

singing trips and took me along, to Scotland or somewhere! True, there was the consideration that these days Korea was where the troops were in worst need of entertainment, but I resolved, Mickey's prediction of what could happen to a person's behind notwithstanding, I fearlessly would even go there if it was with her. Search as I did for mementos of her singing career adventurous or otherwise, though, the other walls held only framed scenes of dairy cows and green countryside in what appeared to be plain old Wisconsin, so I concluded she kept those somewhere special, probably at the radio station.

Now what really had me interested was a cubbyhole room off the far end of the living room.

The door was partway open and I glimpsed what appeared to be a day bed under a plain gray cover. Lured by hope, when I poked my head in and saw piles of cloth of different colors atop a table and spilling onto a chair, I knew at once this must be the sewing room, even before I spotted the shiny electric Singer machine by the window. Who would have thought Kate Smith sewed her own clothes? But everyone needs a hobby, I reminded myself, or maybe in her dress-size situation, doing it herself was a necessity. Any fat girl at school got teased about her clothes being made by Omar the Tent Maker, and while I felt guilty about that uncharitable thought, there was the big-as-life fact that Aunt Kate was a much larger woman than clothing stores usually encountered.

Of greater significance to me was that day bed, just my size, really--I'd slept on any number of cots like that, jouncing through life with my parents--and I'd have bet anything this nice snug room was where I was going to be put up for the summer, special guest in a special place of the house.

Through taking in these new surroundings, something else needed taking care of, and I had to retreat to the kitchen to ask.

"Aunt Kate? I need to use the convenience."

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

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

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

I most certainly did remember, and more than that, I took the opportunity to examine my chipped tooth in the mirror over the sink. Baring my teeth in a kind of maniac smile, I saw that the damaged one stood out menacingly from the others. A snag, in fact, the chip having left it as pointed as a fang.

Studying my reflection, I decided I sort of liked the snaggletooth sticking up that way. It made me look tough, like I'd been through some hard going in life.

My admiration of this new feature was interrupted when all of a sudden I heard singing.

I went still as stone to make sure. Yes! Distinct as anything, from the direction of the kitchen. A solo, to keep the famous Kate Smith voicebox tuned up, I bet. And not just a song, but *the* song! Oh man, this was almost like going to the radio show!

"God bless America,

Land that I love.

Stand beside her

And guide her

Through the night with a light from above."

I tell you, that singing went right under my skin and raised goose bumps. The one-of-a-kind beautiful voice, the words every schoolchild--every parent,

even--knew by heart. And here I was, the lucky audience to this performance by the most famous singer in America, maybe in the world. This settled it. I absolutely had to ask for the treasured autograph as soon as the song was over, it was bound to please the performer in the kitchen as well as me. Out of the bathroom like a shot, I sped to where my jacket was piled atop my suitcase, grabbed out the album, and darted back to the kitchen.

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

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

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

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

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

She swallowed the last of the weenie, fast. "Heaven help, that," she groaned, frowning all the way down to her double chins.

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

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

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

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

She looking down and me looking up, we gazed at each other in something like mutual incomprehension. I squirmed a little, and not just from the clammy touch of the davenport through the seat of my pants. Dismayed as I was, she too appeared to be thrown by the situation, until with a nod of resolve she sucked in her cheeks, as much as they would go, and compressed her lips to address the matter of me.

"Now then, lambie pie, there's nothing to be ashamed of," her tone became quite hushed, "but has your grandmother or anyone, a teacher maybe, ever said to you there might be a little bit something"--she searched for the word--

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motion

anything

"different about you?" Another breath from her very depths. "Just for example, do you get along all right in school?"

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

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

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

"Me? No! I get straight A's! In deportment, even!" I babbled further, "I heard Miss Ciardi, that's my teacher, say to Gram I'm bright enough to read by at night."

My frantic blurts eliciting the throaty response "I see," although she didn't seem to, Aunt Kate tapped her hand on her thigh the jittery way she'd done in the car when I assumed singing to all of America was upmost on her mind.

Before she could say anything more, Herman stuck up for me from the kitchen doorway.

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

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

mpion

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

"Maybe a little bit more than most," I owned up to.

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

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

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

"I see," she said a little less dubiously this time. She certainly helped herself to an eyeful of the memory book as she took it from me, her lips moving surprisingly like Gram's in silently reading that cover inscription, YE WHO LEND YOUR NAME TO THESE PAGES SHALL LIVE ON UNDIMMED THROUGH THE AGES. "So that's what this is about," she said faintly to herself in flipping to one of the entries, I hoped not the Fort Peck sheriff's about keeping your pecker dry.

On pins and needles, I waited for her reaction as she dipped into the pages until she had evidently seen enough. "I need an aspirin," she spoke with her eyes clamped shut, pinching the bridge of her nose, "and then we are going to eat

Change
pagination

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

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

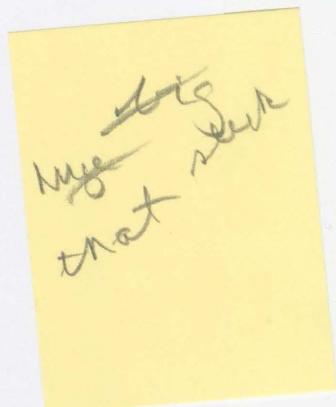
Twin Cities, according to the driver's good-natured announcement, and whatever the other place was like, everything about Minneapolis was more than sizable as I perched on the edge of my seat peering out at it all, the first metropolis--it puffed itself up to that by stealing half the word, didn't it--of my life.

Wide as my eyes were at the sights and scenes, it was hard to take it all in. Even the department store windows showing off the latest fashions seemed to dwarf those in, say, Great Falls. Likewise, the sidewalks were filled with throngs that would not have fit on the streets back in Montana. People, people everywhere, as traffic increasingly swarmed around us, the tops of cars turtling along below the bus windows barely faster than the walking multitudes.

As the Greyhound crept from stoplight to stoplight, I couldn't help gawking at so many passersby in suits and snappy hats and good dresses on an ordinary day, each face another world of mystery to me. Where were they going, what drew them out dressed to the gills like promenaders in an Easter parade? Where did they live, in the concrete buildings that seemed to go halfway to the sky or in pleasant homes hidden away somewhere? I wished this was Wisconsin so I could start to have answers to such things, all the while knowing I was many miles yet from any kind of enlightenment.

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

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



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

In high spirits, I gazed arround the teeming depot to scout out the conveniences and so forth. The slick-looking blue building, when we'd pulled up to it, took up most of the block, with a rounded entrance on the corner where three fleet greyhounds the same as on the bus seemed to be in an everlasting chase after one another around the top of the building. But impressive as the entranceway was, that was not the most outstanding thing to me. Inside, an actual restaurant, just like you'd find on a street, was tucked to one side of the majestic space, with a full menu posted. It hooked me at first sight; all due apology to Gram and her decree of sandwich for lunch, my stomach was only interested in a real meal.

Hadn't I been through a lot since Bemidji, coping with the danger of being robbed blind? That kind of narrow escape was bound to cause an appetite, right?

Besides, I still was carrying loose change wanting to be spent.

Anyway, feeling highly swayve and debonure out on my own in grownup territory, I found a table where I could see the big clock over the ticket counter-- most of an hour yet until the bus was to leave, but I wasn't taking any chances-- and was served Swiss steak by a pleasant waitress, although I didn't know what she was called because it wasn't written on her breast. To me in my grand mood, only one name in pink stitching deserved such prominence anyway.

Leticia. What a reward it was, when I was done with that summer of living out of a wicker suitcase and Gram met me at the Greyhoud station in Great Falls, healed up and feisty as ever, to hear her say guess what, she had her old job back as fry cook at the truck stop in Browning. And guess what again, Letty was back too, waitress on the same shift. Havre didn't work out, I was not surprised to hear. And sure enough, there she was from then on,

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red-lipsticked and sassy as she dealt out the meals Gram made appear in the kitchen's ready window, sneaking a cigarette whenever the counter wasn't busy, and boldly taking up where she left off with Harv the trucker. With his jailbreaking past and mean sheriff brother behind him, and regular as the days of the week in courting Letty--who wouldn't be, linked up with the world's best kisser--he was my great companion as well. On weekend trips to places like Great Falls and Helena sometimes he would take me with him in the bus-wide cab of his truck, and always pull over at a side road on the long hill at the Two Medicine River, so we could get out and put flowers at the two white crosses. Both couples of us lived in apartments above the famous Browning Mercantile, so everything a person could possibly want--school clothes, Reader's Digest Condensed Books--was right downstairs. I went to school with Blackfoot kids who all wore moccasins but none as good as my fancy-dance pair. To top off this fantastically lucky turn of life, I took my meals at the truck stop, with Gram dishing up chicken-fried steak whenever I wished and Letty giving me a wink and asking, "Getting enough to eat, sonny boy?"

"I said, are you getting enough to eat, sonny boy?"

I came to with a start, the Minneapolis waitress puncturing that vision as she started to clear away my empty plate. "Fine, yeah, I'm full as can be," I mumbled my manners as real life set in again, the public address system announcing departures and arrivals the same as ever.

Rousing myself with still plenty of time until I needed to be back at the bus, I left a dime tip as I had seen the person at the next table do, and roamed out into the busy waiting area, where I was naturally drawn to the news and candy stand.

The stand was piled on all sides with newspapers and magazines, and after buying a Mounds that I justified as dessert, I circled around looking at the magazines to see who was famous just then. On cover after cover was someone smiling big. Biggest of all, in every way, was the well-known face of the impressively hefty singer Kate Smith on the large cover of LIFE, which identified her as AMERICA'S FAVORITE SONGSTRESS--BLESSED WITH TALENT. If talent meant singing "God Bless America" over and over until her familiar voice stuck in the head of everyone in the country, she sure had that, all right. Giving her the admiring look of someone who, as Gram would have said, couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, I moved on to other publications, careful not to get anything on the glossy covers as I munched my candy bar. Movie stars populated a whole section of the newsstand, Elizabeth Taylor again, and Ava Gardner and Gary Cooper and Robert Taylor and a good many I had never heard of, but they were clearly famous. How I envied every gleaming one of them.

Perhaps it goes without saying that my fame fever was a product of imagination, but there was greatly more to it than that. Call me a dreamer red in the head, back then, but becoming famous and well off looked to me like a way out of a life haunted by county poorfarm and orphanage the other side of the mountains. A change of luck sort of like winning a real jackpot, in other words. Wouldn't we all take some of that, at eleven going on twelve or any other age? The missing detail that I had no fixed notion of what I might best be famous at--the talent matter--other than a world-record autograph collection, maybe even constituted an advantage, giving me more chances as I saw it.

Dreamily I drifted past to a selection of photography magazines, something new to me. There was one I picked up, *Photoplay*, with pictures of women in poses that interested me increasingly since that kissing experience with Leticia. The newsstand clerk glanced at me a couple of times, but apparently

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assumed I was too young just to be there on my own and my parents must have told me to wait while they were using the conveniences.

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

I flung the magazine into the rack and ran as hard as a frantic human being can with a depot full of travelers in the way as I raced for the departure gate.

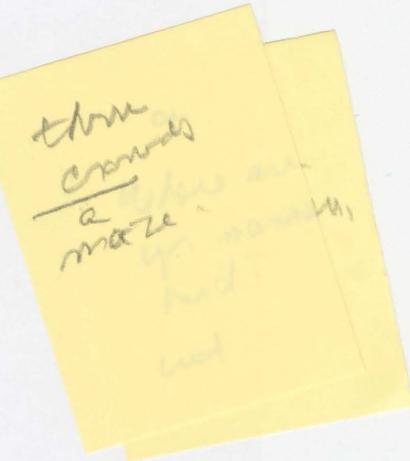
But too late. By the time I scrambled past passengers lined up for other buses, drawing cries of "Hey, don't shove," I could see mine rumbling onto the street and pulling away.

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

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

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

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



"W-W-Wisconsin."

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

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

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

"Is it very far?"

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

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

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

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

Before I could ask about the half I was missing, I was distracted by the high bridge we were atop without warning, over a river that seemed to go on and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

calmulate

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

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

"Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway," the teamster addressed the unwavering red light that held us up at the cross street. On the other side, so near and yet so far, the St. Paul terminal fancied up with plaster-like decorations of fruit and flowers appeared to be older and smaller than the Minneapolis one and must not have dealt in as many passengers, because fewer buses with the racing dog on the side were backed into the loading area in the open-arched driveway. I had eyes only for one, with MILWAUKEE in the sign slot above the windshield, and I spotted it immediately, its door cruelly folding closed as if shutting me out.

which van

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

"That's what he thinks, the dickhead." The newspaper van revved and so did the teamster, bouncing slightly in his seat, as the stoplight took agonizingly long to change.

The instant it did, we shot across the street and along the arches of the terminal driveway, directly toward the warning sign at the far end, reading in red letters of descending order EXIT wrong way DO NOT ENTER.

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

By reflex, the wide-eyed driver of the bus had hit the brakes, and even more so the horn. "Here you go, kiddo. Have a nice trip," my good samaritan daredevil at the wheel said, giving the Greyhound driver the finger. In the blare resounding in the arched driveway, I could barely be heard thanking the van-driving teamster as I leaped out and he gave me a little bye-bye wave.

Peering down at me through the broad windshield, his eyebrows dark as thunderclouds, the bus driver at last let up on the deafening horn as I edged through the slit of space between the facing vehicles and popped out at the bus door. Faces watching curiously in the windows above the ever-running streamlined dog, I wildly pantomimed that I needed in, until the driver, keeping his hand dubiously on the door lever, cracked things open enough that I could make myself heard.

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

"That's yours?" Looking more upset than ever, the driver fished my jacket from behind his seat. "You should have kept better track of it, kid. I didn't see it in time or I'd have turned it in back there before we started."

As I gulped at one more near miss, he pointed a further accusing finger at me. "And technically, if a passenger misses the bus, it's his own tough luck." I was so afraid of exactly that, I couldn't form words. "It says right in the regulations," he kept on reading me the dog bus version of the riot act, "it is the passenger's responsibility to--"

Just then a sharp blast of horn from the van made him jerk his head around, glowering back and forth from me to the motionless teamster, unbudging as a bulldog.

In exasperation, he yanked the bus door open. "Okay, okay, step on and show me your ticket."

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window

You
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me!

junior

To my intense relief, I found the autograph book safe and sound in the jacket and simply huddled in my seat with an arm wrapped around them both as if they might get away again, until the bus finally trundled out of the last of St. Paul and its troublesome twin and the tires were making the highway humming sound.

Naturally the other passengers had gawked for all they were worth as I scrambled aboard and ducked into the first vacant set of seats--where I was sitting before was occupied by a mother with a fussy baby, I saw with a pang--so I wouldn't be pestered by a seatmate about the whole experience that started in the mesmerizing pages of *Photoplay*. From the tone of remarks that followed my adventurous arrival, I could tell that my fellow riders were divided between thinking I was lucky beyond belief in catching up with the bus the way I had or a menace to society for missing it in the first place. I wasn't going to argue with either point of view. Until dog bus life settled down a great deal more, I was not budging from my seat, the autograph book would have to go into early retirement, I would stay quiet and still and have nothing to do with anybody. *Paint it red*, fatherly advice drummed in me once more, put the bus-missing episode out of mind, concentrate on something else like, well, anything but that.

I reckoned without the elderly couple across the aisle from me.

"Tsk," first I heard the woman. "It just makes me want to take and shake him. Imagine doing what he did."

"Dang right. Must have been a star pupil in fool school, is all I can think," her husband pitched in.

I shrank inside. Now this, to add to the day. It was bad enough to have behaved like a stray and ended up on the wrong side of the beetle-browed driver, let alone scandalizing my nearest bus neighbors to such an extent. Donkey school, fool school--so much for the Tetonria prairie schoolhouse and the other one-room stops of my bouncing education through six grades, the Greyhound world graded harder.

From the corner of my eye, I apprehensively studied the couple, way up there in years, clucking their tongues about me now. Both of them were short and sparely built, like a matched pair that had shrunk over time. Actually the woman reminded me of Gram, even to the skinny wire eyeglasses emerging from the cloud of grey hair bunched in no particular identifiable hairdo. She had on what looked like a churchgoing dress, the darkest blue there is with touches of white trim and what looked like a really valuable carved ivory rose brooch, which she wore with about the same authority as the Glasgow sheriff did his badge. Her husband also was dressed in Sunday best, a baggy brown suit and wide green tie with watermelon stripes. Bald and smallheaded and with his skinny glasses perched on the knobby end that old noses sometimes form into, he didn't look like much, a druggist or something. But when he leaned forward to scrutinize me further through the tops of his glasses, I glimpsed the hat line where his forehead turned from suntanned to pearly pale. Ranchers and farmers had that mark of lifelong weathering, and I didn't know any others who did. This added another hayload to my mortification. People who ought to have recognized me for what I

was, if I only had been wearing my rodeo shirt instead of slopping syrup on it, were against me. My best hope was that the *tsk tsking* pair of old busybodies was getting off at the next stop, and it couldn't come too soon.

"I tell you, a soul can't simply sit by after seeing that without saying something," the woman was definitely saying, in that henyard voice. "It runs contrary to common decency."

"You're right as rain," her husband vigorously bobbed endorsement to that. "Speak your piece, it's entirely called for in this dang kind of a situation."

With that, here she came like a shot, scooting across the aisle with surprising agility into the seat next to mine as I cringed back to the window at the prospect of being taken and shaken for wrecking common decency. Oh man, did she look mad, her eyes down to slits behind the lenses of her glasses.

"We want to let you know," she leaned right in so close on me I could smell Sen-Sen on her breath, "we think it was downright awful of the fool up there in the driver's seat to go off and leave you like that."

I sat up like a gopher popping out of its hole. "Really? You do?"

"Bet your britches we do," the man chipped in, sliding over into her seat on the aisle and sticking his head turtle-like across toward us. "It was uncalled for, that dang kind of behavior when it's up to him to be on the lookout for his passengers, is what I say."

I barely resisted contributing "Well, yeah, he's a dickhead," but condemnation of the guilty party humped over the steering wheel seemed to be going along just fine with *dangs*. All of a sudden, the dog bus was the top of my world again, given these unexpected backers. Fortunately, the three of us were far enough from the driver that he couldn't make out what we were saying about him, although he was watching us plenty in the rearview mirror, looking sore that the commotion back and forth across the aisle plainly involved me one more time.

as my
catapulted
out of the
seat

My newfound defender riding shotgun beside me gave him a snakekilling look right back, shaking her head the way that's another method of saying *tsk tsk*, and her husband added his two bits' worth, as he put it, to the effect that the Greyhound Company ought to examine its hiring procedure. I tell you, it was almost like having Gram, a double helping of her, there to stick up for me.

In the burst of introductions, they made themselves known to me as Mae and Joe Schneider, and I recited by heart Donal without a *d* and how it dated back to Scotland and Cameron kilts and buck-naked Englishmen, which seemed to interest them no end. They in turn lost no time filling me in on the Schneider clan as they called it, three boys with children of their own, one son who ran what they referred to as "the ride" at the place they were going to, Wisconsin Dells, and another they had just visited who was a doctor in Yellowstone Park, treating people who fell into hot pools or were mauled by bears. Wow, I thought, talk about being famous, he must be the talk of the park every time he patched up some dumb tourist like that. A third son, it turned out, ran the family farm in Illinois--somewhere called Downstate, which from my fuzzy geography I guessed had nothing to do with Chicago--while, as Mrs. Schneider said, she and Joe "trotted around having the time of our lives."

Trotting around by dog bus for the fun of it was a new notion to me, and as I listened to one and then the other peppily telling of their travels, I longed for the cushion of family that was theirs, in contrast to Gram and me on our own with only the distant relatives--literally--that I was being packed off to like a shipped fruitcake at Christmas.

Something of this must have shown through in me, because Mr. Schneider interrupted himself to ask, wrinkled with concern, "Now where is it you're going, Donal?"

"Manitowoc."

→ #?
?

The Schneiders glanced at each other as if their hearing had failed.

I repeated the tricky word, adding "It means, uh, 'Where ghosts live' in Indian," which didn't seem to help.

"Don't know it at all. You, Mae?"

"Not a bit. Where in heaven's sake is it, somewhere far? Back east?"

The other somewhere of my trip--Pleasantville, Decatur, Chicago--the map dots of my imagination, my protection against the unknown that awaited me in one last bus depot where I was to give myself over to strangers, glimmered for a wistful moment and passed into simple memory. These two honest old faces could not be storied to nor did I want to, hard truth the destination I had to face now.

"No, no, it's in Wisconsin, honest. See, I'll show you." Producing the autograph book from my jacket pocket, I took out the precious piece of paper with the Manitowoc address and so on, Mrs. Schneider peering at the writing through her bifocals very intently before passing it across to Mr. Schneider who studied it with a squint of concentration identical to hers before handing it back to me. And more than that, I told them the whole story, Gram's scary operation and my parents killed by the drunk driver and the summer ahead of me in the hands of relatives who might as well be ghosts for all I knew about them, and the dog bus proving out Gram's prediction that it gets all kinds, the huffy little sheriff who thought I was a runaway and the slick convict who had almost made off with my suitcase--it spilled out of me in a flood, although I did hold back being soundly kissed by a vagabond waitress with *Leticia* stitched on her breast.

"Whew," Mr. Schneider whistled when I finally ran down, "you're a trouper for not letting anything throw you," and Mrs. Schneider added a flurry of *tsks* but the good kind that marveled at all I had been through. They put their heads together and figured out where Manitowoc must be from my ticket that

My
grandmother
says
me

• many
1.
Brinkley

white

Showed I'd have to change buses in Milwaukee and ride for only a couple hours beyond that, which indicated the place must be on Lake Michigan, and assured me that made them fret somewhat less. As Mr. Schneider put it, the town didn't sound like it was off at the rear end of nowhere.

Time flew in their company, comfortable as they were with a boy from having raised three of their own, and I felt next thing to adopted as our chatter continued across the miles. I could just see their prosperous farm with a few horses still on the place for old time's sake and what it must be like living somewhere with no Power Wagon, no Sparrowhead, to ruin a summer. The saving grace of an uncorked imagination such as mine was that it always carried me away, as Gram all too well knew, waking dreams that I could more than halfway believe in if life would only correct itself in the direction of good luck instead of bad for her and me. I knew with everything in me Joe Schneider would have given me a chance to harness up a team of workhorses and prove myself in the fine fields of Illinois instead of running me off like an underage hobo, and Mae Schneider would never be a tightwad about kitchen matters. In my trance during the valuable time with this sage little age-dried couple--wizened must have had something to do with wisdom, mustn't it?--I could hardly bear not to ask if they needed a teamster and a cook.

But then Mrs. Schneider looked out at some Palookaville the bus was passing through and exclaimed, "Can you believe it, we're almost to the Dells," and that bubble popped. I came to with a start, realizing I hadn't had them write in the autograph book, and they chorused that they'd fix that in a hurry.

"A memory book," Mrs. Schneider said wistfully as I handed her the album and pen. "Why, I haven't seen one of these since our children had theirs." I watched over her shoulder, a growing lump in my throat, as she penned in a neat hand:

*When twilight drops a curtain
and pins it with a star,
Remember that you have a friend
Though she may wander far.*

He took a lot more time with his, a mischievous twinkle in his eye as he wrote and wrote. When his wife told him for heaven's sakes hurry up, he shushed her with "Never you mind, this is man talk between me and Donal," using my name with exquisite courtesy. When he passed the book back to me, along with a knowing grin, I saw he had composed:

*Here's to the girlfriends,
you'll have them in numbers,
you'll have them in plenty,
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10,
11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20.*

The Wisconsin Dells stop was so brief I didn't get off, merely pressed my nose against the window as the Schneiders waved to me and were met by their family. Whatever dells were, I goggled at what appeared to be a lake turned into an amusement park, with a fleet of landing craft like my father's at Omaha Beach, except these advertised on their sides, WISCONSIN DUCKS--FUN! ADVENTURE! ON LAND AND WATER! That was not the most thrilling thing, though, as rising over the water like a railroad that had decided to jump the lake was a swooping roller coaster track--sure as anything, the "ride" operated by the Schneiders' son. I ached to stay there, just once in my life be a member of that world of pleasure. For as the bus pulled out, I knew in my heart of hearts nothing like that awaited me in some hard-to-spell town with not a thing going for it except the Indian explanation that it was where ghosts lived. Dead, in other words.

Milwaukee. The last hazardous stop I had to get through appeared to me endlessly gray and runny, drizzle streaking the bus window, as though the church steeples every block or two poked leaks in the clouds. Either a very religious place or one in serious need of saving from its sins, this big city looked old and set in its ways, streets of stores alike from neighborhood to neighborhood even when the spelling on the windows was different kinds of foreign.

Humped up trying to see out to the blurred brick buildings set tight against one another, I was as bleary as the weather. Ever since Wisconsin Dells, I kept going over my all too adventurous day, the close calls with the badly dressed master criminal and the wild ride to catch up with the bus in St. Paul--luck on my side but only barely until the Schneiders came along to stick up for me when I most needed it--my imagination zigging and zagging to what could have happened instead of what did. Yet, already those experiences, bad and good, seemed farther past than they were. In some way that I could not quite wrap my mind around, distance messed up time, the miles accumulating since I climbed on the dog bus in Great Falls putting me unfathomably farther from life up until that point than just the count of hours could show. I had to think for a bit to realize by

now it was Sunday, and from that, it struck me full force that while I was going through a day of scares not enough to kill me, Gram had gone into the hospital for her do-or-die operation.

That thought ballooned my imagination almost to bursting, my head crowded with doctors and nurses and nuns clustered around one familiar frail form, talking their hospital talk in tones as hushed as any in the gloomy Milwaukee churches the Greyhound was nosing past.

Determined as I was not to cry, my eyes were as blurry as the watery bus window by the time the dumb driver called out the announcement about the depot's conveniences and so forth.

Jumpy at having to change buses at what was bound to be another overwhelmingly busy terminal, I scrambled out directly behind the driver and seized my suitcase as soon as he heaved it out of the baggage compartment. I headed straight down the long bank of swinging doors with arrivals and departures posted beside them, not veering an inch toward the waiting room newsstand and its lure of Mounds bars, my stomach losing out to what happened in Minneapolis. Only a complete moron would miss the bus a second time, right?

The challenge, though, was to find mine in the listings of dozens of stops, until way down at the end of the doorways past ST. LOUIS and KANSAS CITY and even BEMIDJI, I finally spotted a sign like a string of letters in alphabet soup.

SHEBOYGAN MANITOWOC WAUSAU EAU CLAIRE

Of all things, this time I was way early, the bus sitting there empty, no driver in sight. I checked the posted departure time and saw that I had plenty of leeway to go use the nearby convenience, so as a precaution in I went, hugging my suitcase to me. It was there, washing my hands afterwards, that the large red lettering on the machine on the wall past the stalls registered on me.

MAXIMUM PROTECTION!

That drew my interest. Keeping a death grip on my suitcase, I went over to see what was being dispensed that qualified as so surefire against jeopardy of whatever kind. In smaller print but still in blazing red letters above the coin slot was the explanation, more or less.

TUFFY PROPHYLACTICS

THE STRONGEST CONDOM COMING AND GOING!

Well, that indicated to me, in an inexact schoolyard way, the vicinity of what these were for. But only that? The further wording touting how stout and reliable a Tuffy was included the word *sheath*. That in turn brought to mind one of the poems Miss Ciardi had made us memorize by the dozens in the sixth grade, *Noble Cyrano sheathed his knife/And spared the foul assassin's life*. I had something sharp to sheath too, did I ever.

After all, it made sense to me that people carried good luck charms for a reason--*carried* the thinger that brought luck--which I had not been able to do with the practically knife-edged arrowhead stashed in the suitcase. If I could just somehow have it in my pocket without getting jabbed like crazy every time I sat down, maybe it would work more like a lucky piece was supposed to. In short, protection was what I needed, and here it was promised for twenty-five cents.

Risking one of my few remaining coins, I turned the knob on the machine and into the trough at the bottom dropped a round packet disappointingly small. And when I unwrapped it, the so-called sheath seemed all too thin. Huh. I thought by reputation these things were made of rubber. Instead the material was sort of like fishskin, and while stretchy, didn't strike me as all that strong. When I dug the arrowhead out of the suitcase and compared lengths, though, the condom thinger looked just about right.

For all I knew, maybe more than one at a time was needed in this matter of protection, like putting on extra socks in zero weather. I had a last couple of quarters left and inserted them one after the other into the Tuffy dispenser, drawing quite a look from a guy at the nearest urinal. Then over in a corner at the sink counter, working carefully, carefully, with a little toilet paper padding to help out, I managed to tug the triple layer of condoms over the arrowhead. Definitely sheathed, it fit in my pocket as not much bigger than an ordinary charm like a rabbit's foot, and finally felt like a lucky piece should, ready and waiting.

Back out in the boarding area, the driver showed up at the still empty bus at the same time I did. Burly and black-mustached and still settling his company crush hat on his head, he looked me over enough that I was afraid he'd heard about me, the entire Greyhound fleet alerted about the stray whom trouble followed like a black cat's shadow. But he only remarked, "Early bird, aren't you," and stuck the wicker suitcase safely in the baggage compartment. I went up the steps right at his heels, and for quite some time we were the only ones on the bus, me securing a window seat partway down the aisle but away from the bumpy ride over the back tires, and him behind the steering wheel dealing with paperwork.

Waiting there like that, one stop from my destination, something came over me, a feeling sort of like the start of a cold, but in this case recognizably homesickness about to happen. The funny thing about it, though--odd funny, not funny funny--was that what I was about to miss in the way a person does when familiar surroundings are gone was not the Double W cook shack, nor even the ranch nor Montana in general, but the bus itself. Sitting there in a usual window spot that my fanny by now knew as well as the seat of my pants, the long aisle somehow invisibly crowded with fellow passengers who had come and gone, the

whole Greyhound-grey upholstery of seat cushions and backrests as familiar and comfortable around me as a traveling living room, for the first time I wished I could stay on, keep on going, COAST TO COAST like the showy badge on the driver's cap, just ride the dog bus on through the open-ended summer ahead.

Half wished so, rather, the other part of me, the more-or-less wised-up traveler one was aware that I had barely skinned through some tough situations, and if I had learned anything about life by then, it was that there did not seem to be any limit on tough situations. Imagination and a lot else had carried me this far, but I knew deep down that Manitowoc unavoidably was the end of the line for all that, in more ways than one, and the sooner I got there, maybe the better?

Was I ever going to get there, though? Time seemed to slow to a crawl during this. I was tired and getting cranky along with it. The driver kept on dabbing at his paperwork. I continued to be the one and only passenger. At last a few others dribbled aboard, but to my puzzlement, not as many as at any point of the trip since passengers dwindled away into the void of North Dakota. Was Manitowoc such a ghost town no one wanted to go there? Soon enough I'd know, wouldn't I. If the Greyhound ever got itself in gear, which I was starting to doubt.

Growing really antsy, I was about to ask the driver when he was ever going to start us rolling, until I heard him say to himself, "Hoo boy, here they are," and climb off in a hurry to do his baggage job. I turned to the window to see what was happening, and gasped.

A disorderly line of kids, snaking from side to side like one of those Chinese dragons in a parade, was pouring out of the depot, each with a suitcase in hand. There was an absolute mob of them, and worse than that, entirely boys, and even worse yet, the worst I could imagine, they all were about my age and

there were more than enough redheads among them to confuse anyone. I knew it! Redheaded thinking it surely was, but this clearly was a disaster in the making. Just like I had tried to tell Gram, there was no conceivable way Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch could pick me out, confronted with red mopheads everywhere they looked.

The whole pack of them stormed onto the bus laughing and shoving and talking at the top of their voices as I sat frozen watching the pandemonium. A couple of fretful adults were in charge, or trying to be, but they were no match for the stampede. The kids swarmed as they pleased through the aisles, claiming seats and instantly trading. The bus filled up, and the next thing I knew, three boys descended on where I was sitting, one of them flopping down next to me and the others straight across the aisle.

As sharp-featured as if he'd been whittled, my new suitmate had a natural nose for poking into other people's business, eyeing me with squinty curiosity. "What'ja do, get on the bus early?"

"Sort of. Yesterday."

"Yeah? Where ya from then?"

I told him, his snoopy pair of chums listening in. If the new bus riders were impressed by my distant point of departure they had a funny way of showing it. "Monta-a-a-na," they bleated like sheep. "Know any cowboys? Like Hopalong Assidy?" They snickered roundly at the idea.

What to do? Lay it on them about the past two years of hanging around the bunkhouse with the Double W riders every chance I got, sometimes even being permitted when I caught Gram and Sparrowhead both in the right mood to saddle up and help move cows and calves to a new pasture, riding right next to cowboys not of the phony movie ten-gallon-hat-on-a-half-pint-head Hopalong

Cassidy variety but as genuine as they come, as shown by their imaginative cussing?

These kids, not a freckle from the outdoors on their milkwhite faces, did not seem like a promising audience for any of that. For once, I figured I'd better tone matters down.

"Well, sure, I couldn't help but know plenty of them, could I," I said offhandedly, "my grandmothers's the cook on the biggest ranch in Montana, see, and the whole crew, cowboys and all, eats together at a table as long as this bus." That did stretch the matter a little, but not unreasonably so, I thought.

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

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

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

The way kids will do, we gingerly got around to names. The one sitting next to me was Kurt, with a K, he informed me, as though that made him something special and not just a victim of poor spelling. The duo across the aisle weren't named much better, Gus and Mannie. They looked like brothers but didn't act like it, Gus nervous as a pullet and Mannie the kind who would stare you in the eye while he took your lunch. Kurt was the leader, I could tell. Leaders always sat by themselves, or in this case by the seatfiller I happened to be. I wished I had drawn the set of boys directly behind us, who were quietly reading comic books.

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

Leez,

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

"Sleep outside like that?" Why on earth would anyone with a home and a bed, as these milksops surely had, camp for the night on the cold ground? "What for?"

"Outside, nothin'," the big talker who spelled his name with a K turned up his nose at that. "We're goin' to Camp Winnebago. It has cabins and everythin'."

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

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

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

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

"OW! Hey, quit!" Trying to shake the sting out of my hand, I at least had the consolation that Kurt was groaning as he rubbed his ribs and complained, "Oof, you gave me a real whack," which, in all justice, my elbow automatically had done when he pinched the bejesus out of me. Somehow it seemed to make him think better of me.

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

But when I told him, he snickered, while across the aisle Gus, or was it Mannie, jeered, "Ooh, old Manitowoccee, couldn't make it to Milwaukee."

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

"All kinds of stuff!" They were any too glad to tick off activities to me. "Swimmin'! Makin' things with leather! Tug o' war! Archery!"

It was Gus, the fidgety pullet one, who interrupted the litany with, "Don't forget singin'," causing Mannie next to him to hoot out "The campfire ditty!" and before you could say *do re mi*, all three of them were laughing like loons and rauously chorusing:

Great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts,

Mutilated monkey meat.

Dirty little birdie feet.

Great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts,

And me without my spoon.

That was impressive, I had to grant, as did the harried grownup who came rushing down the aisle and told them to quit showing off. As one, they snickered at his retreating back. The candy company should have put the three of them on the Snickers bar, like the Smith Brothers on cough drop boxes.

I didn't have much time for that kind of thinking, however, as they turned their attention back to me, the Mannie one looking particularly hungry for a crack at me.

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

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

Oh, the temptation that brought on. To see the look on their faces when I coolly announced that when it came to things like arrows, I just happened to have a lucky arrowhead older than Columbus right there in my possession. The only shortcoming was, if they clamored to see it I'd have to show it in its wrapping of Tuffies, and I sensed that was not such a good idea. I hated to miss the chance to be superior about the archery matter, but maybe I had something better up my sleeve.

"How about guns?"

My question silenced them for a full several seconds.

Mannie was the first to recover and break out a sneer. "What, cap pistols? Little kid games ain't for us."

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

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

"Magpies."

"Yeah? What's those?"

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

"Naw, I don't think so." He looked across uncertainly at Gus and Mannie, who were shaking their heads in slack-jawed ignorance of one of the most common birds in Creation. Talk about having a wire down; if any of these three had a brain that worked, it would be lonesome.

"Then how do you make any money?" I pressed my advantage, Kurt still leaning away as if his ass might get shot off from my direction. "See, there's a bounty on magpies, on account of they eat the eyeballs right out of calves and lambs and things, and"--I had a moment of inspiration--"they really do gobble gopher guts." At that, my audience was agog, if slightly green around the gills.

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

By now I was being looked at as if I was either a gunslinging hero of the eleven-year-old set or the biggest liar on the face of the earth. But it was totally true that Wendell Williamson, tightwad that he was, ponied up for dirty little birdy feet, magpies being the hated nuisance they were on ranches, after Gram vouched that my father had taught me how to shoot the .22 and she swore I was responsible enough to hunt along the creek willows without endangering the cattle.

My listeners stirred uncertainly. Gus's lips were moving as he worked out fifty cents times seventeen, while Mannie gauged me more warily than before. It was up to Kurt to rally the campers.

"Yeah, well, bows and arrows can kill stuff, too. Like, uh, frogs. We're goin' frog huntin' the first night at camp, ain't we, guys."

"We'll murder the buggers!" and "Frog legs for breakfast!" from across the aisle backed that up as if hunting hopping amphibians in the dark, Indian style, was a tried-and-true camp activity, which I seriously doubted.

Now even the would-be holy terrors of the frog world fell still as an announcement boomed out from the driver that we were not stopping in

Sheboygan as scheduled, because no one was ticketed to there and no more passengers could be taken on. Actually, I suspected he was in a hurry to get rid of the mess of campers. No doubt to put minds at rest, so to speak, about a rest room, he added, "Manitowoc in fifteen short minutes."

Really? The comprehension began to sink in that I was nearly there at last. Fifteen minutes truly did sound like no time after all my hours on the bus, the never-to-be-forgotten encounters I'd had, close calls especially, chapter after thick chapter of memory. In an odd way, I started to miss all that, the good and the bad, so many bits and pieces of my immense journey coming to mind while my latest companions thought it was a big deal to go up the road a skip and a jump to the same dumb camp year after year. But the mind does funny things, and half listening to their razzing back and forth about which of them was most likely to shoot himself in the foot with an arrow, I had a sudden itch toward the autograph book. After all, here was my last chance on the dog bus for who knew how long, and three candidates right here handy. So what if they behaved like nose pickers, when they knew stuff like that campers' song. Goofiness had its place in the pages of life, too.

Impulsively I pulled out the album, its cream-colored cover somewhat smudged from so much handling but overall less the worse for wear from its trip than I was, and showed it off to Kurt.

"Yeah?" his answer to almost everything. He fanned through the pages like a speed reader. "So you want us all to put somethin' in it."

I said I sure did, which brought about quite a reaction across the aisle. Gus giggled in Mannie's face. "Gonna write *My name is Manfred Vedder, I'm an old bed wetter, aintcha?*"

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

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

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

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

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

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

In desperation, I shoved the heel of my hand into Kurt's surprised face and kicked my way past him--he didn't amount to much of a barrier compared to the braided Indian or the man in the bad-fitting suit--and launched myself onto the giggling pair across the aisle, calling them dickheads and sons-of-bitches and whatever other swearwords came to my tongue. It was two against one, but they were underneath and I was all over them with flailing limbs. In the scuffle, I elbowed Gus hard enough to take the giggle out of him. Mannie was chanting

"Uh uh uh, don't be grabby!" when I got on top of him enough to knee him in a bad place and snatch the album back.

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

Still cussing to the best of my ability, I was grappled by one of the adults into the seat across the aisle, Kurt having retreated to the window as far as he could get from me.

"We wasn't gonna keep it, honest," he whined, the liar, as I furiously checked things over. The autograph book miraculously had survived without damage, but my shirt was wrecked all to hell, a pocket dangling almost off-- fortunately not the one with the money pinned to it--and a number of buttons were missing and I could feel a draft from rips under the arms and long tears down the back as if I'd been fighting clawed animals, which I pretty nearly was.

About then I spat something out. A piece of tooth. My tongue found the chipped spot. One of the sharp teeth next to my bottom front ones. Sharper now. Baring my choppers at him, I gave Kurt another murderous look, not that it repaired anything but my feelings, and he whimpered, the fearless frog hunter.

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

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

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

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

By then I had seen sixteen hundred miles' worth of towns, from Palookavilles to the Twin Cities busy as double beehives to gray soppy Milwaukee spiked with churches. At this first sight of Manitowoc, though, I did not know what to think. Houses looked old, and many of them small and with gray siding on streets with some flower gardens fringing the lawns but none of the overowering cottonwood groves of Gros Ventre or Great Falls. Nothing about the tight-packed neighborhoods appeared even remotely familiar except Chevies and Fords dotting the streets and those were strangely pulled in sideways--parallel parking had not converted Montana. Plenty of church steeples here, too, like arrow tips in the hide of the sky. As for the people out and about, they were not as highly dressed up as in Minneapolis, yet the women looked like

3

they had on nylons which not even Meredice Williamson wore on an everyday basis at the ranch, and the men sported hats that would scarcely keep the sun off at all, not a Stetson among them.

My eyes stayed busy as could be, my mind trying to keep up with all the different sights and scenes--Gram had been right about that, I had to admit--as the bus approached the more active downtown section, with long lines of mystifying storefronts. We passed a business calling itself a SCHNAPPS SCHOP, which looked like a bar, and the bars I could recognize all had a glowing blue neon sign in the window proclaiming SCHLITZ, THE BEER THAT MADE MILWAUKEE FAMOUS, which was news to me--it hadn't done so in Montana--while what looked like restaurants commonly had the word SCHNITZEL painted on the plate glass, and an apparent department store had SCHUETTE'S, a very strange-sounding product if it wasn't a name, spelled in large letters above its show windows. Next thing, however, along came a hotel called SHEPHERD'S, spelled perfectly normal as if sheep herders stayed there. Talk about confusing. In school I always won spelling contests, but I wouldn't want to try here.

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

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

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

at
beginning...
German
& learned on
one

I was thunderstruck, but not for long.

"HEY, NO, EVERYBODY SIT TIGHT! YOU'RE NOT THERE YET!"

My outcry froze the driver and probably everyone else on the bus. "You're taking them to Camp Winniegoboo!" I instructed the open-mouthed man at the wheel. "They told me so!"

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

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

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

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

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

Trying to fight down the jitters, I cast another wild gaze around the teeming waiting room hoping for salvation in the form of anyone who might resemble Gram enough to be her sister. No such luck, not even close. People of every shape and form and way of dress, but none showed me any recognition and of course I couldn't tell them. I must have been looked past hundreds of times, as if I was too ragged for anyone to want to pack home. I was stuck.

There was no help for it, I was going to have to throw myself on the mercy of GREAT LAKES PAYPHONE. Setting down my suitcase to try to get things in order, especially me, I first of all reached out the autograph book from my jacket pocket and flipped through the pages to find the slip of paper with the phone number. Then again. My fingers began to shake.

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

Distress became panic, like an instant fever, as an awful omission caught up with me. Worse, what might be called the commission of an omission.

Stupidly I hadn't bothered to so much as glance at the phone number or street address even when showing those to the Schneiders. If I had any excuse--which I glaringly didn't--it was that those would be right there written down in case of emergency. But here was the emergency, landing on me with both feet, and I did not have a clue in the world to the existence of people called Kitty and Dutch except that their last name was Schmidt. And if the alphabet meant anything in this crazily named city where nearly every store sign spoke whatever language Schlitz and and Schnapps and Schnitzel and Schuette were, I dimly understood that Schmidts similarly were probably beyond number.

Damn and goddamn and every dirty word beyond. I had hit rock bottom and I knew no way out of it. This was my absolute lowest point since Gram told me I was being shipped to Wisconsin for the summer. Unmet, my clothing half torn off, as good as lost in a strange city, with night coming on and not even the dog bus as a haven any more. Rough introduction into being a total orphan, it felt like.

I was dissolving into utter despair, tears next, when I heard the melodious voice behind me.

myself

*chance
how do
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+ out
w/*

"So here you are, sweetie pie. We wondered."

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

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

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

Blinking my way out of one surprise after another, I simply stood planted there gawking at the two of them, one tall and slope-shouldered, the other nearly as broad as the fat lady in a carnival. Longfaced and with that horsy grin and glasses that made his eyes look larger than human, with an odd glint to them, he was quite a sight in his own right, but it was her I was stupefied by. I could only think Gram hadn't spelled her out to me to save the surprise. Oh, man! *She* was in our family, what there was of it? This was like a wish come true, life all of a sudden springing the better kind of trick for a change.

I still almost couldn't believe it, but the more I looked at this unexpected personage, the more excited I became. I would have known her anywhere, an unmistakable figure in more ways than one, big around as a jukebox, jolly double chins, wide-set doll eyes, hairdo as plump as the rest of her, the complete picture. The exact same face I had seen big as life--well, *LIFE*, really, the picture magazine that showed what was what in the world every week--just that same day at the Minneapolis newsstand, and the melodious voice, familiar as if it was

coming out of the radio that very moment. My Aunt Kitty was clearly none other than what the magazine cover described with absolute authority as America's favorite songstress, and unless a person was a complete moron and deaf to boot, recognizable as the treasured vocalist of every song worth singing, Kate Smith.

At last, I had it knocked.

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

Wolf Point seemed to be the cutoff between what is generally thought of as Montana and the notion of North Dakota, farms sprinkled across a big square of land. By now passengers had dwindled drastically--there wasn't much of anywhere to pick someone up until the supper stop at Williston, a couple of hours away--and I managed to gather only the autographs and inscriptions of a Rural Electrification troubleshooter and two elderly Dakota couples retired from wheat farming and moved to town, so much alike right down to the crow's-feet wrinkles of their prairie squints that they could have been twins married to twins. Maybe inspiration flattens out along with the countryside in that area, because they all tended to come up with sentiments along the lines of *Remember me early, remember me late, remember me at the Golden Gate*. But every page filled went

toward my goal of a world-famous collection, so that was okay. With nothing happening to match the Kinnick brothers, I thumbed back through the other writings in the album, daydreaming of more that surely were to come, the one good thing about this forcible trip, until the Greyhound pulled in at the Williston depot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Uh, sir?" I called to the driver, still foggy. "Where are we?"

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

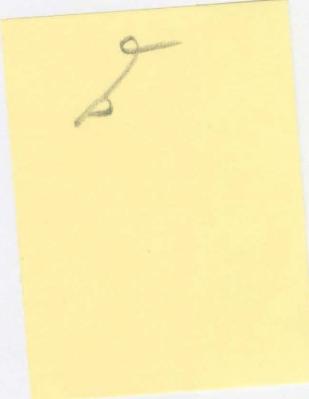
What language was that? Actually, my stomach didn't care. It was ready for one of Gram's prescriptions that I could obey to the letter, stuff myself with a big breakfast.

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

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

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

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

A yellow sticky note with a handwritten signature.

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

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

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

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

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

"Twelve going on thirteen," I stretched things a little, and for once my voice didn't break.

He maybe showed a tic of doubt at that, but didn't question it. Himself, he was going gray, matching the tight-fitting suit. He had a broad good-natured face, like those cartoons of the man in the moon, although as Gram would have said he must have kept it in the pantry; his complexion was sort of doughy, as if he needed

to be outdoors more. "I'm all admiration," he said with that confiding shake of his head. "Me, I'm on the go all the time for a living, and anybody who can do it for pleasure gets my vote."

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

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

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

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

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

"You're something else, aren't you." He tugged at his tie as he appraised me. "Where've you been anyway, donkey school?"

Mystified, I furrowed a look at him.

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

"Oh man, that's a good one," I exclaimed, wishing I had it in the autograph book. If only the sleeping Indian had been this talkative! Taken with the back-and-

forth, I said in the spirit of things, "I skipped wise ass school, see, for a dude ranch. Out west."

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

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

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

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

"You pretty close to guessed it. Beaded moccasins."

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

"They were made a long time ago for the best Blackfoot fancy-dancer there ever was, that's how." I didn't need to fumble for a name. "Red Chief, he was called." My enthusiasm built with every detail that flashed to mind. "See, when there was this big powwow about to happen with Indians coming from everywhere, the tribe gathered all its beads on a blanket, and the best moccasin maker chose the prettiest ones and spent day and night sewing the design." Expert

of a kind that I was from donning the soft leather slippers for so many middle-of-the-night calls of nature, I lovingly described their blue and white prancing figure that seemed to lighten a person's step, like wearing kid gloves on the feet.

"They're real beauties," I assured my blinking listener, "and when the guy, Red Chief I mean, put them on for the fancy-dancing contest against all the other tribes, he won everything. And so, after that the moccasins were called 'big medicine'--that's Indian for 'magic,' see--and nobody else in the tribe could even touch them but that one fancy-dancer."

"When he got old and died, though," my tone hushed just enough to draw my audience of one in closer, "the tribe was going to sell them to a big museum, but the dude ranch owner heard about it and traded a bunch of horses to the Blackfeet for them." For all I knew, this part approached the truth. Admittedly in very roundabout fashion, but the fact was that my grandmother the sharp-trading fry cook there in the Reservation town of Browning had bargained someone out of the impressive moccasins somehow.

I had to really reach for the next portion, but I got there. "When the dude rancher tried them on, they had shrunk up real bad and didn't fit him, so he made them the grand prize for the roping contest. They're just right for me," I finished modestly.

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

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

"A fortune on your tootsies, huh? I tell you, some guys have all the luck."

To walk
around in,

Good-natured about it, though, he drew back as if to make room for his admiration of me, topping it off with "Look at you, just getting started in life and you've got it knocked," and I went still as death.

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

Innocent as it sounded, the utterance from this complete stranger echoed in me until my ears rang. Gram was more used to this sort of thing, the sound of someone speaking from past the grave. Past a white cross on the side of Highway 89, in this instance. How many times had I heard it, waiting with my mother in a kitchen table card game of pitch or a round of dominoes or some such while my father scouted for work, for the next construction camp that needed a hotshot catskinner, and in he would come at last, smiling like the spring sun as he reported, "They're hiring at Tiber Dam," or the Greenfield irrigation project it might be, or the reservoirs capturing creeks out of the Rockies, Rainbow and Pishkun and those. Each time his voice making the words wink that certain way, "We've got it knocked." Wherever it came from--World War Two? the Depression?--for me the expression indeed meant something solid we were about to tap into, wages for my folks after a lean winter and a firmer place to live than wherever we had fetched up when the ground froze hard enough to resist a bulldozer blade. It entered me deeper than mere words generally go, as Gram's sayings did with her, to the point where I perfectly well knew, even though I wasn't there, that starting out on that trip to take possession of the bulldozer that would set them--us--up in life for once and for all, Bud Cameron and his wife Peg declared in one voice or the other that they had it knocked. Until they didn't.



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

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

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

"Huh?"

"You know, a cop on the beat?"

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

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

"Nope. A rodeo announcer. 'Now coming out of chute four, Rags Rasmussen, saddle bronc champeen of the world, on a steed called Bombs Away,'" I gave him a rapid-fire sample. My parents never missed a Gros Ventre rodeo, and given all the hours I had sat through bareback and saddle bronc riding, the announcer's microphone spiel was virtually second nature to me.

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

"Only what?"

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

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

*Answer
nope*

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

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

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

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

"My--?"

"Family. Ever been hitched? You know, married?"

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

"Lucky you," this I meant when I said it. "So where do you live?"

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

If I knew any, it was that it was time to quit fooling around. He wasn't as good at making up things as I was, whatever that was about. Maybe he was embarrassed about being a headbolt heater salesman and not able to afford to dress better than he did. In any case, I didn't have time for bulloney from him, I needed to get going with the autograph book. In several seats not far behind us was a group of women all wearing hats with various floral designs, and from what I was able to overhear of their chatter they were a garden club who called themselves the Gardenias, and were out for fun, which seemed to consist of staying at a lakeside lodge with a flower garden. I didn't want to miss out on the bunch of them, so I produced the album to deal with my seatmate first and then scoot down the aisle to those hats bursting with blossoms.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Feeling like a complete moron, I charged out the door of the bus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How I wished for that halfpint sheriff in the big hat right then. This Lake Itasca place, not much more than a wide spot in the road, didn't look like it had any such. I could tell that the driver was antsy about the delay it would take to deal with the criminal, and come right down to it, I did not want my trip, complicated enough as it was, to be hung up that way either.

"Naw, let him go," I said, sick of it all. When the driver turned the thieving so-and-so loose--my swearing vocabulary wasn't up to the description he deserved--he swaggered off in the direction of the cafe, adjusting his suit, careful not to look back. The garden club ladies cooed at me in concern, but I only looked at the bus driver with a long sigh. "Can I get something out of my suitcase again?"

*pursed
over*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Retrieving one of the Mounds from a coat pocket, I noisily unwrapped it, crumpling the wrapper as loudly as possible while I munched away. No result on the sleeper.

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

another

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

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

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

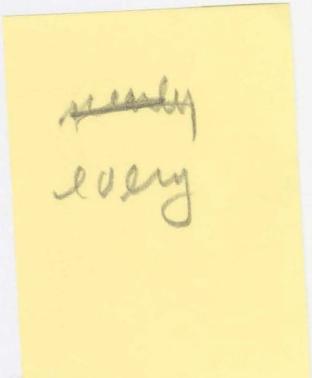
Here goes nothing fom nowhere, this one of Gram's old standards was more encouraging, and I was perilously up and with one leg spraddled over his round midriff as if mounting a horse from the wrong side, when the fact struck me. *Moron, there aren't any empty seats.* I'd have to stand up all the while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

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

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

"Twenty minute stop, folks."

The driver's droning announcement that we could disembark if we so wished and take advantage of the conveniences of the Greyhound terminal jerked me out of a nightmare, not knowing where I was. It was one of those bad dreams where you try to hide but never get anywhere, in this case in some big awful building where Wendell Willianson was after me, but evrey time I ran down a long hallway or up a staircase, he would barge out of a room and demand, "*Where's that arrowhead? Hand it over or I'll tell your folks.*" Groggily I looked up and down the aisle of the bus, trying to come to grips with my surroundings. Then looked again, blinking to see whether I still was in a dream, not a good one.



The Indians had vanished. Likewise the oilfield crew. The passenger load was down to a precious few, myself and one of those tourist couples out to

see the world on the cheap and a man in a gabardine suit of the kind county extension agents and livestock buyers wore. All the rest of the seats, including the one next to me, were as empty as a bare cupboard.

I couldn't get my bearings. The bus already had slowed to a town speed, we must be nearly to a depot and those conveniences, but this was no drop stop as Chinook or Fort Belknap would be. I whirled to see out the window to the street. A Stockman Bar, a Mint Bar, a Rexall Drug, a Buttrey's grocery, those could be anywhere. Then I spotted a storefront window with the oldfashioned lettering, GLASGOW TOGGERY--MEN'S WEAR AND MORE. Glasgow! I had slept away a sizable portion of Montana. The Indians, including my seatmate whom I had only managed to coax the single word "Howdy" out of, long since must have got off back on the reservation, the oil roughnecks likewise somewhere along the way. I felt ridiculously cheated, yet with no one to blame but myself. Staying awake on a once-in-a-lifetime journey should not be that hard a job, I could about hear Gram chiming in on my sense of guilt.

Kicking myself about all the unfulfilled pages of the autograph book and the lost chance to palaver about the black arrowhead, I scrambled off for the rest room the moment the bus door whished open, vowing to get the Kwik Klik into action from here on, no matter what it took.

When passengers filed on again, things looked more promising, several fresh faces, although no obvious Indians. I was nothing if not determined, singling out seats I could pop in and out of as the autograph book and I made the rounds. Itching to start, I waited impatiently for the driver to finish some paperwork he was doing on his lap. All at once, I saw him look up in surprise, spring the bus door open, and address someone outside.

"Afternoon, Sheriff. Prize customer?"

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

Sheriff. Prisoner. The stony lonesome, which meant jail. I sat up sharply.

Sure enough, up into the bus stepped a rangy man with strong features and dark expressive eyebrows and a set mouth as if he was on a mission. He looked like he could carry a sixgun natural as anything, and know the right way to use it.

He, though, unfortunately was not the sheriff, according to the handcuffs on his wrists. Right behind him came a sawed-off guy not much more than half his size, wearing the biggest kind of crow-black Stetson and a star badge. "Here, Romeo," the runty one directed. "Across from the kid will do."

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

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

"Yeah! How come you take him by bus?"

The lawman grimaced as if he'd been asking himself that very question. "My deputy's out on a domestic dispute call, and the jail's full of rangutang drunks from Saturday night. Not the way I want, doing this by Hound," he looked around the bus with distaste, which sort of bothered me as a full-fledged passenger by now. "But it'd be just like the dimwit to bail out of the patrol car if I drove him. Tried that last time, didn't you, Harv."

"We weren't going that fast."

The sheriff laughed nastily. "Not gonna be bailing out of the bus, are you?"

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the cash in the world, but at the time a cup of coffee cost only a dime, as did that stimulant for the younger set like me, comic books, and a movie could be seen for a quarter, and a pair of blue jeans would set you back two bucks and a half at most. It's funny how dollars and cents can change so much from then till now, but that's the story of money.

Be that as it may, besides providing me with a little to spend during the Wisconsin stay--"mad money," Gram's words for it probably fitting my tendencies all too accurately--the shirt stash was meant to outfit me with school clothes back there to come home with, as well. School clothes were a big deal then, no real family wanting to look stingy about it. So, scraping that much cash together to send me off with was no easy thing--it amounted to half of Gram's last monthly paycheck from the tight fist of Sparrowhead--and that's why I had firm instructions from her to stretch the pocket fiver through the trip by confining lunches to a sandwich. No milkshakes, no pieces of pie, no bottles of pop, in other words no getting rambunctious with the tantalizing fivespot,

Which sounded okay in theory, but less so in a a thronged bus depot when I was hungry as a wolf. Wouldn't you know that the lunch counter, offering greasy hamburgers if a person did not want runny egg salad sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, was jampacked by the time I gocould get there and service was slow as ring-around-the-rosy. Havre really needed Letty.

Desperately looking around as my stomach growled for something to be done, I spied the newsstand that sold magazines and cigarettes and other sundries. Gram had not thought to say anything about candy bars.

I hurried over, one eye on the clock. No one else was buying anything, but the gum-chewing woman clerk had to tend to freight parcels as well as the candy counter, and it took a very long couple of minutes to get her to wait on me. "A Mounds bar, please"--dark chocolate with coconut inside, you can't beat that--

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I said rapidly as I could. Then I remembered that suppertime would not be until North Dakota, as distant to me as the cheese side of the moon. "Make it three."

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

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

Oh man, here was my chance! A seatmate I could talk to about all kinds of Indian things! The Fort Belknap Reservation was somewhere in this part of Montana, and he and the Indian families taking up about half the bus must be headed home there. My head buzzed with the sensation of double luck. Here delivered right to me was not only someone really great for the autograph book, but who could palaver--that's what Indians did, didn't they?--with me about the black arrowhead if I went about it right. What a break! Gram's view of Indians, I knew, was that maybe they weren't always smart, but they were generally wise. Just from the look of him, I was sure as anything that this one would have the wisdom to know about obsidian and where an arrow point made of it came from.

"Hi!" I chirped as I joined him.

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

The bus lurched into immediate motion, as if my fanny hitting the cushion was the signal to go, and I settled into eating my candy bar and sneaking looks

sideways at my traveling companion. He was dressed not all that different from me, in bluejeans and a western shirt with snap buttons. All resemblance ended there, though, because his buckskin face could have posed for the one on nickels, and then there were those braids, even. I envied him his straw cowboy hat, beat-up and curled almost over on itself at the brim and darkly sweat-stained from what I would have bet was life on one of the small ranches scattered around on the reservation, riding appaloosa horses and hunting antelope and dancing at pow-wows and a million other things that beat anything I had been through at the Double W.

Mind your manners no matter what, so people won't think you were born in a barn, I could all but hear Gram reciting in my ear, and so I politely turned away to the window to wait until we were out of town and freewheeling toward the reservation before striking up a conversation about him being an Indian and my second name or nickname or whatever it was being Red Chief. That ought to get the palaver going. Then when obsidian arrowheads became the topic, should I tell him, just sort of casually, that I had one in my suitcase? For all I knew, possessing such a rarity maybe made a person special in the tribe. Possibly I was already a sort of honorary chieftain and didn't know it, from whatever sacred quality--to me, that meant pretty much the same as magic--a glistening dark treasure like that carried.

Yet there was another consideration, wasn't there. While I was surer than sure that Wendell Williamson did not deserve an arrowhead older than Columbus, what about the Indians from that time on? What if my braided seatmate were to tell me the black arrowhead was a lucky piece that they worshiped, and there was a whole long story about how tough life had been for Indians ever since it was lost? I'd feel bad about having it. I decided I'd better play it safe at first and start with his autograph.

"To tell the truth, I don't see how."

"Damn right you don't. You're on a one-way ticket back to behind bars and that's that."

"You needn't be quite so tickled about it. I'm not exactly a public enemy, am I."

"Oh, hurting your feelings, am I. Ain't that just too damn bad."

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

"I explained that, Carl," the prisoner drawled. "My girlfriend Letty waits tables in Great Fallsa. How else am I supposed to get to see her?"

"I KNOW HER! Leticia, I mean, it was right there in pink!"

My bray startled both men, their heads whipping around to scrutinize me. "She was here on the bus, see," I gave out the news as fast as I could talk, "so I met her and we talked for a long way and she was really nice to me, boy, she's a piece of work." I reported further to the surprised prisoner, "She told me all about you, sort of. The trucker part."

"Oh, swell," the sheriff said sardonically. "Now she's running around the countryside too. What is it about you two, claustrophobia?"

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The prisoner ignored the sarcasm, leaning forward to see around the sheriff, sunlight glinting off his handcuffs. Those aside, he intently questioned me as if he was the one handling the case of himself and Letty,: "Why was she on the bus, my friend? Start at the beginning."

With both of them fixedly looking at me nonstop across the aisle, it seemed a good time to keep the beginning close to the end. "She got sick and tired of uppity customers at the Buster hotel, so she's gonna try Havre."

"Havre." The men looked at each other as if that was the bottom of the barrel.

Harv recovered enough to maintain, "Letty'd have her reasons."

"Eh, her," the sheriff scoffed. "The cause of all this. Isn't that so, loverboy?"

"Only because you arrested me when I was on my way to go see her in Great Falls, before Havre came up," the prisoner said, patient as paint. "I was hitchhiking just fine until I had to stop for a bite to eat."

"For crying out loud," his captor groused, "I leave the office for lunch at the Highliner Cafe like usual, and there you come waltzing up the street, big as life. What was I supposed to do?"

"You could have looked down the street."

"Oh, sure, let a jailbreaker run around loose, even if it's you," the sheriff shook his head in disgust. A mean little smile crept in after that expression. "Anyway, this Letty sounds like she isn't waiting for you, Harv old kid."

"We'll fetch up together, sooner or later," the big quiet man in cuffs vowed calmly, and jailbreaker notwithstanding, I found myself pulling for that to be true.

The sheriff sighed in exasperation. "You're being a fool for love, worst kimd. Honest to God, Harv, if brains was talcum powder, you couldn't work up a sneeze."

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

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

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

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

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

"There 'tis, Carl. What's left of the river, hmm?"

"Shut up, Harv, I don't need to hear about it." Sounding fit to be tied, the sheriff shot a look over to where I still was taking in everything wide-eyed, and growled, "We're just past Fort Peck Dam, lamebrain is talking about." His mouth twisted. "Franklin Delano Roosevelt didn't think the Missouri River worked

slumped

good enough by itself, so he stuck in a king hell bastard of a dam," a new piece of cussing for me to tuck away.

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

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

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

So much for the value of the unvarnished truth.

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

I may as well tell the rest of the Cameron family story, what there is of it.

My mother, teenage girl with soft eyes and fashionably bobbed dark hair according to the Brownie box camera photos from the time, was waitressing there at the damsite in an around-the-clock cafe where Gram was day cook. I imagine Gram met it with resignation, much as she had met roustabout Pete Blegen in the

Dorothy
Smythe

cook tent of a Glacier Park roadwork construction camp twenty years earlier, when her daughter Peggy fell for the cocky young catskinner across the counter. Fell right into at least one of his capable arms, I can guarantee, because this livewire who became my father always had a necker knob, the gizmo that clamped onto the steering wheel for handy one-fisted driving, on every car he ever owned, from Model A to final Ford pickup.

Marriage came quick, and so did I. I had my footings poured, to use the Fort Peck term, in a thrown-together shacktown called Palookaville. Later, whenever we were living at some construction site or another in crude housing, my parents would think back to that time of a drafty tarpaper shack between us and weather of sixty below, and say, "Well, it beats Palookaville anyway." Once the Fort Peck work shut down for good, we began a life of roving the watersheds along the Rockies. My father was six feet of restlessness and after the Depression there were irrigation and reservoir projects booming in practically every valley under the mountains, where a man who knew his stuff when it came to operating heavy equipment could readily find work. For her part, my mother learned bookkeeping, and jointly employable Bud and Peg Cameron moved from one construction camp to the next, with me in tow.

The war interrupted this pattern. In 1943 my father went in--enlisted or drafted, I have never known; it is one of the mysteries of him--and at Omaha Beach on D-Day he was badly shot up in the legs. He spent months in a hospital in England where surgeons put in rods and spliced portions of tendon from elsewhere in him into his knees and on down. Eventually he came home to my mother and me, at least to Fort Harrison hospital in Helena where he advanced from casts to crutches to learning to walk again. Perhaps it says most about my father that he went right back to being a catskinner, even though you operate a bulldozer as much with your legs, working the brake pedals, as with your hands.

Whatever it cost him in pain and endurance, Bud Cameron never veered from that chosen line of work, and in a way his stubborn climb from a cripple's life summed up our family situation, because we were always getting on our feet. Money was tight when earthmoving jobs shut down for the winter, and Montana winters are long. Hopping to whatever water project was first to hire 'skimmers when the ground thawed, with me attending whatever one-room school happened to be anywhere around, my folks had hopes of moving up from wages to contracting projects on their own. They had managed to take out a loan on a D-10 Caterpillar dozer and were on their way to the Cat dealer in Great Falls to sign the final papers, when the drunk driver veered across the center line on the Two Medicine hill.

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

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

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

"No! The other way around! I mean, Gram and me got kicked out of the cookhouse and so we don't have anywhere, and she's sending me off to these people like I told you for someplace to go, honest!"

Characters in the funnies sometimes act out a situation to the fullest and whenever the "Just Trampin'" hobo PeeWee and his buddies encountered a sheriff like this, they squawked, "*Yeeps! It's the constabulary!*" and their hair stood on end. I can't prove the top of my head was a red pompadour reaching for the sky, but it felt that way as I faced the scowling little lawman across the aisle. I was as



dumbfounded as I was scared. Could a person be arrested for riding a Greyhound bus? And if so, would my suitcase be searched? How could I explain the obviously precious black arrowhead to a sheriff already full of suspicion? *It's really mine, see, because I found it, but my grandmother made me hand it over to Sparrowhead and so I got it back when he wouldn't let me stay on the ranch and--* That sounded fishy even to me, let alone a skeptical law enforcement officer. Then and there, with that star badge full in my face, the consequences of my impulsive grab off the show-off table at the Double W went through me like a fever spasm. I could howl to high heaven maintaining that in pocketing the rare arrowhead I was only retrieving what was rightfully mine, finder, keeper. But Wendell Williamson never in his stingy life was going to accept being loser, weeper.

Afflicted as I was by something I'd done without thinking, now I had to strain my brain for how to head off the inquisitive sheriff. The prisoner sent me a knowing look of sympathy that didn't help. Somehow I needed to dodge incrimination by proving I actually was going to visit relatives like I'd said. "Here, see?" Frantically I dug out the autograph book from my jacket pocket and produced the slip of paper Gram had written the Wisconsin address on.

Still spooked to my eyeballs, I held my breath as the sheriff studied Gram's spidery handwriting. If he was overly suspicious of what he held in his hand and hauled me back to Gros Ventre and turned me over to the authorities there without her on hand to straighten things out, to me that was the first awful step to becoming an orphan, permanently a handed-around outcast by any other name. Worse yet, with "thief" added on if Wendell Williamson learned I was back and went to those same authorities about me taking the arrowhead. My whole life to come teetered on a scrap of paper.

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

The prisoner Harv rumbled a laugh. "How old do you always say you were, when you set out on your own? Barely out of short pants, right?"

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

Although I was still shaky from the close call, my impulse was to get back to an even footing as a legitimate Greyhound passenger if I possibly could.

Screwing up my courage, I took a gamble. "Uh, sir?" I tried to keep the squeak out of my voice. "I've never had anything to do with a sheriff before, so how about signing my autograph book for me, please, will you, huh?"

That seemed to amuse him no end. "Kind of a feisty squirt, hnn?" he cackled. "I can believe you was hatched at Fort Peck." In the next blink, though, habit or something set in and he made a face and pushed away the opened album I was trying to give him. "I don't have time for foolishness."

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

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

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

Harvey
snapped

--Carl Kinnick, Sheriff, Hill County, Montana

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

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

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

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

Reading it with a pinched look, the sheriff at first couldn't seem to believe his eyes, saying to himself, "Huh. Huh." Finishing, he burst out: "Harv, you're hopeless! That's schoolhouse mush if I ever saw any."

Unperturbed, Harv stated, "Letty is worth every word of it."

Spitting out "Huh" again, the sheriff sourly passed the opened album for me to take in the painstakingly shaped words.

I'm in love with a lovely miss.

She's this.

the like

kind at

of look

a you

girl

Holy wow, I thought to myself, that pretty well describes Letty except for the pink stitching.

The sheriff was still expressing disgust with his prisoner. "What jailhouse wall did you learn that off of, loverboy?"

"Below decks on a troop carrier in the Guam invasion, along with 'Kilroy Was Here,' if you really want to know," Harv told him instructively.

Somewhere amid their back and forth and my thrilled admiring of his construction on the page, I finally fully took in the signature beneath..

Harvey Kinnick, serving time in this life.

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

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

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

cut
Kilroy

aren't

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A landing craft?" Turk whistled through his teeth, looking at me a different way. "Out the far end!" he exclaimed, which took me a moment to savvy as soldier talk for outstanding and then some. "D-Day was hairy. Came back in one piece, did he? Listen up, Mick."

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

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

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

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

That
hurtled
me

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

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

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

So, there it went, again. Out of my mouth something unexpected, not strictly true but harmlessly made up. A storying, maybe it could be called. For I still say it was not so much that I was turning into an inveterate liar around strangers, I simply was overflowing with invention. The best way I can explain it is that I was turned loose from myself. Turned loose, not by choice, from the expected behavior of being "a good kid," which I was always a little restless about anyway. "You're being a storier," Gram would warn whenever I got carried away spinning a tale about one thing or another. Now, with no check on my enthusiasm when it started playing tricks upstairs in me--the long bus trip seemed to invite daydreaming, mine merely done out loud--I was surprising myself with the creations I could come up with. I mean, what is imagination but mental mischief of a kind, and why can't a youngster, particularly one out on his own, protectively occupy himself with invention of that sort before maturity works him over? One thing sure, the soldiers on their way to their own mindstretchng version of life ahead did not doubt my manufactured one in the least.

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

*NOW THAT SOUNDS PRETTY GOOD.**Gordon Jones**General Nuisance, US Army*

*Mickey O'Fallon is my name
America is my nation
Butte, Montana, is my home
Korea is my destination*

Like the Turk one had said, Out the far end! Three fresh pages of inscriptions, just like that. Now, though, I faced a dilemma. Stretch my luck and go back for Kwik Klik tidbits from other passengers, or quit while I was ahead? The bus was belting along through nondescript country with nothing much to show for itself except a brushy creek and flat buttes, so Havre or any place else was not in the picture for a while yet, and I had time if I wanted to brave the gauntlet of strangers again. But if I wasn't mistaken, the nun had looked about ready to pounce as I hustled past from keeping company with the swearing soldiers. Was it worth it to risk falling into her clutches, or for that matter, end up with some talky tourist bunch like the ladies' club on the Chevy bus?

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

Making up my mind, I leaned way forward to the crack between the seats. I could just see the side of the woman's face as she smoked away, eyes down on her movie magazine.

"Uh, can I bother you?" I spoke into the narrow gap. "Talk to you about something, I mean? It'll only take a jiffy. Honest."

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

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

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

Uncomfortably I owned up to "Almost."

"Takes some getting used to, especially in the sitdown bones," she said with a breezy laugh. Just then a flashy Cadillac of the kind called a greenback special--Wendell Williamson had one like it, of course--passed us like the wind. "What has big ears and chases cars?" she playfully sent my way, not really asking. "A Greyhound full of elephants."

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

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

expression, I rattled out my pursuit of autographs to remember my trip by, producing the creamy album in evidence.

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

A flea and a fly in a flue

Were caught, what could they do?

"Let us flee," said the fly.

"Let us fly," said the flea.

So they flew through a flaw in the flue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't need 'em for either one," she said offhandedly. "They're just windowpane."

"So why do you wear them ever?"

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

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

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

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

*Life is a zigzag journey, they say,
Not much straight and easy on the way.
But the wrinkles in the map, explorers know,
Smooth out like magic at the end of where we go.*

“That’s pretty deep for me,” I admitted, so far from the end of my unwanted journey that I could not foresee anything remotely like magic smoothing the way. More like a rocky road ahead, among people as foreign to me as a jungle tribe. Still, I did not want to hurt her feelings and resorted to, “You really know how to write.”

“Learned that ditty in school, along with the one about burning your candle at both ends. Funny how certain things stick with you,” she mused as I was reluctantly about to thank her and excuse myself to get up and leave. But then froze, staring fully into the autograph book. “What’s the matter, kiddo?” she asked offhandedly, her next cigarette on the way to her lips. “Did I spell something wrong?”

What had stopped me cold was her signature. *Letty Minetti.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A jolt went through me like touching the hot wire of something electric.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aw river, maybe."

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

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

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

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

trucker, Harv, I got a little involved with. He's a piece of work," she grinned saying it. "The strong silent type, except when he really has something to say and then it's right on the money. Ever see Gregory Peck in *The Gunfighter*? No? Too bad, because that's Harv to the life." Her face clouded a little. "Only problem is, he's a little hard to keep up with because he's on the road so much, trucking here and there. But when he's around, sparks fly."

"Holy wow," I said as if I knew anything about such matters. "He sounds like a real boyfriend."

"Real as they come." She blew a smoke ring. "We're more or less engaged, or will be when that husband of mine gets it through his head to agree to a divorce." Dabbing the ash off her cigarette, she mused, "Haven't seen Harv lately, wherever he's been. Had to leave word for him at the Buster that I've moved on to Hav-err." Then her grin came back. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all that, huh? Harv's good at catching up on things."

"I bet he is," I endorsed him sight unseen, talented as he sounded in areas a little beyond me. "Anyway, what's done is done," she said briskly. "You ought to have that in your book." She mashed out the latest cigarette. "Hey, enough of the story of my life. How's Dorie these days? Why isn't she with you?"

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

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

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

Quiet,
Not
then,
very

trick

"Ever been kissed?"

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

"Besides nighty-night?"

"Uh, not really, I guess."

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

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

We broke apart, her first. "There you go, kiddo, that's for luck." Grinning broadly, she opened the compact again to show me myself plastered with the red imprint of her lips, as if I needed any evidence, before tenderly wiping away the lipstick with her hanky. "First of many smackeroos in your career," she said huskily, "you'll get good at it. Betsa bootsies you will. Now you better scoot back to your own seat, sugar, we're just about there." That was true of her and the pink tittytatting that pointed the way. I still was trying to catch up with the dizzying twists and turns of the day.

mat

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

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

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

He gave me one of those *Now what?* looks, the same as when he'd punched my ticket and realized I was traveling by myself at my age.

Straightening up, he asked with a frown, "Not parting company with us, are you? There's no refund once you're checked onto the bus, sonny."

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

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

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

been within immediate reach, to keep me always with them no matter how unhandy the circumstances.

So, right then it did not seem at all imaginary that life was turning against me, Gram and me both, to an awful extent. I resented the human plumbing or whatever it was in her case that produced this situation. If that nun back there playing with her beads or whatever wanted to do something useful, why didn't she pray up a better system of women's insides so a boy wouldn't worry himself sick about losing his grandmother, all he had, to some kind of operation?

And getting booted out of the cook shack and off the ranch like we were nobody--if that wasn't enough cause for resentment, I didn't know what qualified. I could have driven that stacker team in haying time just fine, and if Wendell Williamson didn't think so, he needed his sparrow head examined.

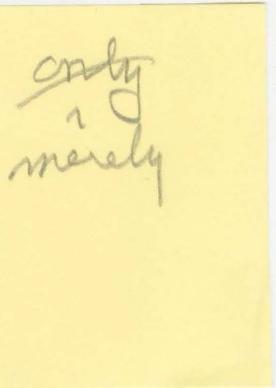
The list didn't stop there. These shirttail relatives I was going to be stuck with for an endless summer--why hadn't this Kitty and Dutch pair ever visited us, so I'd at least know what they looked like? Even if they were dried-up old coots who probably kept their teeth in a glass at night, as I figured they must be, it would have helped if I could picture them at all.

Branded
by name

I could have gone on and on like that, nose against the window and feeling sorry for myself, but that gets old, too. Stirring myself so plowed fields would not bore me out of my skull, to be doing anything I took out the autograph book. It opened to *In the game of life, don't lose your marbles*. Right. If you were lucky enough to own any marbles to start with. Moodily I moved on from the Double W brand of advice, flipping to the front of the book. Naturally, Gram's was the very first inscription. Wouldn't a person think, in a nice autograph book that she'd spent real money for, she would have carefully written something like *To my one and only grandson...* Instead, in her scrawl that barely did for grocery lists:

responses to my seatmate, this first leg of the journey was something like a tour of spots of my existence since I was old enough to remember. Leaving behind Gros Ventre and its green covering of cottonwoods, Highway 89 wound past the southmost rangeland of the Two Medicine country, with Double W cattle pastured even here wherever there were not sheepherders' white wagons and the gray spread of ewes and lambs on the foothills in the distance. Above it all, the familiar sawtooth outline of the Rocky Mountains notched the horizon on into Canada. There where the South Fork of English Creek emerged from a canyon, during the Rainbow Reservoir construction job my folks and I crammed into a humpbacked trailer house built for barely two. I had to sleep on the bench seat in back of the table, almost nose to nose with my parents squeezed into their bunk. But the thrill of being right there as bulldozer operators such as my father--the honest-to-goodness one, I mean--rode their big yellow machines like cowboys while building the dam that bottled the creek into the newest lake on earth never wore off.

Next on the route of remembering, however, butted up against a rocky butte right at the county line as if stuck as far out of sight as possible, a nightmare of a place reappeared, the grim rambling lodginghouse and weatherbeaten outbuildings of the county poorfarm--we pronounced it that way, one word, as if to get rid of it fast. Once upon a time my father had graded the gravel road into the place and dozed out ditches and so on while my mother and I spent creepy days watching out a cabin window at the shabby inmates, that lowest saddest category of people, wards of the county, pottering listlessly at work that wasn't real work, just tasks to make them do something. Seeing past the talkative woman to that frightening institution again where the unluckiest ended up gave me the shivers, but I found I could not take my eyes off the poorfarm and what it stood for. In most ways I was just a dippy kid, but some things get to a person at



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

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

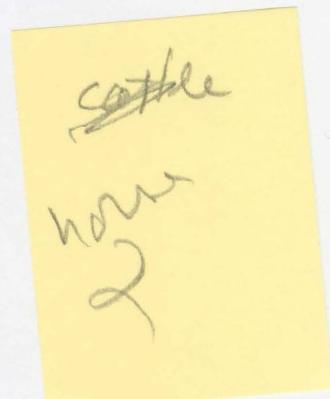
"Yeah, well, that's sort of what I had in mind," I fumbled out. "It's just, you know, I have everybody else's."

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

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

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

"I don't blame Meredice for scooting off to California every chance she gets," Gram sympathized wholly with the current lady of the house, "it's like



course, remained to be determined, but I was working at it. And this next autograph request counted double, in a sense.

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

Only to slow to a halt as ever at the display table in the hallway nook. The show-off table, Gram called it, there to impress visitors with items discovered on the ranch from pockets of the past. I never passed without looking the fascinating assortment over. A powder horn and bullet pouch from the days of the fur trappers. A long-shanked jinglebob spur a cowboy lost on a trail drive from Texas. A big bone of some beast no longer seen on earth. All things like that until the array of Indian stuff, spearpoints and hide scrapers and flint skinning knives and other remnants of buffalo hunts long before Double W cattle grazed the same land. And resting there prime amid those, the object I longed for, the dark black arrowhead that was my find.

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

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

things

Saturday came, 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 and sit me down me for on elong last canasta drill. Instead, not even stirring from her set position at the kitchen table in her flannel robe and fuzzy slippers she let me know in no uncertain terms that she was going to do some housecleaning 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." Jiggling 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*. "Schmidt, 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 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 Georgrphics*. "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 wasthe movie theater with a marquee full of colored lightbulbs brightly spelling ot the curent show, TOMAHAWK with Van Heflin and Yvonne DeCarlo, until I remembered I was broke.

As Herman puttered 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?"

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 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 pottered 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 hanks of rope in every twist and turn of sailors' knots imaginable. 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."

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 suppertime 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. I ignored the deadly plaque on the wall as best I could, and 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, 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-quite-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 interminable time, until I convinced myself the sleepers had not heard. What I was after had to be somewhere in here. Aunt Kate's purse hung on a clothes rack next to the door, but I knew better than to go into it, she would keep track every cent she was carrying in it. No, in every 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. Normally kept in a kitchen cabinet, 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.

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 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 came across a toggle that switched on a small bulb, perfect for my purpose. Now I could dimly pick out objects in the room, but amid the stacks of cloth and sewing books and such, nothing like a change jar showed itself.

My last hope was the low cabinet next to the sewing machine to hold thread and attachments and maybe more. I quietly as possible 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 into the scene. This was it, coins loose and rattling to the touch, nickels, dimes, even pennies, and quarters, quarters, quarters. My heart rate and breathing both went up wildly. There was so much accumulated small silver a mere two dollars and fifty cents missing would hardly make a dent in it. Biting my lip in concentration, I sorted out onto the platform of the sewing machine about the same proportion of quarters and dimes and nickels to make the drawer's holdings seems as even as ever. 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 those fuzzy slippers which were noiseless on the living room rug. At first my tongue did fail me as I stared at her 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, didn't she. So why can't I?"

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

"And you also said you and Herman were headed for the poorhouse, but you have emoney you just throw in a drawer."

--will you listen, please.

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

"This does not concern you.

"I live here, Donny lives here, and as far as anybody in whole wide world knows, he is my grandnephew too." I couldn't see the tangle in the middle of hat sentence

"I had my folks," flew out of my mouth

"Of course, I didn't know them." Of course not. She'd have had to get in a car and actually come see us in Montana.

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

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

"Oh, that again."

She gave me a sly little look from the corner of her eye. "You've already been on a 'medicine' visit with the thirsty Mr. Schmidt, haven't you."

"I told you and told you..."

"Pack your things. I'm sending you home."

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

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

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

"I think you're a storier."

I could tell she did not mean that in any good way. "W-why do you say that?"

"That tale about your OO."

"A person doesn't want to have a pie hole mouth."

That really hurt. That meant a mouth large enough to take in most of a pie at once; in other words, a big mouth.

Now who had a pie hole mouth?

"This hurts me as much as it does you," which was something people usually said when that wasn't the case at all. "I wrote to your grandmother saying I have to send you back. I didn't tell you before now because I didn't want you to be upset."

Back where?

"I've packed your things for you and your suitcase is in the car. We'll have to be on our way to make the bus."

"You can't! They're gonna put me somewhere! An orphanage!"

"That's--that's not certain," "We have to think 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 stop to the orphanage. To make sure, I went to the county OO here and got a list of such places in Great Falls. It's all there. Your grandmother will only have to fill out a form or two." Or whoever was in charge of wards of the county.

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.

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 bitses, 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 mystrerious 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, orphanasge 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

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?"

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

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 ooden 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

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."

17

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

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

"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 tentlike dress, rose-patterned on white today. "What I want is that lawn chair. Free and for nothing and with not even a fee, as the saying is." All three tittered at that. Then Herta sighed and consoled herself with a nibble. "I've been saving up and saving up, but it's a slow process."

"You watch and see," Gerda put in, "you'll be eligible for that lawn chair about the time a foot of snow comes. I'm with Kitty, those silly stamps aren't worth the trouble. It's your draw, snickelfritz," and bang, we were right back at

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.

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 stakes 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 *chirrups* 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 chirrups, discarded an ace of spades. Immediately she went into flutters and the full act of "Oh, did I play that card? I didn't mean to!"

She made as if to pick it up, which Aunt Kate headed off 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.

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 wih 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 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 have 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?"

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 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 was 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 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 whateve 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.

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, we'll do as usual and play two out of three."

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, she praised my new powers of concentration and confidence and what she unknowingly termed a better feel for canasta, amazed at the progress I had made. "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?"

That and whatever could be squeezed out of a lucky arrowhead and a French Bible.

"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.

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 shooing 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

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 Georgrphics*. "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 wasthe movie theater with a marquee full of colored lightbulbs brightly spelling ot the curent show, TOMAHAWK with Van Heflin and Yvonne DeCarlo, until I remembered I was broke.

As Herman puttered 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?"

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 pottered 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."

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, saying "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?"

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"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?"

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

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"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.

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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."

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"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.

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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."

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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.

Saturday came, 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 and sit me down for on¹ elong last canasta drill. Instead, not even stirring from her set position at the kitchen table in her flannel robe and fuzzy slippers she let me know in no uncertain terms that she was going to do some housecleaning 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." Jiggling the car keys, he halted across the kitchen table from her. "Donny can go with, why not?"

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I went through that day of Aunt Kate's 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 suppertime 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. They ignored the deadly plaque on the wall as best they could, and 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 to go out into the dark of war to forage, but I did make myself wait, tingling to go and do it, until long after everything went quiet.

Finally swinging out of bed, I hurried into my clothes, slipped into the moccasins, and padded across the room. Cracked the door open, listening for any sound downstairs. There was none whatsoever except that nighttime not-quite-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 interminable time, until I convinced myself the sleepers had not heard. By then my eyes adjusted to the dark and I could dimly pick out objects in the room. What I was after had to be somewhere in here. I hobbled over to where the sewing machine was located, near the window where the streetlight helped out a little. Next to the fancy Singer machine was a low cabinet to hold thread and sewing instruments. And a stash containing the canasta winnings I was deprived of? Come on, Aunt Kate, stand and deliver, as a pistolero would say when holding up a stagecoach in Karl May land.

I felt around in the cabinet drawers, encountering spool after spool of thread and countless attachments for the sewing machine, until finally my fingers dipped into a drawer that jingled when I opened it. This was it, coins loose and rattling to the touch, and if my sense of feel was not mistaken, three or four rolls of what in all likelihood were quarters. My heart rate and breathing both went up wildly. The next piece of luck I needed was from the sewing machine, and yes, on a model this fancy my blind search ultimately came across a switch that turned on a small light beneath the arm of the machine to shine down on close work Perfect for my purpose. Carefully I scooped a handful of the coins onto the flat surface where material was fed to the needle and fingered through the spill of silver in the cone of light. Huh. Not only quarters, but nickels and dimes. That stalled me, because it meant the stash was where Aunt Kate kept her change from shopping, not simply the canasta stakes. If I knew anything about her by now, it was that she would of every cent, chickenfeed or not, that passed through her hands, and would surely miss two and a half dollars worth of quarters.

I stewed on that problem for a minute until I thought of the rolls of quarters. Pulling one out to examine it in the light, I was rewarded with the printing on the

paper wrapping, QUARTERS COURTESY OF FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF
MANITOWOC \$10. Forty coins in a roll, and I only needed ten.

The eye-dea, in Herman terms, shaped itself in me s I pawed through the chickenfeed currency on the sewing machine platform.

Just one more step to be done: The incriminating remainder of the mitt and its mate I would have to conceal under the trash in the garbage can in the morning, but I'd be up way earlier than anyone else, no problem. It seemed only fair, since that was where the Kate had tossed my shirt and money. As to what would happen when winter came and she couldn't find the mittens, things got lost in closets all the time, right?

Who knows if luck had anything to do with it, but back upstairs, with the arrowhead ready and waiting in its ideal pouch, I slumbered so soundly that for once I would be telling Aunt Kate the absolute truth when I said I slept like a charm.

"I moved your suitcase. And it jingled. Where did you get all these?"

"Playing canasta."

"I told you and told you..."

"Pack your things. I'm sending you home."

"I think you're a storier."

I could tell she did not mean that in any good way. "W-why do you say that?"

"That tale about your 00."

he had bought me a tablet with stiff backing, envelopes and stamps, everything needed "for you to write like a good boy." Then, of course, it was up to me, the shameless storier as Aunt Kate characterized it. As towns and their convenience stops came and went--Fond du Lac, Eau Claire, Menomonie, the Twin Cities where I made damn sure we caught the next bus in plenty of time--I composed letter upon letter describing how my summer in the company of Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch was supposedly going. Creating my ghost self, I suppose it could be said, existing with the Manitowocers roaming around in the afterlife.

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

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

at
carefully
note
interval
(reprise)

my pretended summer on the Lake Michigan shore where Manitou held sway. *Aunt Kitty and I went to the museum. It was real interesting, full of Indian stuff....*

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

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

Those waking dreams that proved real, I should say, were not always mocassined and feathered. One sought me out me that first night of our journey, in the most ordinary of dog bus circumstances. As happens in the monotony of night travel, passengers up and down the aisle had gradually nodded off until the bus was

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stilled to the sounds sleeping people make, Herman leading the chorus, and while I dozed off and on, I was too keyed up by our daring escape from Aunt Kate and all she represented to really conk off. Somewhere in the long stretch beyond the Twin Cities to the even longer stretch of South Dakota, around three in the morning, I came to once again, with a strange little comet of light joining my reflection in the pitch-black window beside me. Blinking at its mysterious appearance there, I realized it was coming from inside the bus rather than up in the sky.

I sat up to look around, and across from us where a couple who must have got on at a recent stop were sitting, a narrow beam of light poked down into the lap of the man in the aisle seat. The woman next to him was curled up kittenishly as she slept, while he was writing for all he was worth, just like I'd been during the day, but into a slick-looking hardbound notebook with sky-blue pages. While the rest of the bus was thoroughly dark, his fancy writing gear was illuminated by that tiny spotlight from someplace. At first I couldn't figure it out, but as my eyes adjusted, I realized he had a pen light, about the size of my Kwik Klik, clipped to his shirt collar and aimed down. This stranger was writing like a demon, whatever it was, his hand never stopping to change or erase anything, a lit-up page no sooner filled than he flipped to the next and was giving it his all.

Hot diggity dog. This was too good to pass up. I nudged Herman awake with a start. "Hsst. Trade seats with me."

"Ja, sure," he mumbled drowsily, and we switched in that clownish way when there is not enough room to maneuver. Herman at once slumped against the window and back into slumber. He'd have to sleep for both of us, I was not going to miss out on this. More wide awake than ever, I half hung over the arm of the seat, in a way designed to catch the man's attention.

