footloose, or at least bus-loose. Crazily like the comic-strip characters in “Just Trampin’” who were always going on the lam, hopping on freight trains or bumming rides from tough truck drivers to stay a jump ahead of the sheriff.



Herman and I did not even have to do any of that, the fleet of Greyhounds ran anywhere we wanted to go. It was a dizzying prospect. Goodbye, battle-ax wife, for him, and no Hello, orphanage, for me--it was as simple as sitting tight in a bus seat to somewhere known only to us, the Greyhound itself on the lam from all we were leaving behind.

I tell you, scratch a temptation like that between the ears and it begins to lick your hand in a hurry. "You mean, just keep going?" The question squealed out of me in my excited state. "Like for all summer?"

"Betcha boots, podner. Who is to know?"

"Yeah, but, that'll cost a lot. What'll we use for money?"

"Nothing to worry. I got plenty." Seeing my disbelief, he patted the billfold spot in the breast pocket of his jacket, where there did seem to be a bulge.

"Really truly? How much?"

"Puh-lenty," said he as if that spelled it out for me. "I cashed in all my settlement, then went to the bank and took out my share from there. Half for her, half for me, right down center. What is the words for that, same-sam?"

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

"Pah. Woman talk. We will live like kings, Donny. Here, look." He took out the fat wallet from inside his coat and spread it open for me to see. Lots and lots of the smaller denominations, of course, but I hadn't even known fifty and hundred bills existed, as maybe half the wad consisted of. "Outstanding!" I reacted excitedly, money raining down on my situation after that spell of being flat broke.

There was a catch to simply taking off into the yonder, though, isn't there always? "See, Gram has me write to her every week," I fretted. "She'll know right

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away I'm not back there with you and Hippo--the Kate like I'm supposed to be if those are mailed from any old where."

Even before I finished speaking, Herman had that look which usually produced eye-dea, but this time what came out was scheme. "Mailed from Manitowoc, they can be. Gus owes me favor." He spieled it as if it was a sure thing, me writing enough letters ahead to cover the rest of the summer, the batch then sent to the bartender at The Schooner with instructions to mail one each week. "I stick ten dollarses in with, Gus would jump over moon if I ask," he impressed upon me. "Your grossmutter hears from you regular, what you are doing," he finished with infectious confidence, "postmark says Manitowoc if she looks."

"You mean," I asked in a daze, "make up the whole summer?"

"Ja, tell each week the way you like. Make it sound good."

And that clinched it. The chance to condense the disastrous season spent with Aunt Kate entirely according to my imagination was too much to resist.

"Woohoo, Herman!" I enlisted in his plan so enthusiastically he shushed me and took a quick look around at the other passengers, luckily none close enough to have overheard. Whispering now, I asked eagerly, "But where will we go?"

With a sly grin, he leaned back in his seat as if the dog bus was the latest in luxury. "Anywheres," he said out the side of his mouth so only I could hear. "Just so it is"--he made the cocked-finger gesture and pointed that pistoleer finger toward the west--"thataway."

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“Uhm, Herman, that sounds awful close to chicken thief.”

“In peacetime, ja. In war, is different. When rations are short, you must, what is the word, when cattles go here and there to eat grass?”

“Forage?”

“Sounds better than ‘thief,’ don’t it,” he went right past that issue without stopping. “Same eye-dea, though. Go find what you need to survive. ‘Sharp eyes and light fingers,’ was the saying. When night came, so did chance for hunting. You must understand, Donny,” he could see I still was trying to sort this out from chicken thievery, “we was being fed a pannikin of soup like water and slice of bread per man, day’s only meal, before armistice came. Starvation ration, too bad it don’t rhyme better.” He looked contemplatively at his private garden of vegetables under glass. “I grew up on little farm at Emden, cows lived downstairs from us and chickens loose outside, so I understood where food could be rustled. Even horsemeat is not so bad as you might think,” he sounded like he was kidding but I could tell he wasn’t, “if you boil it first.”

We heard the DeSoto jouncing up the bumpy driveway. “Tell you what, podner,” Herman suggested rightly even if it was not what I wanted to hear, “go help the Kate with the groceries, hah? Keep her off the warpath for once.”

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Nervous as a cross-eyed cat, I took my place across the card table from Aunt Kate. It was the fateful turn of Herta Schepke, seated to my left, to host the weekly canasta party and she had really put herself into it, the heavy old dark brown living room furniture burnished with polish, the rose-and-thistle patterned rug vacuumed until every tuft stood and saluted, the plate of “nibbles” impressively stacked with Ritz crackers spread with pimento cheese. Even the parakeet in a cage by the window shone dazzlingly, preening its green and gold colors in the sunlight as it squawked and whistled for attention.

“That’s some bird,” I thought I’d make polite safe conversation while her partner Gerda shuffled and reshuffled the fat deck of cards in expert fashion and Aunt Kate inaugurated the nibbles plate with an *Mmm mm* and two bites that did in a cheese-topped cracker. “What’s its name?”

“Big Tiny Little Junior,” replied Herta, although I wasn’t sure I had heard right. She took pity on my mystified expression. “Oh my, don’t you know? Big Tiny Little Junior is the most divine piano player with the Lawrence Welk orchestra. They make ‘champagne music’ and play here every year for the Fourth

of July observance in the park and at the county fair and everything of the sort. And the name Big Tiny Little Junior just seemed so right for a parakeet. The little dear is a budgerigar, you know." I didn't have a clue that was what a shrunken parrot was called, and my face must have given me away because Herta gave a little giggle of compassion and spelled out, "So there you have it, don't you see? Biggie the budgie. He even knows his name." To prove it, she cooed across the room, "Pretty bird, who's my pretty bird?" The wild-eyed parakeet cocked its head and squeaked, "*Big-ee, Big-ee*" over and over.

During this, Gerda was dealing out cards with mere flicks of her fingers, faster than I could pick them up. We had barely started and already I was scared half sick at the way this so-called game was shaping up. Characters such as Old 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 glistening 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, Kittycat," 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 trickle 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 things up a little, mm?" So saying, she shoved a quarter each for herself

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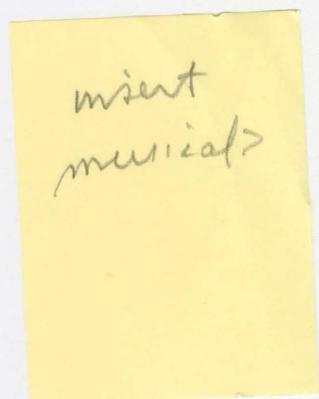
and me, the wouldbe Minnie Zettel, out next to the deck to form the kitty, Gerda did the same for her and Herta, and that was supposed to be that.

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 partnershp, "any red threes to meld?"

Not a good start. "Sure, I was just about to." I grabbed the tray 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 the widder to my right 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.

"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 stake 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.”

Aunt K  
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“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 something to wear.”

“We all *have* clothes, Kitty,” Herta responded with a huffy glance at Aunt Kate’s vivid muumuu. “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 playing canasta 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.”

Luckily enough, 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.

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carrying

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 and our stake 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."

"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?"

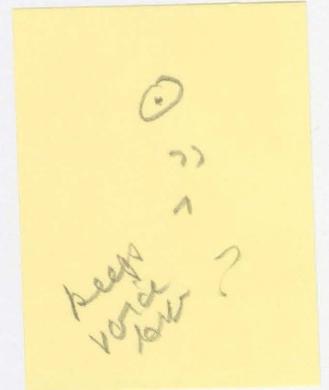
"Uh-uh. I have a whole book, pasted in and everythibng."

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 couple of seconds, calculating what she would lose in the kitty against the fierce price tag on 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 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 and all three women were waiting like tigers to pounce and pick it up, 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."

"You betcha." The spirit of Herman must have got into me to sass her that way.

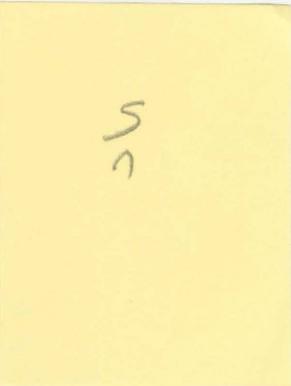
“Mmm hmm.” Stuck for any way to dislodge me from my stubborn maneuver, she tried to make the best of it by shaking her head as if I was beyond grownup understanding. “Girls, it appears we have a frozen deck.”

“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.”

The pile built and built more temptingly as we all drew and discarded several more times, until Herta drew, stuck the card away and as if distracted by Biggie’s latest rant of chirrup, 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 so fast her hand was a blur as she protected the pile. “Oh no you don’t. Against the rules, Hertie, you know perfectly well.” Tossing down her natural pair of aces, she gobbled up 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 providing by yielding up quantities of quarters while Biggie screamed as if celebrating our triumph.



SC

~~Handwritten scribble~~

I felt like a winner in every way as Aunt Kate, humming away as pleased as could be, started to drive back to the house. Victory over the canasta hens, Herman would get a great laugh out of that. And winnings, actual money, the first gain of that kind since I had alit in Manitowoc. Manitou's town itself was even 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" of the shift change at the shipyard.

So I was caught by surprise when my attention, racing ahead of the DeSoto's leisurely pace, suddenly had to do a U-turn when I heard the words, "Donal, I have something to say to you, don't take it wrong."

In my experience as a kid, there wasn't much other way to take something that started like that. I waited warily for whatever was coming next.

She provided it with a look at me that took her eyes off the road dangerously long. "Has your grandmother ever, *ever* suggested circumstances in which you should," she paused for breath and emphasis and maybe just to think over whether there was any hope of changing my behavior, "hold your tongue?"

Was I going to admit to her that frequent warning of Gram's, *Don't be a handful't*? Not ever. "Naw, you know how Gram is. She calls a spade a shovel, dirt on it or not, like she says, and I guess I'm the same."

From her pained expression, she apparently thought that described her sister all too well and me along with it. She drew a breath that swelled her to the limit of the driver's seat and began. "I'm not putting down your grandmother, I know she's done the best she could under the"--she very carefully picked the word-- "circumstances."

That could only mean Gram putting up with my redheaded behavior, and now I was really wary of where this was heading. Aunt Kate took her eyes off the road to make sure I got the message. "So this is for your own benefit"--which was

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it

once  
more

right up there in the badlands of being a kid with *don't take it wrong*--"when I say you are a very forward youngster."

I hadn't the foggiest notion of what that meant, but I risked: "Better than backward, I guess?" She stiffened a bit at that retort, but a lot more when I couldn't stop myself from saying, "And I can't help it I'm a *youngster*."

"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?

I was getting mad, but not so mad I couldn't see from her expression that I had better retreat a little. "Yeah, well, I'm sorry if Herta and Mrs. Horssstetter took the testicle festival the wrong way. I thought they'd be interested in how we do things in Montana." Figuring a change of topic would help, I went directly to, "Anyhow, we beat their pants off, didn't we. How much did we win?"

"Mm? Five dollars." She reached down to her purse between us on the seat and shook it so it jingled. "Music to the ears, isn't it," she said with a smile that would hve done credit to Kate Smith.

"And how!" I couldn't wait one more second to ask. "When do I get my share of the five bucks?"

"Sweetheart, it is time we had a talk about money," the smile was gone that fast. "To start with, I was the one who put up our stake, wasn't I. By rights, then, the winnings come to me, don't they."

"But we were partners! We won the canasta game together! And I didn't *have* any money to put up, remember?"

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That accusation, for that's what I meant it to be, only made her wedge herself more firmly behind the steering wheel of the DeSoto. "Now, now, don't make such a fuss. If I were to give you your share, as you call it, what would you spend it on? Comic books, movies, things like that which are like throwing money away."

Things like that were exactly what I wanted to spend mad money on, and I tried to say so without saying so. "I can't go through the whole summer just sitting around the house doing nothing."

"That is hardly the case," she didn't give an inch. "I'll take you shopping with me, you can be my little helper at the grocery store and so on. Then there's the jigaw puzzle now that you've learned canasta, and always the greenhouse to visit, isn't there." Her voice went way up musically as she said the next. "Don't worry, bunny, you won't lack for entertainment if you just put your mind to it. And here's a surprise for you." By now she was cooing persuasively. "On the Fourth, we'll go the park where they'll have fireworks and sizzlers and whizbangs and all those things, and hear that wonderful Lawrence Welk orchestra Herta talked about."

Who did she think I was, Biggie the budgie? But before I think up a better retort, she let out an alarming sigh as if the air was going out of her. I saw 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."

I jerked my head around to where she was looking, expecting a hospital or cemetery at the worst, some sight ordinarily sad to see. My gaze froze as hers had. The forbidding old building set back from the street was chillingly familiar, even though I was positive I had never seen it before. The sprawling structure, rooms

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piled three stories high, each with a single narrow window, seemed leftover and rundown and yet clinging to life like the skinny little trees, maybe a failing orchard, that dotted its grounds like scarecrows. "What is that place?" I heard my own voice go high.

"Just what it looks like," Aunt Kate responded, speeding up the car to leave the ghostly sight behind. "The poorhouse."

The word hit me all the way through as I still was staring over my shoulder at the creepy building. Put a rocky butte behind it and weatherbeaten outbuildings around it and it was the county poor farm of my nightmares. As if caught up in the worst of those even though I was awake, I heard Aunt Kate's pronouncement that made my skin crawl. "And that's another reason I must be careful, careful, careful, with money and impress on you to do the same. I sometimes think we'll end up there if a certain somebody doesn't change his ways."

"Y-you mean Herman?"

"Him himself," she said, squeezing the life out of the steering wheel.

"But--why?" I was stupefied. "How's he gonna end you up in the poorfarm, I mean house?"

"Have you ever seen that man do a lick of work? If only," she said grimly. Another sigh as if she as about to collapse scared me as much as the first one. "To think, what a difference it would make if Fritzie was here."

"Huh? Who?"

"Oh, the other one," she tossed that off as if it was too sad to go into.

No way was she getting away with that. My burning gaze at her was not going to quit until she answered its question, *The other what?*

She noticed, and said offhandedly, "Husband, who else?"

I gaped at her. She seemed like the least likely person to believe the plural of spouse is spice, as I'd overheard grownups say about Mormons and people like

Poorfarm

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that. "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 again stared until she had to answer. "Storm, slick deck."

"Really?" Strange how these things work, but Herman's shake of the sugar bowl that spilled some over the side when he was showing me the fate of the *Badger Voyager*, combined with her words to make my pulse race. Trying not to sound eager, though I was, I sat up and asked, "Like when the Witch of November came?"

"He's been filling your head out there in the garden shed with his old sailor tales, hasn't he. All right, you want the whole story." No sighing this time, actually a little catch in her voice. "My Fritz was bosun on the *Badger Voyager*. Washed overboard in the big November storm of '47."

I thought so! The same storm and ship that took Herman's eye! That Witch of November coincidence inundated me in waves of what I knew and didn't know. Her Fritzie was Herman's best friend on the doomed ore boat. No problem with that, I could savvy the pair of them as a bunkhouse buddies or whatever the living quarters were on a ship. But then how in the world had someone she would not even call by his first name get to be the replacement husband? Someone she thought was so worthless they'd end up in the poorhouse? Where that embattled matchup came from, my imagination could not reach at all.

Fritz  
Schmidt

learned  
about  
that

All this whirling in my head after her news about Fritzie's sad fate, I miraculously managed to hold my exclamation to a high-pitched "That's awful!" "Yes, it's a tragedy." She gazed steadily ahead at the road. "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. As if reminded, she glanced over at me and patted her purse enough to make it jingle again in a sort of warning way. "You did fine in today's game, honeybunch, but stay on your toes. Next time, it's at our house and we'll do as usual and play two out of three."

A

party

He had me read out canasta rules from Hoyle while he dealt hands of fifteen cards each as if four of us were playing, the same as Aunt Kate had just tried, but that was the only similarity, the cards flying from his fingers almost faster than the eye could follow. I felt justified to hear him let out an exasperated "Puh" at the various rules that threw me. After scooping up his hand and studying it and then doing the same with the other two and mine, he instructed me to sort my cards into order from kings--in the girly deck, even those were naked frolickers around a throne or doing something pretty close to indecent with a crown--on down, left to right, with aces and wild cards and any jokers off the end together for easy keeping track, something Aunt Kate had never bothered to tip me off to. I will say, the bare parts of the French ladies peeking from behind the usual queens and jacks garbed to their eyebrows did cause me to pay a good deal more attention to the display of my cards.

His eyeglasses glinting with divine calculation--or maybe it was a beam of light focused through a photographic pane of glass overhead--Herman lost no time in attacking our phantom opponents. "First thing after everybody melds, freeze the pile, yah? Throw on a wild card or a joker even, so they must have natural pair to take what is discarded. Get your bluff in, make it hard for the hens to build their hands."

That made more sense than anything Aunt Kate had dinned into me in all the afternoons. I had to part with a wild-card deuce featuring a sly-looking blonde skinnydipping in a heart-shaped swimming pool, but reluctantly figured it was worth it to place her crosswise on the discard pile to indicate it was frozen.

About then, Herman noticed my hand visiting deep in my pants and tut-tutted with a frown. "Donny, sorry to say, but this is not time for pocket pool."

Turning red as that seven of hearts, I yanked my hand out at that accusation of playing with myself. "No, no, it's not that, honest. What it is, I carry, uh, a lucky charm and it's got to be rubbed for, you know, luck."

He cocked his head in interest at my hasty explanation. I still was flighty about letting anyone see the arrowhead. But something moved me, maybe the spirit of Manitou, and I suppose somewhat ceremoniously I dug out the arrowhead and peeled back its sheaf of Tuffies enough it to show him.

He laughed and laughed when I explained the need for protection from the sharp edges. "First time in history those are used that way, I betcha." When I handed him the condom pouch with the arrowhead catching enough light through the glass panes to glisten like a black jewel, he fell silent, holding it in the palm of his hand as if it were precious beyond any saying of it. At last he murmured, "Bee-yoot-iful," and handed it back to me with great care. "Where did you get such a great thing?"

I told him about finding it in the creek, right where some Indian dropped it, way back before Columbus, adding none too modestly, "It's rare."

"Goes with your moccasins, you are halfway to Indian," he puffed up my estimate of myself even further. His long face crinkled in a surprisingly wise smile. "You are right to use it as lucky piece and rub it often. Luck is not to be sniffled at wherever it comes from."

Stoking up with a fresh cigar, Herman turned back to Hoyle and how to arm me for the hen party, running his finger down the canasta page black with rules. "Hah, here is oppor-tun-ity. Hoyle don't say you got to put meld down any time quick." Reaching over, he grabbed up the cards I had melded and tucked them back in my hand. "Bullwhack the hens. Hide what you will do, yah?"

It took me a few blinks to rid myself of the mental picture of laying into Aunt Kate and Herta and Gerda with a bullwhip--"Take that, you canasta fiends!"--

change  
puffed up  
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and figure out he meant bushwhack. Then to grasp his idea of an ambush, by holding back meld cards so Gerda and Herta wouldn't have any clue to what was in my hand, until the twin cardplaying demons blindly discarded something I had a bunch of and could snatch up the pile and put together melds like crazy. "'Eye-dea is, surprise their pants off," he formulated, already tracing through the dense print for further stunts I could pull. I giggled. That would put them in the same league as the undressed womanhood peeking various parts of themselves out at me from card to card. Canasta Herman style was proving to be worth ever so much more close attention than that of Aunt Kate.

In our session next day, amazed at the progress I had made, she praised my new powers of concentration and confidence and what she unknowingly termed a better feel for canasta. "That's more like it," she declared, celebrating with a chunk of peanut brickle. "Honeybun, I knew you could do it. All it takes is patience, mmm?" If you didn't count whatever could be squeezed out of a French Bible and a lucky arrowhead.

"All righty right," she munched out the words, "you've learned the hard way what a canasta is. Let's don't futz with it any more today."

My ears must have stood straight out at that. Hearing one of Gram's almost cusswords come from high-toned Aunt Kate shocked me all the way through. Sure, they were sisters, but in my view as different as any two living breathing human beings could be, yet alike as far as something like *futz* went? Wackier than that, even, I felt that barely clean utterance of hers somehow applied to me, too, as the other member of our haphazard family. Was it possible that when she and Gram were youngsters in the sticks of North Dakota, they collected dirty words the same way I was, except those would naturally be somewhat cleaner for girls? It was something to think about, that Aunt Kate had ever been a kid.

my oo  
(canasta)  
partner

like  
me

Nor, it turned out, was that the end of her capacity to surprise. After popping another piece of brickle into her mouth, one for the road, she rose from her chair and beckoned for me to follow her. "Come see, honey bunch. "A certain seamstress has been working her fingers off," she all but patted herself on the back, "and I have something to show you in the wardrobe department."

Wardrobe. I knew that meant clothing, and lots of it, and instantly I envisioned what must be awaiting in the sewing room. Homemade school clothes, what else?

Oh man! Suddenly, something made sense. The sewing machine zinging away during the soap operas, her secretive behavior in holing up there while shooin' me off when I tried to bring up the matter of the missing money--all this time, she'd been busy making shirts and the rest to surprise me with. Those baby-blue stares of hers sizing me up in the best sort of way, when I'd unkindly thought she was in the habit of eyeing me as if I was a stray left on the doorstep. What a relief. I wouldn't have to go back to school in the fall looking like something the cat dragged in, after all.

Giddy with this turn of events, I revamped my attitude about everything since I arrived. No wonder she stuck me away in the attic, in order to have the sewing room produce what I most lacked, a wardrobe! Forgiving her even for canasta, I nearly trod on her heels in my gratitude as my newly wonderful aunt paraded us across the living room to the sewing nook, dropping smiles over her shoulder.

"I do hope you like what I've done," she was saying as we entered the snug room full of piles of fabrics, "I put so much work into it." I bounced on my toes trying to see as she plowed right in to the stack on the day bed, lifting something really colorful off the top.

"Ready?" she crooned, keeping up the suspense. "Usually I have a better idea of the size, so I had to guess a little." Of course she did, unaccustomed to making things for someone eleven going on twelve.

"I bet it'll all fit like a million dollars," I loyally brushed away any doubt.

"You're too much," she tittered. "But let's see."

Proudly she turned around to me with an armful of cloth that radiated colors of the rainbow, and while I gaped, let what proved to be a single garment unfold and descend. It went and went. Down past her cliff of chest. Unrolling along the breadth of her waist, then dropping past her hamlike knees without stopping, until finally only the tips of her toes showed from beneath the curtain of cloth, striped with purple and yellow and green and orange and shades mingling them all, that she held pressed possessively against her shoulders.

"My party outfit," she said happily. "The girls will get their say on Monday, but I wanted you to see it first."

It was a sight to be seen, all right, the whole huge buttonless sheath of dress, if that's what it was. Straight from the needle of Omar the tentmaker, it looked like.

Still holding the wildly colored outfit up against herself, she confided, "They wear these in Hawaii. I came across a picture of one in a *National Geographic*." Crinkling her nose with the news, she informed me: "It's called a muumuu."

"It's, it's really something."

Beyond that, words failed me, as the same old situation sunk in, no school wardrobe, no mad money, no hope of prying either one out of the clothes horse preening over her creation. Or was there?

Sweeping the creation over her shoulders to try to get a look at herself from behind in the full-length mirror, she asked as if my opinion actually counted for something: "What do you think, dearie? Does it look all right from behind?"

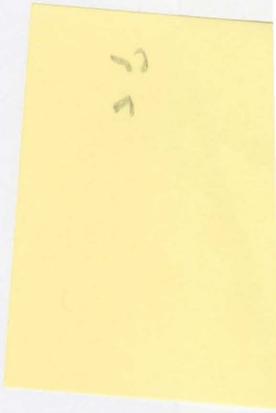
The muumuu made her rear end look like the butt of a hippo, which I absolutely did not say. "It's, ah, about like the front. Fits where it touches. like Gram would say."

"Oh, you. But you're right, it is supposed to fit loosely. Humming full force as she twirled this way and that in front of the mirror that was barely big enough to accommodate her and the tent of fabric both, she was in her own world. Not for long, if I had anything to do with it.

"Gee, yeah, the moo dress will look awful nice on you," I fibbed wholeheartedly. "And you know what, I sure wish I had any good clothes to go along with it at the card party." I furthered the cause of a spiffy homemade wardrobe by angling my head at the sewing machine. "I wouldn't want to look like something the cat dragged in, when you're so dressed up," I clucked as if we couldn't stand that.

That took the twirls out of her in a hurry. She squinted at the reflection of the two of us in the mirror, seeing my point. My hopes shot up as she chewed on the matter, studying back and forth from the muumuu of many colors to me dressed dull as dishwater as usual. I cast another longing look around at the waiting sewing machine and stacks of enough material to outfit me twenty times over, but she was not going to be oufoxed that easily.

"I just remembered, sweetums," she exclaimed as if reminding me, too. "You have your wonderful rodeo shirt to wear, don't you." She smiled victoriously. "We'll put on a fashion show for the girls, mmm?"



With hen party day looming beyond and me not one stitch better off than I'd been, Saturday came, with the soap opera characters taking the day off to recuperate from their harrowing week--I could sympathize with them--and I was leery that Aunt Kate might have second thoughts about any more futzing and sit me down me for one last canasta drill all forenoon. Instead she let me know in no uncertain terms that she was going to do housecleaning for the party and I'd need to find some way to occupy myself. "You can do that if you put your mind to it a weensy bit, I'm sure," she told me without any snookums stuff, for once.

I was puzzled. "Can't I be in the greenhouse with Herman like always?"

"Hmpf," she went, pretty much her version of his *Puh*. "Him? Didn't the old poot tell you? He won't be here."

Just then Herman appeared from the direction of their bedroom, surprisingly dressed up, at least to the extent of wearing a blue-green tie with mermaids twined coyly in seaweed floating all over it. "She is right, can you imagine. Time to go take my medicine." He stuck a few small bills she must have doled out to him into his wallet, sayng "It is not much, Your Highness." She answered that with a dirty look and, "It's the usual, it will have to do--there's no such thing as a raise when there's no income, is there." He shrugged that off, but juggling the car keys, he halted across the kitchen table from her. "Donny can go with, why not?"

Aunt Kate snorted and barely glanced up from the scandals of the *Manitowoc Herald-Times*.. "Brinker, he is only eleven years old, that's why not."

"Old enough. We both knowed what is what in life by then, yah?" Not waiting for whatever she had to say to that, probably plenty, he turned to me with a wink of his glass eye. "Up to Donny, it should be. What do you say, podner?"

A trip along to a doctor's office did not sound any too good, putting me in mind right away of Gram's awful medical situation. On the other hand, it might

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help the case of cabin fever I was coming down with from my shabby attic room and the allures of Bali and other boundless places shown in the *National Geographic*. "Sure, I guess so," I said as if I didn't care one way or the other, hoping that would keep me on the straight and level with Aunt Kate. According to the parting snort she gave as Herman and I headed out to the DeSoto, it didn't.

In no particular hurry, Herman drove in that sea captain fashion, his big knuckly hands wide apart on the steering wheel while he plied me with questions about Montana and the Double W ranch and as many other topics wild, woolly, and western as he and Karl May could come up with. I probably answered distractedly, trying to figure out Manitowoc if I was going to be stuck there for the whole long summer. It appeared to be an even more watery place than I'd thought, the river with the same name as the town taking its time winding here and there--Gitche Manitou really got around on his spirit walks--before finding Lake Michigan. When we reached downtown, street after street of stores occupied brick buildings grimy with age--if this was the pearl of Lake Michigan, it needed some polishing. An exception was the movie theater with a marquee full of colored lightbulbs brightly spelling out the current show, TOMAHAWK with Van Heflin and Yvonne DeCarlo, which I set me heart on seeing until I remembered I was broke.

As Herman pattered us through the downtown traffic a fraction as fast as the van driver tore through the Twin Cities, I passed the time noting more of those curiously named stores I'd spotted from the dog bus, as if anyone going into business had to line up way down the alphabet. Schliesleder Tailoring. Schloter Brothers Grocery. Schroeter Bakery. You can't help but be curious about the schushy sound that half the town seemed to speak in.

"Hey, Herman? What's schnitzel?"

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He worked on that as we pressed on past the main street buildings toward the more grubby waterfront ones. "What are little cattles? Hevvers?"

"The girl ones, uh-huh, heifers. Calf meat, you mean? Veal, that's all it is?"

"Yah. Fixed fancy with stuff on, you got schnitzel . Old German recipe."

"What's schnapps, then?"

"Firewater, Red Chief. Old German drink."

"Boy oh boy, those dumb old Germans really went for some funny stuff, didn't they."

"Ha. Good one."

That was not nearly as many definitions as I'd wanted, but another matter quickly had me wondering as the DeSoto potted across the drawbridge of the weedy river and on past the coal sheds and boiler works. This doctor's office was in an odd part of town and I tried to think what kind of ailment Herman needed to be treated for in a rundown neighborhood. Firmly built right up to the gray summit of his head, he looked healthy enough to me. "Uhm, this medicine of yours, what exactly is it?"

"Neck oil."

Now he had me. I didn't see anything stiff about the way he swung his head to give me a big bucktoothed smile, not the usual attitude shown when going to see the doctor.

Revelation arrived when he turned the car onto the last waterfront street, a block with the lake actually lapping under buildings held up by pilings, and parked at a ramshackle establishment with a sign over its door in weathered letters, THE SCHOONER. This I did not need to ask about, the Schlitz sign glowing in the window telling me all I needed to know.

Herman escorted me in as if the porthole in the door and the sawdust on the floor were perfectly natural furnishings where you go to take medicine, ha ha. I had been in bars before, what Montana kid hadn't? But this one looked like it had floated up from the bottom of the harbor. Sags of fishnets hung from the entire ceiling like greenish-gray cloudbanks. Above the doorway were wicked-looking crossed harpoons, and the wall opposite the gleaming coppertop bar was decorated with life preservers imprinted with *Northwind* and *Pere Marquette* and *Nanny Goat* and *Chequamegon* and other wonderful ships' names. Into the mix around the rest of the long barroom were walrus tusks carved into intricate scrimshaw, and longhandled grappling hooks that looked sharp as shark's teeth, and those bright yellow slicker coats called souwesters, as if the wearers had just stepped out to sniff the sea air. To me, the place was perfect from the first instant, and I could tell Herman felt at home simply entering its briny atmosphere.

Still setting up for the day, the man behind the bar was so round in his various parts that in the wraparound apron and white shirt he looked more like a snowman than a bartender, but plainly knew his business when he turned with towel and glass in hand to greet Herman. "Well, well, it's the Dutcher. Must be ten o'clock of a Saturday." Me, he eyed me less merrily. "Uh oh, Herm, who's your partner in crime?"

I waited for the guttural response I knew was going to turn my stomach, that I was his wife's sister's grandson, practically worse than no relative at all. Instead, I heard proudly announced, "Gus, please to meet my grandnephew Donny from a big cowboy ranch in Montana."

There. My full pedigree. Stuff that in your pink telephone, why don't you, Aunt Kate. I grew an inch or two and swaggered after Herman to a bar stool just like I belonged. As I scooted on, Gus met me with a belly laugh--he had the full makings for it--while saying he didn't get many cowboys in the Schooner and



warning me not get drunk and tear up the place. Just then the building shook, and I started to bolt for dry land.

“Sit tight, happens all the time,” Herman was chuckling now as he caught my arm before I could hit the floor running. Gus informed me it was only the ferry to Michigan going out and the joint had never floated away yet, although it kept swaying thrillingly as I gawked at the gray steel side of a ship sweeping by the porthole windows facing the harbor and lake. Oh man, I loved this, almost the sense of sailing on the Great Lakes as Herman had so heroically done. As the slosh of the ferry’s wake died down and the building quit quivering, Gus snapped his towel playfully in Herman’s direction. “Ready to take your medicine? Gonna beat you this time.”

“Always ready for that, and it will be first miracle ever if you beat me,” Herman replied breezily. Laughing up a belly storm, the bartender moved off along the line of beer spigot handles extending half the length of the bar, running a hand along them the way you do a stick in a picket fence. The assortment made me blink, beer tap after beer tap of brands I had never heard of, and I would bet, even the most seasoned drinkers in Montana probably had not. Rheinlander. Carling Black Label. Piels. Bavarian Club. Stroh. Schlitz, naturally, but then Blatz, followed by Pabst, for some reason spelled that way instead of Pabzt. On and on, down to the far end, where Gus stopped at a handle with a towel draped over it so it couldn’t be read. “No peeking, Dutcher,” he sang out. “You either, Tex.”

“No reason to peek,” Herman replied with utter confidence and gazed off into the fishnets and such, the mermaids on his tie looking perfectly at home. I had no problem joining him in losing myself in the nautical trappings, knowing full well a ship did not have a bunkhouse, but this was the most comfortably close to such a thing since the Double W.

Shortly, Gus came back scooting a shotglass of beer along the bar between thumb and forefinger. "Here you go, just up to the church window like always." I saw he meant by that it was only up to the jigger line, not even a full shotglass. Huh. Herman must be a really careful drinker, I thought.

Sure enough, he took the little glass of beer in a long slow sip, almost like you do drinking creek water out of your hand. Swirled it in his mouth as if thinking it over, then swallowed with satisfaction. "Hah, easy--Olde Rhine Lager."

The bartender slapped the copper top of the bar with his towel in mock fury. "God damn it, Herm, how do you do it? I had that brought in all the way from Buffalo to fool you."

"Takes more than Buffalo," Herman said with the simple calm of a winner and still champion, and set the shotglass aside like a trophy while the bartender trooped back to the hitherto mystery tap and drew a genuine glass of the beer, which is to say a schooner. "What about Cowboy Joe here?" he asked as he presented Herman the free beer. "I might as well stand him one too while I'm giving away the joint."

"Name your poison, podner," Herman prompted me as if we were in a saloon with Old Shatterhand, and so I nursed a bottle of Orange Crush while the two men gabbed about old times of the Great Lakes ore fleet and its sailors, Herman soon buying a beer to even things up a bit in the tasting game and a second Orange Crush for me, adding to the general contentment. I was drifting along with the pair of them to the Strait of Mackinac and Duluth and Thunder Bay and other ports of call, when I heard Gus utter:

"So how's Tugboat Annie?"

I went so alert my ears probably stood straight out from my head. Somehow you just know a thing like that out of the blue, or in this case, the fishnets. Aunt Kate, he meant.

Herman took a long slug of beer before answering. "Same same. Thinks she is boss of whole everything."

Gus laughed, jowls shaking like jelly. "She was that way even when she was slinging hash down here on the dock, remember? Order scrambled eggs and they'd just as apt to come fried and she'd say, 'Eat 'em, they came from the same bird that cackles, didn't they?'" He let out a low whistle and propellored his towel somehow sympathetically. "You got yourself a handful in her, Herm."

"Armloads, sometimes," said Herman, not joking at all

Wait a minute. I was trying to catch up. The Tugboat Annie part I got right away, that rough and tough hefty waterfront character in stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*. But Aunt Kate was ever a *waitress*? Snooty as she was now, with her Kate Smith style of dressing up and insistence on good manners and all? It almost was beyond my ability to imagine her, twice the size of shapely Letty and her name sewn in big sampler letters on the mound of her chest, behind a cafe counter bawling meal orders to someone like Gram in the kitchen. And strangely enough, in their breakfast battles over slices of toast, Herman never threw that chapter of the past in her face.

Eventually we departed The Schooner, Gus vowing he would stump Herman the next time and Herman telling him Hah, he could try until the breweries ran dry, with me still wowed by that beer tasting stunt. Before we reached the car, I asked, "How'd you learn to do that?"

Herman was maybe somewhat tanked up on Olde Rhine Lager, but his answer was as sober as it comes. "Job I had in old country. Story for another time, when you want your hairs raised. Get in, Donny. We must go home and face the Kate."

The puzzle pieces were barely settled in the box before Aunt Kate was pulling up across the table from me and had the cards flying as she dealt a stream to each of us and to the absent partners right and left, humming something unrecognizable as she did so. Helplessly watching her deliver the valentines, as the poker game regulars in the Double W bunkhouse termed it, I felt unsure of myself but all too certain that turning me into a Minnie Zettel for hen parties was going to test the limits of both of us. And this was before I even had any inkling that a contest of hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades could become such a dangerous game.

While she was rifling the cards out, Herman wandered by the living room, took a peek at what was happening, sending his eyebrows way up there and his step quickening until he was safely past and out the back door. No rescue from that direction, so I cursed silently and kept stuffing cards in my overloaded hand.

Finishing dealing with a flourish, Aunt Kate slapped the deck down squarely in the middle of the table and sang out, "Now then, honey bun, the first thing is, we're partners, mmm? So, you have to catch up a weensy bit by learning a few rules." And there the life-changing course of events began..

"No, no, child, you can't meld that card. Pick it back up, hurry scurry." Topping over me like Mount Rushmore hogging the jigsaw puzzle, she forced a smile, the kind with teeth gritted behind it.

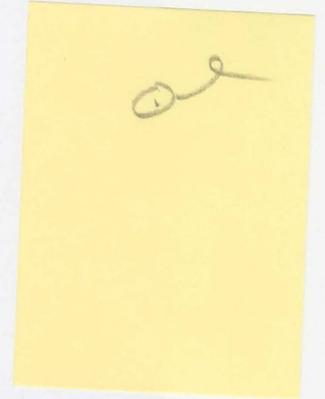
The first hour or so of canasta lesson wasn't up yet, and while her mind may have been set firmly as stone, mine was simply spinning gravel. "Mistakes are life's little ways of setting us straight, aren't they," she recited as if reading off a sampler on the wall.

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

"Red threes," her tone of voice wasn't the best either. "Black treys, you need three of a kind as usual to meld, but can only play them to go out on."

Black, red, who cared? Since when wasn't a three a three? My ruthless instructor paused as I sulkily picked up the threespot of spades off the table and stuck it any old where in my mess of cards. It didn't help the situation that the long suit of both of us was stubbornness.

"That rule is a teeny bit tricky," she granted, then imperturbably took it back in the next breath. Plainly not to be budged until I either showed progress at canasta or perished from trying, she sat across from me like one of those Chinese dowager queens shown in a history book, her precisely arranged cards held like a fan, helping herself to a plate of chunks of rock-hard brickle, a peanut-butter kind of candy that I thought in no way deserved the name, kept handy for "nibbles to keep us going."



Crunching a bite of the brittle stuff, she thickly lectured through her chewing. "Learning the cards only takes concentration. It's no worse than putting your mind to what your schoolteacher shows you on the blackboard, is it."

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

Paying no attention to my snit, she clasped her cards to her mound of chest and leaned across the table. Back to being bossy, she ordered, "Let me see your hand so I can show you what to keep and what are discards. Pay attention, mmm?"

As she rattled off the finer points of canasta, I couldn't shake the feeling of being caught up in something like a measles epidemic, only the spots were on the cards. In today's era of more home entertainment than we know what to do with, canasta seems as out of date as a Civil War songbook singalong around the upright piano. But in any day and age the latest thing can get to be a craze, and the freshly conceived card game with the Spanish name meaning "basket" swept into the living rooms of mid-century America like a fever. This I knew only in the vague way a kid picks up on the odd doings of grownups, but it left the definite impression that canasta was something played to the fullest by dried-up old ladies with nothing else to do. Aunt Kate was the opposite of dried-up, for sure, but from her warnings that "the girls" would beat the pants off us if we didn't play our cards right, I pictured an ominous pair of prune-faced sharp-eyed whizzes who ate, slept, and dreamt canasta. Even their names sounded mean: Gerda and Herta.

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

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

"Him?" The one word did that idea in, but she added for good measure, "The old silly, he calls our little canasta parties something rude having to do with chickens." She snapped off a piece of bristle and held it as if she would like to throw it in the direction of him and his greenhouse hideout. "You can see he'd be impossible."

What I could see was that I was being drafted to fill in at something where impossibility was in the air. Gulping, I tried another way to wiggle out of the canasta trap. "Gee, Aunt Kate, it's awful nice of you to try to teach me like this, really it is, but I just don't think I'm slick enough at cards to--"

"Don-ny."

It's always bad when an adult when an adult breaks your name in two. The doll-like eyes were fixed on me a certain way as she leaned across the table and enunciated further, "It won't hurt you to do it one time in your life."

I knew that look from her. Gram had one just like it whenever she prodded me into some task I didn't want to be within a mile of. True, there was about a hundred pounds of difference behind the gaze, but it was all in Aunt Kate's favor.

Knowing when I was licked, I mumbled, "I guess I can try."

That began a spell of time when the high point of my days was the sugar on my cereal.

Far from being the adventure I had been so excited about when I was met at the bus station by the living image of Kate Smith, my Wisconsin summer bogged down into the same old things day after day. Afternoons were canasta, canasta, canasta, and mornings veered from boredom when, after getting up hours earlier

anyone else and doctoring some puffed rice with enough spoonfuls of the white stuff, all I could find to do was to hole up in the living room reading an old *National Geographic* brought down from the attic, until the time came to tread carefully around the first of the battles of the Schmidt household. Every day, Aunt Kate and Herman had a fight to go with breakfast. Generally it was her to start things off with a bang. "Can't you quit that?" Her first salvo would make me jump, even though it was not aimed at me. "It's childish and a nasty habit, how many times do I have to tell you?"

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

"That is absolutely ridiculous. Why can't you just *eat*?"

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

"It is not the same! Oh, you're impossible."

The one constant in the repeated quarrels was Aunt Kate holding her ground in the kitchen, while Herman retreated elsewhere waiting to scrap over toast scraps another breakfast time. Eventually, when it sounded safe, I would abandon the green leather couch and *National Geographic* --even the attractions of people pretty close to naked in "Bali and Points East" can hold a person only so long--and creep across the living room to peek into the kitchen. The remains of the daily toast war which might still be sitting there at lunch or beyond, I could not figure out. Sometimes on what had to be Herman's plate would be nothing but crusts, other times a pale blob of toast from the middle of a slice that looked like something I almost but not quite recognized was the only morsel left over. In any case, I would face the inevitable and call out "Good morning" and she'd look around at me as if I'd sprung up out of the floor and ask "Sleep well, honeykins?" and I'd lie and reply "Like a charm" and that was pretty much the level of conversation between us.

I have to hand it to Aunt Kate, she was a marvel in her own way. To say she was set in her habits only scratches the surface. Regular as the ticks and tocks of the kitchen clock, she maintained her late start on the day, parked at the breakfast table in her robe striped like the world's biggest peppermint stick as she dawdled over the Manitowoc *Herald-Times* and coffee refills, yawning and humming stray snatches of tunes, until at nine sharp she arose and clicked the radio on and one soap opera after another poured out, the perils of Ma Perkins and Stella Dallas and the others whom she worried along with at every devious plot turn afflicting them. The sudsy weepers filled the air until noon, always leaving the characters hanging in iffy circumstances at the end of the half hour. Myself, I thought the radio people ought to take a trip on a dog bus if they wanted some real situations, but Aunt Kate listened with both ears as she pattered away the rest of the morning, much of it spent in the sewing room with the Singer zizzing softly under the radio voices.

Needless to say, monotony was not my best mode. Herman's either, fortunately. During the soap opera marathon, he hid out in the greenhouse, where I sooner or later would join him so as not have radio performers' woes piled atop my own.

"What do you know for sure, podner?" he would greet me, as no doubt one cowboy in a Karl May western would drawl to another.

Actually not a bad question, because the one thing I was sure of was what a mystifying place Manitowoc was, from toast fights to smoky portrait sitters inhabiting greenhouse windows to Manitou walking around dead to the strange nature of the neighborhood. I mean, I seemed to be the only kid anywhere. As used as I was to being in grownup company at the Double W, now I apparently was sentenced to it like solitary confinement, with the street deadly quiet, no cries of Annie-I-over or hide-and-seek or boys playing catch or girls jumping rope,

nobody much making an appearance except a grayhaired man or woman here and there shuffling out to pick up the morning paper or position a lawn sprinkler. It made a person wonder, did every youngster in Wisconsin get shipped off to some dumb camp?

In any case, the sleepy neighborhood was getting to me, so I finally had to put the question to Herman as he fiddled with a cabbage plant. "Aren't there any other kids around here at all?"

"Like you?" I was pretty sure I heard a note of amusement in that, but he soon enough answered me seriously. "Hah uh, kids there are not. The Schroeders on the corner got boys, but they're older than you and don't do nothing but chase girls." Taking the stogie out of his mouth, so as not to spew ashes on the cabbage leaves, he shook his head. "Except them, this is all old folks."

I still had a hard time believing it. "In this whole part of town? How come?"

"Shipyard housing, all this. From when Manitowoc builds submarines in the war. The last one," he said drily, I supposed to mark it off from the one going on in Korea. "People didn't go away, after. Now we are long in the tooth," he mused. He gave me a wink with his artificial eye. "Or ghosts."

That was that, one more time. I pulled out a fruit box and settled in while he went on currying the cabbages.

Under the circumstances, with no other choice except Aunt Kate, hanging around with Herman in the greenhouse suited me well enough. Whenever he wasn't pumping me about ranch life or telling me some tale out of Karl May's squarehead version of the West, I was free to sit back and single out some family or man and woman in the photographic plates overhead, catching them on the back of my hand thanks to a sunbeam, and daydream about who they might have been, what their story was, the digest version of their lives. It made the time pass until

old not

lunch, when I'd snap out of my trance at Herman's announcement, "The Kate will eat it all if we don't get ourselves in there."

After lunch, though, inevitably, the nerve-wracking sound in the living room changed from soap opera traumas to the slipslap of the canasta deck being shuffled and the ever so musical trill, "Yoo hoo, bashful," and all afternoon I'd again be a prisoner of a card game with more rules than a stack of Bibles.

"No, no, *no!*" She put a hand to her brow as if her mind needed support, a familiar gesture by this third or fourth day--I was losing track--of card game torture. "What did I tell you about needing to meld a full canasta before you can go out?"

"Oh. I must not have heard right. Better wash my ears out, I guess."

Her pained expression did not change. With regret I picked up the five foursspots I had triumphantly spread down on the card table. Going out, which was to say ending a hand of the dumb game and giving me an excuse to go to the bathroom and kill as much time I could in there, was a much desired play if I could make it. "I was thinking about something else, excuse me all to pieces. What do I do now?"

"For a start, pay attention, pretty please," she flicked the next card off the deck and waved it under my nose until I took it. "You're stuck in draw and discard until a four shows up on the pile," she reeled off as if in a language I couldn't quite follow, "and you can take it all and build to a canasta." Eyeing me sharply, she prodded: "You grasp that much, don't you, sweetpea?"

I gave something between a nod and a shrug.

"Now then, I'll see whether Herta"--she employed the names of the two missing players as if they were sitting there, ghostly, on either side of us--"is likely to discard one for you." Expertly she swooped up the face-down hand of cards to

Berda

the right of me. "Not yet," she announced in a singsong way, and slapped a useless five onto the discard pile as if that would teach me a lesson.

I suppose it should have, but nothing was really penetrating me except the something else I kept thinking about. My money. The disastrous shirt-in-the-garbage episode that left me broke as a bum. No mad money meant no going to a show, no comic books, not even a Mounds bar the whole summer, for crying out loud. But that wasn't nearly the worst. It bothered me no end that if I went back to Montana in the fall without the school clothes Gram had expressly told me to stock up on, I would have to go to class looking like something the cat dragged in. People noticed when a kid was too shabby, and it could lead to official snooping that brought on foster care--next thing to being sentenced to the orphanage--on grounds of neglect. Gram would never neglect me on purpose, but if she simply couldn't work and draw wages after her operation, how was she supposed to keep me looking decent? With all that on my mind, here was a case where I could use some help from across the card table, and I didn't mean canasta. The one time I had managed to broach the subject of school clothes and so on between her morning loafing at the breakfast table and soap opera time, Aunt Kate flapped her fingers at me and said, "Shoo now. We'll figure out what to do about that later." But when?

By every sign, not while I was stuck with a mittful of canasta cards. Back to brooding, I sucked on my chipped tooth as draw-and-discard drearily continued.

A little of that and Aunt Kate was grimacing in annoyance. "Don't they have dentists in Montana? What happened to that tooth, anyway?"

“Nothing much,” I sat up straight as a charge went through me, my imagination taking off in the opposite direction from those modest words. “I got bucked off in the roundup, is all.”

“From a *horse*?” She made it sound like she had never heard of such a thing.

“You betcha,” I echoed Herman, pouring it on more than I had to, but a person gets carried away. “See, everybody’s on horseback for the roundup, even Sparrowhead,” I stretched the matter further. “I was riding drag, that’s at the rear end of the herd, where what you do is whoop the slowpoke cows and calves along to catch up with the others. Kind of like *HYAH HYAH HYAH*,” I gave her a hollering sample that made her jerk back and spill a few cards.

“Things were going good until this one old mossie cow broke off from the bunch,” the story was really rolling in me now, ever so much better than admitting to a run-in with campers who didn’t have a brain in their bodies, “and away she went with her calf at her heels. I took out after them, spurring Snipper--he’s a cutting horse, see--and we about got the herd quitters headed off when Snipper hit an alkali boghole and started bucking out of it so’s not to sink up to his, uhm, tail. I’m usually a real good rider,” modesty had to bow out of this part, “but I blew a stirrup and got thrown out of the saddle. I guess I hit the ground hard enough that tooth couldn’t take it. I was fine otherwise, though.” I couldn’t resist grinning at her with the snag fully showing.

“Good grief,” my listener finally found her voice. “That’s uncivilized! Poor child, you might have been damaged any number of ways!”

“Aw, things like that happen on the ranch a lot.”

That put the huff back into Aunt Kate in a hurry. “Whatever has gotten into Dorie?” she lamented, catching me off guard. “That sister of mine is raising you to

Sort of

be a wild cowboy, it sounds like. Tsk,” that tail end of the remark the kind of sound that says way more than words.

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” I tried to backtrack. “Gram sees me with my nose in a book so much she says my freckles are liable to turn into inkspots.”

“Does she.” As if looking me over for that possibility, she scanned my earnest expression for a good long moment, with what might have been the slightest smile making at her jowls twitch.

“All right then, toothums. Let’s see if that studious attitude can turn you into a canasta player.” Laying her cards face down, she scooped up those of the phantom Herta, drew from the deck, hummed a note of discovery, then discarded with a flourish, saying “My, my, look at that.”

A fourspot, what else. I perked up, ready to show her that I knew what was what in this damn game. With a flourish I melded some fours and other combinations to get on the board, and then as she watched with that pinched expression for some reason deepening between her eyes, I flashed the one fourspot I’d held back and a joker to scoop in the pile when the voice across the table rose like a siren.

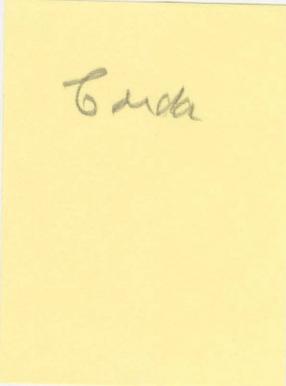
“No, no, no! Wake up, child. You can’t take that without a natural pair.”

“Huh? Why not?”

Rolling her eyes, she put a hand to the peanut brickle plate. Finding it empty, she bit off instead: “Because it’s a rule. How many times have I gone over those with you? Mmm? Can’t you put your mind to the game at all?”

At that, our eyes locked, her blue-eyed stare and my un giving one right back. If she was exasperated enough to blow her stack, so was I.

“There are too many rules! This canasta stuff goes through me like green shit through a goose!”



Canda

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I know it is the mischief of memory that my outburst echoed on and on in the room. But it seemed to. At first Aunt Kate went perfectly still, except for blinking rapidly. Then her face turned stonier than any of those on Mount Rushmore. For some seconds, she looked like she couldn't find what to say. But when she did, it blew my hair back.

"You ungrateful snot! Is this the thanks I get? That sort of talk, in my own house when I've, I've taken you in practically off the street? I never heard such--" Words failed her, but not for long. "Did you learn that filth from him?" She flung an arm in the direction of the greenhouse and Herman.

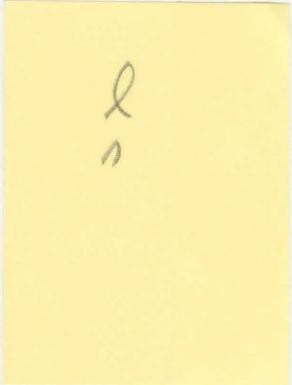
"No!" I was as shrill as she was. "It's what they say in the bunkhouse when something doesn't make a lick of sense."

"Look around you, mister fellow," she blazed away some more. "This is not some uncivilized bunkhouse on some piddling ranch in the middle of nowhere. Dorie must be out of her mind, letting you hang around with a pack of dirty-mouthed bums. If she or somebody doesn't put a stop to that kind of behavior, you'll end up as nothing more than--"

She didn't finish that, simply stared across the table at me, breathing so heavily her jowls jiggled.

"All right," she swallowed hard, then again, "all righty right. Let's settle down." If sitting there letting her tongue-lash the hide off me without so much as a whimper wasn't what might be called settled down, I didn't know what was. My tight lips must have told her so, because her tone of voice lessened from ranting to merely warning: "That is enough of those words out of you, understand?"

My face still as closed as a fist, I nodded about a quarter of an inch, a response she plainly did not like but took without tearing into me again. "That's that," she said through her teeth, and to my surprise, threw in her hand and began gathering in all the other cards on the table.



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"I need to go and have my hair done, so we won't try any more cardsie-wardsie today." She fixed a look on me as I too readily tossed my hand in with the rest. "That gives us only tomorrow, because Saturday I have a million things to do around the house, and of course we can't play cards on Sunday." He then that she obviously thought I was, I didn't see why not, but I still kept my trap shut.

"Now then," she shoved the cards together until they built into the fat deck ready for my next day of reckoning, "while I'm out, find something to do that you don't have to swear a blue streak about."

Naturally I resorted to Herman. He was sitting there book in hand in the greenhouse, comfortable as person can be on a fruitbox, smoking a cigar while he read. As soon as I called out "Knock, knock" and sidled in, he saw I was so down in the mouth I might trip over my lower lip. Squinting over his stogie, he asked as if he could guess the answer, "How is the canasta?"

"Not so hot." Leaving out the part about what went through the goose, I vented my frustration about endless crazy rules. "I try to savvy them, really I do, but the cards don't mean what they're supposed to in the dumb game. Aunt Kate is half mad at me all the time for not doing better, but I don't know how." I ended up dumping everything into the open. "See, she's scared spitless her card party is gonna be a mess on account of me. So am I. But she's got it into her head that she can teach me this canasta stuff by then."

"The Kate. Sometimes her imagination runs off with her." Said the man paging through *Winnetou the Apache Knight*.

Herman nursed the cigar with little puffs while he thought. "Cannot be terrible hard," he reasoned out canasta with a logic that had eluded me, "if the Kate and the hens can play it. Betcha we can fix." Telling me, cowboy style by way of

Karl May, to pull up a stump while he searched for something, he dragged out the duffel bag from the corner of greenhouse.

Dutiful but still dubious, I sat on a fruit box as ordered and watched him dig around in the duffel until he came up with a deck of cards that had seen better days and a well-thumbed book of Hoyle. "We reconnoiter the rules, hah?" A phrase that surprised me, even though I pretty much knew what it meant. But we needed more than a rulebook, I told him with a shake of my head.

"We're still sunk. Aunt Kate and them play partners, so it takes two decks."

"Puh. Silly game." He swung back to the duffel bag, stopped short, turned and gave me a prolonged look as if making up his mind. Then thrust an arm in again. Scrounging through the bag up to his shoulder, he felt around until he grunted and produced another deck of cards even more hard-used than the first.

"The Kate is not to know," he warned as he handed me the deck and pulled out a box to serve as a table. "Man to man, yah? Here, fill up your eyes good."

I was already bug-eyed. The first card, when I turned the deck over for a look, maybe was the queen of hearts all right, but like none I had ever seen--an oldtime sepia photograph of a woman grinning wolfishly in a bubble bath, her breasts out in plain sight atop the soapy cloud like the biggest bubbles of all.

With a gulp, I spread more of the cards face up on the box table, which meant breasts up, legs up, fannies up, pose after pose of naked women or rather as close to naked as possible without showing the whole tinger. Who knew there were fifty-two ways of covering that part up? That didn't even count the joker, a leggy blonde wearing a jester's cap and coyly holding a tambourine over the strategic spot.

"French Bible," Herman defined the fleshy collection with a shrug, scooping the deck in with the tamer one and shuffling them together in a flash.



pickle. That elongated face and the prominent teeth, taken together with the cockeyed gaze magnified by his glasses, gave him the look of someone loopy enough that you might not want to sit right down next to, although of course there I was, plotted beside him like just another potted plant. Together with everything else in the humid greenhouse, he himself seemed to have sprouted, his stooped shoulders topping my head as he stretched from his stool here and there to reach into his menagerie of vegetation, his big knuckles working smoothly as machine parts in crimping a leaf off a tomato plant near its root--“Pinch their bottoms is good for them,” he told me with a naughty grin--or tying a lagging bean stalk to a support stick. The dappled light streaming through the glass ceiling and walls brought out the silver in his faded fair hair, which I suspected made him older than Aunt Kate, although there was no real telling. I’d have bet anything gray hair did not stand a chance on her; she would rather, as not much of a joke had it, dye by her own hand.

About then, as I was yammering away with Herman, I noticed a strange smudge of some sort on the back of my hand. Dirt is to be expected in a greenhouse, so I went to brush it off, but when that didn’t get rid of it, I peered more closely. Then gasped. A ghostly scrap of face, an eye clear and direct, feminine eyebrow and ladylike cheekbone distinct in outline, had scarily materialized on my skin. Yanking my hand away as if burned, I sent Herman one hell of a look. Whatever this stunt was, I didn’t like having it pulled on me.

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

I tipped my head back and must have gaped, my eyes adjusting even if my brain was lagging. When looked at closely, reversed faces spookily gazed down from every glass pane, eyes and hair empty of color while the rest of the

countenance was dark as night. Bygone people, for I could make out old styles of men's collars and women's hairdos--the lady who appeared on my hand again when I hesitantly put it out and held it at the right distance to bring her portrait pose into full miniature was done up in marcel curls, her probably black tresses tumbling ever so neatly down the sides of her head.

Agog, I kept looking back and forth from her image there on me to the shadowy section of glass overhead, still not seeing how this worked. "These--these things were in cameras? How?"

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

"So, Donny," the master of the house of glass went on with a squint that was all but a wink. "When Schildkraut's Photography Shop went *pthht*," he made the noise that meant kaput, "these are for the dump but I get there first. The Kate thinks I am crazy to do it, but glass is glass, why not make a greenhouse, hah?" He tapped his forehead, his eyebrows lifted toward the plates pintoed dark with people. "I give a little think whether to scrape people off. Nuh-uh, leave them like so. 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 up 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 neary a whisper:

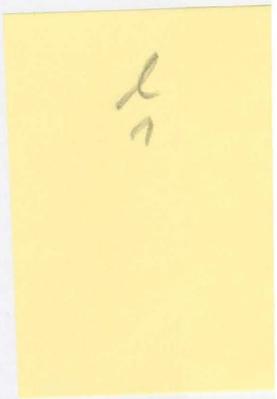
“Who are they?”

“Manitowocers,” he said around the stub of his cigar, or maybe “Manito Walkers,” I couldn’t be sure which he meant.. At the time, I assumed he merely meant those in the old days who had but to gallivant around town to think they were hearing 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, nothing to do but hoof around being airy.

Just then, the back door of the house banged like a shot, making me nearly jump out of my skin, Herman reacting with a jolt too, the ash spilling off his cigar. A dressed-up Aunt Kate was advancing on us with quick little steps, high heels tricky on a lawn. Again my heart twinged, that someone who was such a perfect mirror reflection of Kate Smith was not the real thing.

I did not have time for much of that kind of regret, as she minced right up to the doorway of the greenhouse but plainly was not setting foot in the place, and announced, “I’m off to canasta. You two are on your own if you think you can stand it.”

At first I took that to mean another town with one of those Wisconsin names, Kunazdah or something, packing up and leaving us which raised my spirits no little bit, until Herman said without a trace of expression, “Cut the deck thin and win,” and I realized she was off to a card game.



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

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

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

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

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

I watched her pick her way to the DeSoto, and drive off speedily. Showing less interest in the tomato plant now, Herman peered at me through his specs. "She is off to her hen party. They will yack-yack for hours. Now then," he luxuriously mimicked that word combination of hers that made less sense the more you thought about it, patting around on himself to find his matches and light up another cigar, as if in celebration of the Kate being gone. He gave me a man-to-man grin. "So how do you like Manito Woc?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yah, like Gitche Gumee, from the poem?" He looked saddened when I had to tell him I was not up on Hiawatha.

"*By the shore of Gitche Gumee,*" he recited, his accent thumping like thunder. Again, I had to shrug. "*By the shining Big-Sea Water,*" he persisted. I shook my head, wishing he would try me on something like "*A flea and a fly in a flue...*"

Despairing of my lack of literary education, he held up crossed fingers. "Longfellow and Karl May were like so. Poets of Gitche and Winnetou."

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

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

Supposedly it takes one to know one, right? So, then and there my own sometimes overly active mind, red in the head or however the condition of seeing things for more than they are can best be described, was forced to acknowledge that this odd bespectacled yah-saying garden putterer and henpecked husband, fully five times older than me, had a king hell bastard of an imagination. Possibly outdoing my own, which I know is saying a lot. Wherever Herman Schmidt got it from, he'd held onto the rare quality that usually leaves a person after a certain number of years as a kid, to let what he had read possess him. I saw now why Aunt Kate was forever at him about taking to heart too much the stories of Karl

May in what seemed to be, well, squarehead Westerns. Not that I wanted to side with her, storyteller of a sort that I sometimes turned into. But from my experience of his mental workings so far, notions Herman had picked up out of books did not appear to be condensed from their imaginative extent any at all, let alone properly digested.

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

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

"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, same word anyhow."

Herman leaned way toward me, cigar forgotten for the moment. "Heart Bee-yoot. Bee-yootiful 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 Dwayne Left Hand and Vern 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."

"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 gave it a think about 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

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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. "Down with the ship, it went."

He appeared to be serious. Oh man, I thought to myself, first the Gitchy something or other, 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.

"Eye-dea," he announced as if something had come to him when he wasn't looking. Whatever the idea was, it had the former 'Dutch' grabbing for the sugar bowl with sudden purpose. "You know about ore boats any, Donny?"



Foodmen

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.

Very instructive, yes, if you were interested in that kind of thing. "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 boat, see. Me, I mean. Twenty years." Pride shown out of him as he sat back, shoulders squared nearly enough to 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 Witch of November comes."

Another one of those? One more Great Spirit of Gitche Gumee or whatever, I didn't need. My skin was starting to crawl again just from how he'd said that. "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 at all, I told him about the thawing wind you could hear roaring down from the Rockies 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. Drown you like a kitten katten in a bag, it will."

Drowning like a cat in a sack was definitely no good, as he'd said about throwing money in the garbage. That description did make quite a bit of an impression, I had to admit. But 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. Lost an old friend, the bosun. One minute he is with us, giving orders, and the next, the Witch takes him in biggest wave yet and he is gone." Sugar shook from the bowl, he quivered it so hard. "The *Badger Voyager* sanked, like I say. Big waves broke her in half," he lifted his hands and mimicked snapping a branch.

You can bet I was on the edge of my chair 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 recoiling in horror.

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“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.

Immediately fascinated, I let loose with “Holy wow, Herman, doesn’t that hurt at all?”

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

“That’s really something! Can you do it again?”

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

“Glass,” he said with a half wink this time, 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,” he dropped his voice as if at a funeral. “Herman stays on land, no more Witches of November.”

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



rightly

even thought I had one--I didn't know what I was going to be up against when she returned 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, flinging a hand to the vicinity of her heart. "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."

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

piece to  
sewing room

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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 summertime, 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 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."

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gallivanting

"Mmm, 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 gossipy 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, kitten. 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."

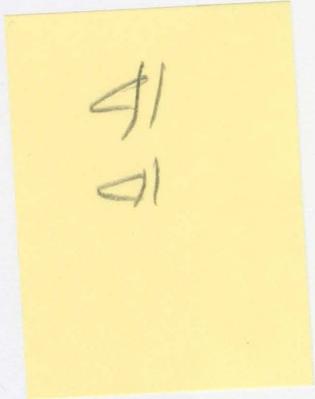
Before I could come out of my stupor, she was crumbling the sky-blue edge and George Washington's forehead and scooping the pieces along with the rest of the puzzle into its box. "Don't worry, child, you can start over on it once you've learned canasta."

dinner with no more interruptions.” That last, I sensed, was spoken as much for Herman’s benefit as mine.

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

No sooner was the tube steak meal ingested if not digested than Aunt Kate declared in a sweetened mood, “Chickie, you look tuckered out from your trip,” which I didn’t think I did, but she topped that off with the message impossible to miss, “Your room is ready for you.”

The night was still a pup compared to the Greyhound’s long gallop through the dark, but if she wanted to settle me in the cozy sewing room with that nice cot, I was ready for that any time. “It’s best for you to have a room all to yourself,” she said leading the way into the hall--wow, I thought, she’s really putting herself out, giving up her sewing room for my sake--“so we have fixed a place for you, haven’t we, Schmidt.” He oddly answered, “Yah, you come to Manito Woc and rough it like a cowboy, Donny. Make you feel at home, hah?” And whiz, just like that, I was bypassing the cubbyhole sewing room and instead trooping upstairs behind Herman, with him insisting on lugging my suitcase-- “You are the guest, you get the best”--while in back of us, Aunt Kate strenuously mounted one tread at a time. And as the stairs kept going, quite a climb by any standard, the suspicion began to seep in on me as to where we were headed, even before Herman shouldered open the squeaky door.



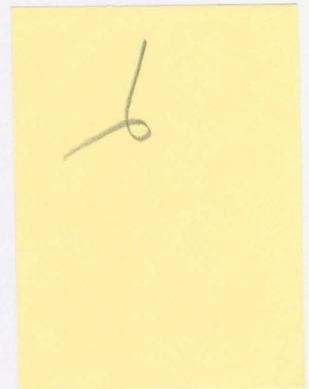
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To this day, that 'room', up where the hayloft in a barn would be, is engraved in me. Aunt Kate could call it what she wanted, but I had bounced around enough with my parents in makeshift quarters to recognize this as nothing more than the attic. Bare roofbeams and sharply sloping underside of the roof and probably mice and spiders, the whole works.

The first thing to strike me in my shock was the frilly bedspread flowered with purple and orange blossoms the size of cabbages, instead of the cozy quilts Gram and I slept under every night of our lives, and pillows, pillows, pillows, the useless small square ones with tassels or gold fringe or sentiments stitched on such as IT TAKES TWO LOVEBIRDS TO COO. To give Aunt Kate the benefit of good intentions, which I was not about to do, I suppose all that was an attempt to camouflage the suspect bed, which I could tell from its ancient iron legs would skreek every time a person turned over. The rest of the furniture amounted to a cheap fiberboard dresser, a rickety straight-backed chair, and a bedstand holding a lamp with a stained shade. The remainder of the space was taken up by a sagging bookcase shelved with the unmistakable yellow spines of many years' worth of *National Geographics*, and stacks of storage boxes labeled *Xmas tree lights & curtain material* and such.

A kind of concentrated Palookaville, in other words. But veteran of makeshift quarters that I was from life with Gram and my folks in construction camp circumstances, I could have put up with my so-called home for the summer but for one thing. The thing on the wall, I immediately thought of it as, and still do. That dimestore plaster-of-Paris wall plaque no kid old enough to be acquainted with death wants to have to see the last thing before the lights are put out, the pale kneeling boy in pajamas with his hands clasped and eyes closed perhaps forever, praying a prayer guaranteed to sabotage slumber:



*Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.  
If I should die before I wake  
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

There could not have been a worse verse facing down on me with Gram somewhere between living and dying in a faraway hospital. That spine-chilling ode to death in the night, making it out to be no big deal as long as you got on your knees right before going to bed, unhinged me so badly that if someone had written it in the autograph book, I honestly believe I would have scissored it out.

As things were, I had trouble tearing my eyes away from the praying boy as Aunt Kate crooned around the confined quarters instructing me where to put things, while Herman stood well back out of the line of fire.

“There now,” she said when I was installed to her satisfaction, “and you know where the bathroom is.” Yeah, about a mile downstairs. “Kiss kiss,” she patted her cheek in a particular spot. I kissed Gram good night every bedtime, but only reluctantly put my lips to where I was ordered in these circumstances. Gram always returned the kiss, but Aunt Kate wasn’t about to. “Nighty-night, sleep tight,” and away she went, clumping down the stairs one by one. Kate Smith would not have left me with anything that babyish, I knew with a sinking heart, but at least Herman came through with “Have a good shuteye” and another of those half cockeyed man-to-man glances as he followed her into the stairwell.

Bunkhouse vocabulary failed me as I undressed for bed, faced with endless nights ahead stuck up under the rafters like another piece of the junk that collects there. I could have cried, and maybe should have, but instead, cold dismay welled in me. How did I land in this fix? More to the point, why? Did this whopper of a woman who was my last remaining relative after Gram hate me at first sight? Was

I asking for it by showing up looking more like a stray hobo than the little gentleman she wanted me to be? What was I going to do all summer long, be kicked around in this household where the grownups fought like cats? Try as I might to think my way out this tough situation, captive to an aunt who not only was not Kate Smith but thought I must be missing a part between my ears, the only advice I could find for myself was that bit whispered from those interrupted existences Gram kept in touch with. Hunch up and take it.

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

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

"Donny? Are you sleeping?"

"I guess not."

"Good. I come in."

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

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

This was a case where you could tell a book by its cover. *Deadly Dust*, with cowboys riding full-tilt while firing their six-shooters at a band of war-painted Indians chasing them in a cloud of dust. At first glimpse it might have been any of the Max Brand or Luke Short or Zane Grey shoot-'em-ups popular in the Double W bunkhouse, but the name under the title was a new one on me.

Recalling my earlier encounter with the kind of person who spelled his perfectly ordinary name with a *K*, I asked skeptically, "Who's this Karl May guy?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It took all the restraint I had, but I didn't let on that right over there in my pants was a little something from Montana that may have slain many a buffalo. This Herman was wound up enough as it was; the night might never end if we got

off on more or less lucky arrowheads and so on. I stuck to the strictly necessary. "Can I tell you something? It's Mon-TANA, not MONT-ana."

"Funny things, words. How they look and how they say." He broke off, glancing toward his feet. Letting out an exclamation I couldn't decipher, he reached down and picked up one of my moccasins.

"I stepped on it!" he cried out as if he had committed a crime. "I hope I didn't break it none."

I could tell by a quick look the decorative fancy dancer still had all his limbs, the rest of the beadwork had survived too, and so I reassured Herman no harm had been done, meanwhile scooping the other moccasin out of range of his big feet.

"Fascinating," he said under his breath, pronouncing it *faskinating*, lovingly turning over and over in his hands the deerskin footwear he had tromped on. When he right away had to know what the beaded stick figure cavorting there on the toe and instep was supposed to be, I explained about fancy dancing contests at big powwows.

Still fondling the moccasin as if he couldn't let go, he asked in wonder, "You got from Indians?"

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

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

He ran his fingers over the beadwork and soft leather one more time and carefully put the moccasin side by side with the other one.

“So, now you know about Winnetou and I know about fancy dancing. Big night!” He grinned that horsy way and clapped *Deadly Dust* shut. Evidently gauging Aunt Kate’s bath was about done, he rose from his chair. “We palaver some more tomorrow, yah?” he whispered from the stairwell as he sneaked back downstairs.

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

I was an old hand at waking up in new places, worlds each as different from the last one as 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 in 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."

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. Not a sound of any kind. Deafening silence, to call it that, was spooky in its own way and maybe not an improvement, but I couldn't stay in the bathroom permanently. Mustering all the courage I had, 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 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 stairwell--she kept on drinking coffee and going through the paper, occasionally letting out a high-pitched hum of interest or exasperation at some item, as I spooned down the puffed-up cereal. The scatterings of crust on what must have been Herman's plate seemed like a fuller meal than mine.

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

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

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

“Donny, come to the phone.”

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

“Hello? This is... he.”

“I am Sister Carma Jean,” the voice sounding exactly like 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. “Last thing when I was at her bedside, our 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?”

you

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

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

"I guess not," I quavered, squeezing the phone. Then erased that in the next breath. "No, wait, there is too. Tell her"--I could feel the look from across the room--"the dog bus worked out okay." Mentally adding, *But Manito Woc or however you say it is even a tougher proposition than either you or I ever imagined, Gram. So please get well really, really fast.*

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

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

"Well, now, we must keep you entertained, mustn't we." Her next remark made my heart drop as much as it would have soared had she really been Kate Smith. "I know you like to be busy, so I set up the card table and got out a jigsaw puzzle. Those are always fun, aren't they."

Maybe I was not the absolute shrewdest judge of character, but I had a pretty good hunch that habit of agreeing with herself covered up her desperation at not knowing what to do with a kid. This household didn't have so much as a dog

or cat, not even a goldfish. By all evidence so far, Aunt Kate was only used to taking care of herself and the war with Herman, if that's what it was.

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

Ready to leave me to the mountain of puzzle pieces and my cold toast, Aunt Kate headed for the basement to see if the laundry was finished yet. "Oh, just so you know," she sang out as she started down the cellar stairs, "I put your snapbutton shirt in with our washing, but the other was torn so badly I threw it away. It wasn't worth mending."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"See," I tried to explain, "I was supposed to buy my school clothes with it, and whatever comic books I wanted, and go to a show once in a while if you said it was okay, and--" I looked at her angrily flushed face, twice the size of my

merely red one, and abjectly tailed off--“wasn't supposed to be a nuisance to you about money.”

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

I babbled another apology to try to make amends, although I wasn't getting anything of the sort from her for failing to go through my pocket before junking my shirt and costing me every cent I possessed, was I.

“Why don't you start on your puzzle,” she said darkly, heading for the basement again.

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

No such luck. Gone to “work,” where else, she forgot about the basement long enough to circle back and huff, the quotation marks speaking loudest. Then when I asked what his job was, she sorted me out on that in a hurry.

“Job?” She drew the word out mockingly as she clattered stray breakfast dishes into the sink in passing. “That will be the day. The old pooter”--that bit of Gram's language out of her startled me--“is out in that greenhouse of his again.”

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

“You can go help him, dearie, wouldn’t that be nice?” she suggested, suspiciously sweet all of a sudden. “Make yourself useful as well as ornamental.” Which may 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 starvation wages you’re paying me.” Helping in the greenhouse sounded dangerously close to choreboy territory, unpaid at that, so I hung back in reluctance. However, Aunt Kate was looking at me forcefully enough to budge a tombstone.

“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 Wisconsin 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

scooted  
overused  
?

cut?

now seemed another lifetime ago. Halfway hidden in a corner of the hedge at the rear of the yard, the greenhouse, as I now knew it, seemed like it ought to be transparent but somehow could not actually be seen through, whatever the trick of its construction was.

It did not reveal much more about itself in broad daylight as I approached past a neatly marked out vegetable patch, the small glass panels that were the walls and roof of the shed frame splotchy as if needing a good washing. Funny way to grow things, the soot smears or whatever they were blocking out full light that way, I thought. Weird old Wisconsin, one more time.

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

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

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

Properly impressed with his green thumb, I stood back and watched Herman fuss over his crop, pot by leafy pot. Pausing to tap the ash off a smelly cigar that undoubtedly would not have been allowed into the house, he made a face that had nothing to do with the haze of cigar smoke that had me blinking to keep my eyes from watering. “You have escaped with your scalp, yah? I heard the Kate on the warpath again.”

"Yeah, well, she's sort of pee o'd at me," I owned up to, making plain that the feeling was mutual.

Herman listened with sympathy, as best I could tell behind his heavy glasses and the reeking cigar, while I spilled out the story of the torn shirt and the fatally safety-pinned bills. He tut-tutted over that, saying throwing money in the garbage was not good at all. But he didn't lend me any encouragement as to how I was supposed to get through the summer flat broke.

"The purse is the Kate's department," he said with a resigned puff of smoke. Reflecting further, no doubt from a lot of experience, he expressed effectively: "She is tight as a wad."

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

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

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

improve

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

That got me started, almost as if I was back on the dog bus telling yarns free and easy. I regaled Herman with this, that, and the other about life on the Double W, from riding out with the actual cowboys to check on the cattle, to hunting magpies along the creek, making him exclaim I was a pistolero, by which I figured he meant gunslinger. Puffing away on his stogie and babying his plants with spoonfuls of fertilizer and careful irrigation from a long-necked watering can--a couple of times I interrupted myself to go and fill it for him from the spigot at the back of the house--Herman listened to all that as though I were a storyteller right up there with his idol who wrote the pile of books about cowboys and Indians, encouraging me with an occasional “Hah! Lucky boy.”

In the end, my storying naturally led around to the whole thing, Gram and I being chucked out of the cook shack and her into the charity ward and me onto the dog bus, when I could just as well have been earning wages in the hayfield the entire summer, and while I couldn't quite bring myself to lay out my full fear about the poorfarm looming in her future if medical things did not go right and ward of the county and orphanage starkly in mine as well, he grasped enough of the situation to tut-tut gravely again.

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

Somehow I felt better for having poured out that much of the tale, even if it went into squarehead ears, so to speak. Whatever his background, I was finding Herman to be the one thing about Wisconsin that I felt vaguely comfortable with, despite his evident quirks and odd appearance. In most ways, he was homely as a

*pistolero*

**Where Manitou Walks****June 17-30, 1951****9**

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

Patti Page before she reached the hit parade with songs like "Tennessee Waltz" was plain Clara Ann Fowler, a name switcheroo if there ever was one. Besides, as Red Chief myself, I was naturally in favor of sprucing up what you called yourself in any way possible.

So the great Kate Smith, dressed in a peach-colored outfit that made her look like a million dollars, monumental in every way as she peered down at me with a perfectly plucked eyebrow arched, represented rescue, relief, reward, a miraculous upward turn in my circumstances. And I needed whatever I could get, ragged and snaggle-toothed as my appearance was. Her expression turned to puckered concern as she tallied my missing buttons, dangling pocket, and the rest of my shirt more or less torn to shreds. "Heavens, child, you look like you've been in a dogfight."

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

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

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

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

Paying no attention to that, she seemed to make up her mind to smile at me, the extra chin and the famous chubby dimples involved. She had the bluest

eyes, which mine swam in guilelessly. "If you're ready, honeybunch," she was saying in that voice so melodious I was surprised she could pass herself off in public as Aunt Kitty at all, "we may as well go."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile, it was all I could do not to bounce up and down with delight at her pronouncement. The station! This was so good. The dog bus, that loping mode of transportation full of starts and stops and disruptions and tense connections, somehow had delivered me right in time for her radio show. "Kate Smith Sings," all anyone needed to know about it.

I glanced at her hopefully. Maybe she even could slip into the program some hint that I had arrived, and Gram would hear it in her hospital room and know I had come through my harrowing journey safe and sound, mostly. I didn't want to ask that yet, shy about bothering someone getting ready to perform for a national audience. I would not have been surprised if she exercised her vocal cords right there in the car, but the only sign she gave of impending performance was humming to herself while she tapped a hand on the round rise of one thigh as steadily as a telegraph operator in a shoot-'em-up western.

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



CC  
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"How is Montana?"

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

"Yah, I betcha."

His laugh came from the bottom of his throat, like his words. While his broken English came as a surprise, it didn't really bother me, accustomed as I was to hired hands in the bunkhouse or the barracks at a construction camp who were called Swede or Ole or Finnigan if from Finland, and spoke more or less the way he did. Squarehead, was the catch-all term for such types. Admittedly, I couldn't see any real resemblance between Herman, at his size, and someone like Dutch Pete, a longtime sheepherder in the Two Medicine country so squat and blocky he stood out like a stump. But I figured nationalities must come in all sizes and sounds. Literally over my head, Herman's choppy voice now reached a wistful register as he declared, "Out in cowboy land, you are in luck."

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

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

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

Hand  
silver  
shades

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

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

With only the two of us in the car, I couldn’t help feeling this was my chance. It was all I could do not to yank the autograph book out of my coat pocket and ask her to write in it, right then and there, in the greenish yellow glow of the gas station’s pump lights. Whatever she put on the page, it would be so good, I just knew. And of course I would want her to sign it *Kate Smith*, not something like *Your devoted Aunt Kitty*, to elevate the autograph collection toward true Believe It Or Not! territory as I kept adding to it. I bet she knew all kinds of other celebrities who would write their famous names in it for me, too. Talk about a jackpot! Herman had said a mouthful, about my being in luck. The sacred black arrowhead could not have been doing its job as a lucky piece better, the Tuffies packaging it in my pocket were paying off sensationally.

I cleared my throat to make my request. “Can I ask you for a real big favor?”

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

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

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

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

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

Herman returned and went through the dashboard maneuvers and what else it took to start the DeSoto. “Home to the range,” he sang out, earning a sharp look from Aunt Kate.

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

It was dark by the time the DeSoto rocked into a bumpy driveway. The house, painted that navy gravy gray shade like in pictures of battleships and with a peaked roof and lit sort of ghostly by the nearest streetlight, appeared big as a ranchin’ mansion to me after the cook shack, although looking back, I realize that only meant it had an upstairs as well as a downstairs.

As we went in, Aunt Kate instructed Herman to leave my suitcase at the foot of the stairs to be dealt with after dinner. Since it was pitch black out, I

Given  
name

deduced that must mean supper, another Wisconsin mystery like schnitzel and schnapps and going to camp with a bunch of boy hoodlums.

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

I stepped in to the indicated bedroom, adult territory where kids usually set foot at their own risk, and too timid to put the light on, swapped shirts as fast as I could. Straining to take in the exact place where Kate Smith slept, even in the dimness I was convinced I could see a telltale sag in the near side of the double bed.

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

Not this boy, because Gram viewed frankfurters--weinies by any other name, right?--with dire suspicion whenever she was forced to boil up a batch to feed the crew toward the end of a month's kitchen budget, convinced that the things were made from leavings lying around the butcher shop. "Tube steak," she'd mutter as she plopped weinies by the handful into the pot, "you might as well be eating sweepings from the slaughterhouse." Not the best thing to build an appetite for frankfurters. But my stomach and my hunger had no time to debate

that, as I was shooed out of the kitchen, told I was free to look around the house while dinner was being fixed.

Herman had immediately disappeared, saying with a mysterious grin he had a surprise to show me. Everything was, so far.

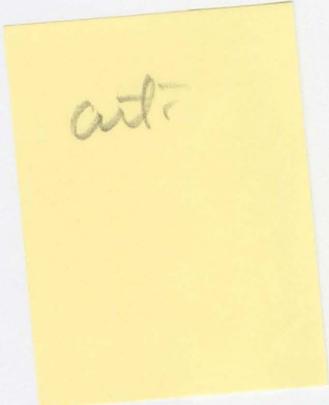
Meanwhile I edged into the living room and onto a pea green rug so deep I left footprints wherever I stepped. It was like walking on a mattress. Intimidated, I crept across the room, studying the unfamiliar surroundings. A big long leathery davenport, also green but closer to that fakey shade of lime Kool-Aid, sat prominently in front of a bay window where the sill was crammed with potted plants of kinds I couldn't recognize. On an end table next to the arm of the davenport rested a phone, pink as bubblegum, of another type I had no experience of, with a cradled receiver and a circular dial full of numbers and letters. Whatever else this strange territory of the summer proved to be like, it definitely did not seem to be party-line country.

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

Unquestionably Aunt Kate went in for wall decoration, so I searched around for what I was eager to see, photos of her singing for the troops and overseas in palaces and such. Wouldn't it be great if she went on one of those



hers



auto