same, back there." I suppose trying to be civil, he drawled, "Come to say 'Aw river,' have you?"

The joke about "Au revoir," if that was what it was, went over my head. "Uh, not exactly," I stammered in spite of myself. "It's about something else." He waited expressionlessly for me to get it out. Heaven only knew what rash requests had been heard in this office down through the years by one poker-faced Double W boss or the next. None quite like mine, though. "What it is, I want to get your autograph."

Suspicious I was making fun of him for booting us out of the cook shack, he gave me a beady look. I quickly displayed the autograph book. "I've already got Mered--Mrs. Williamson's."

That did not seem to cut any ice with him. Before he could say anything, I hurriedly added: "And the Major's."

That, now, registered on him. The old gentleman, as Gram called the elder Williamson, showed up from New York only a time or two each year, but his presence changed the feel of the ranch, as if Wendell's wiser father--actually his uncle--had taken charge. Silver-haired and tailored to the last thread, with the limp of a wounded war hero, a handsome man even with age on him and tragic story trailing him--the bunkhouse gossip I managed to pick up on was that he lost the love of his life to a famous colored singer, no less--he had smiled through his white mustache when I waylaid him with the autograph album. Confiding that he was a collector of the written word himself and welcoming me to the club, he jotted a quote in a firm hand, the one about the pen being mightier than the sword, and signed his name with a flourish. Wow, I thought, my eyes big at the beautifully written passage he handed back, complete with *Wesley Williamson, in fellowship.*

"You landed Unk, huh?" Thinking it over to the very end, the current Williamson reluctantly put out a paw-like hand. Taking the autograph book from me, he splayed it on the desk with the practiced motion of someone who had written out hundreds of paychecks, a good many of them to cooks he'd fired. I waited anxiously until he handed back what he wrote.

*In the game of life, don't lose your marbles.*

*Wendell Williamson*

*Double W ranch*

*June 8, 1951*

"Gee, thanks," I managed. "That's real good advice."

He grunted and fiddled busily with some papers on his desk, which was supposed to be a signal for me to leave. When I did not, he frowned. "Something else on your mind?"

I had rehearsed this, my honest reason for braving the ranch boss in his lair, over and over in my head and even so it stumbled out.

"I, uh, sort of hoped I could get a haying job. Instead of, you know. Wisconsin."

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

I thought it was as obvious as the nose on his face. "Driving the stacker team."

This I could see clear as anything, myself paired with the tamest workhorses on the place, everyone's favorites, Prince and Blackie, just like times on the hay sled last winter when whoever was pitching hay to the cows let me handle the reins. The hayfield job was not much harder than that, simply walking the team of horses back and forth pulling a cable that catapulted a hayfork load onto the stack. Kids my age, *girls* even, drove the stacker team on a lot of ranches. And once haying season got underway and gave me the chance to show

my stuff at driving the easy pair of horses, it all followed: Even the birdbrain behind the desk would figure out that in me he had such a natural teamster he'd want to keep me around as a hayhand every summer, which would save Gram's spot as cook after her recuperation, and the cook shack would be ours again. To my way of thinking, how could a plan be more of a cinch than that?

I waited expectantly for the boss of the Double W to say something like, "Oh man, great idea! Why didn't I think of that myself?"

Instead he sniffed in a dry way and uttered, "We're gonna use the Power Wagon on that."

*No-o-o!* something inside me cried. The Power Wagon for *that*? The thing was a huge beast of a vehicle, half giant jeep and half truck. Talk about a sparrowheaded idea; only a couple of horsepower, which was to say two horses, were required to hoist hay onto a stack, and he was going to employ the equivalent of an army tank? I stood there, mouth open but no words adequate. There went my dream of being stacker driver, in a cloud of exhaust. I was always being told I was big for my age, but I couldn't even have reached the clutch of the dumb Power Wagon.

"Cutting back on horses, don't you see," Wendell was saying, back to fiddling with the papers on the desk. "Time to send the nags to the glue factory."

That did that in. If charity was supposed to begin at home, somehow the spirit missed the Double W by a country mile. Apprentice cusser that I was, I secretly used up my swearing vocabulary on Wendell Williamson in my defeated retreat down the hallway. I can't account for what happened next except that I was so mad I could hardly see straight. Without even thinking, as I passed the show-off table and its wonders for the last time, I angrily snatched the black arrowhead and thrust it as deep in my jeans pocket as it would go.



Gram watched in concern as I came back in to the cook shack like a whipped pup. "Donny, are you crying? What happened? Didn't the fool write in your book for you?"

"Got something in my eye," I alibied. Luckily, the veterinarian's pickup pulled up outside and honked. In a last flurry, Gram gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Off you go," her voice broke. "Be a good boy on the dog bus, won't you."

# 3

And here I was, stepping up into what I thought of as that real bus, with GREYHOUND--THE FLEET WAY TO TRAVEL in red letters on its side and as if to prove it, the silver streamlined dog of the breed emblematically running flat-out as if it couldn't wait to get there. Maybe not, but I had two days and a night ahead of me before climbing off at the depot in farthest Wisconsin, and that felt to me like the interminable start of the eternity of summer ahead.

At the top of the steps I stopped short, not sure where to sit. The long aisle between the seats must have been easily twice the length of the Rocky Mountain Stage Line sedan, and the double sets of high-backed seats on each side made my experience of riding from Gros Ventre squashed between the mailbag and the bulky woman seem like three in a bed with room for two, as Gram would have said. This was a vehicle for a crowd, and it already was more than half full. Way toward the back as though it was their given place sat some soldiers, two together on one side of the aisle and their much more sizable companion, who needed the space, in the set of seats across from them. Slumped in front of them was a bleary rumpled guy in ranch clothes, by every sign a sheepherder on a spree, who appeared to have been too busy drinking to shave for a week or so. Across from him, like a good example placed to even him out, rested a nun in that black

headgear outlined in white, her round glasses firm on her set face. Then toward the middle were scattered leathery older couples who I could tell were going home to farms or ranches or little towns along the way, and some vacationers dressed to the teeth in a way you sure don't see these days, coats and ties on the men and color-coordinated outfits for the women. One and all, the already seated passengers were strangers to me, some a lot stranger than others from the looks of them, which didn't help in making up my mind. Much more traveled than I ever hoped to be, Gram had told me in breaking the news that I was being shipped halfway across the country by Greyhound, "The dog bus gets all kinds, so you just have to plow right in and stake out a place for yourself." Yeah, but where?

Now I noticed the dark-haired woman nearest me, with her name sewn in red on her crisp blouse in waitress fashion, although I couldn't quite read it. Wearing big ugly black-rimmed glasses that made her look like a raccoon, she took short quick drags on a cigarette while reading a movie magazine folded over. She was sitting alone, but her coat was piled in the seat beside her, not exactly a friendly signal. Robbed of that spot--I'd have bet my bottom dollar that she knew how to be good company, snappy when talking was called for but otherwise minding her own business; some people simply have that look--I kept scanning the seats available among the other passengers, but froze when it came to choosing. It was a bad time to turn bashful, but I decided to take potluck and ducked into an empty set of seats a row behind the nonstop smoker.

And no sooner had done so than I changed my mind. About potluck, I mean. What was I going to do if the bus filled up and whoever sat next to me was anything like the nonstop talker about the digestive system? Or if the drunk sheepherder toward the back, recognizing me as somebody fresh off the ranch--my shirt said something like that--came staggering up the aisle to keep me company? Or the nun decided to sneak up and get going on me about God? I

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

under the moccasins; I hated not to be carrying it as a lucky piece, but I didn't want to risk being jabbed in my sitting part all the way to Wisconsin, either.

Missions accomplished, I returned the suitcase to the baggage compartment as best I could, then as I headed to climb back on the bus, I nearly bumped into the driver coming around the front. I still was on his mind, apparently. "Say, I saw you come straight off the Rocky bus--did you get your Green Stamps?"

I plainly had no idea what he was talking about. "They're a special deal this summer, long-distance passengers get them for their miles. You're going quite a ways across the country, aren't you?' I sure was, off the end of the known world. "Then, heck, go in and show your ticket to that prissy agent," he jerked a thumb toward the terminal. "Hustle your fanny, we're leaving before long."

My fanny and I did hustle inside, where I peered in every direction through the depot crowd before spotting the ticket counter. Miraculously no one was there ahead of me, and I barged up to the agent, a pinchfaced woman with a sort of yellowish complexion as if she hadn't been away from the counter for years, and rattled off to her while waving my ticket, "I'm supposed to get Green Stamps, the driver said so."

"Those." She sniffed, and from under the counter dug out sheets of stamps, about the size you would put on a letter but imprinted with a shield bearing the fancy initials *S&H*, and sure enough, sort of pea green. Next she checked my ticket against a chart. "Sixteen hundred and one miles," she reported, looking me over as though wondering whether I was up to such a journey. Nonetheless she began counting out, telling me I was entitled to fifty stamps, a full sheet, for every hundred miles I was ticketed for. As the sheets piled up, I started to worry.

"Uhm, I forgot to ask. How much do they cost?"

"What the little boy shot at and missed," she answered impassively, still dealing out green sheets.

Really? Nothing? Skeptically I made sure. "The dog bus just gives them away?"

"Believe it or not," she muttered, little knowing that was the most convincing reply she could have given me.

Pausing, she squared the sheets into a neat stack. "That's sixteen," she announced, studying the chart again with a pinched frown. The one extra mile evidently constituted a problem for her. "What the hey," she said, and tossed on another green sheet.

"Wh-what do I do with them next?" I had to ask as I gathered the stack of stamps off the counter. Handing me what she called a collector book, which was right up my alley, she explained that I was supposed to stick a sheet onto each page and when enough pages were filled, I could trade in the collection in for merchandise at any store that hung out an S&H sign. "You've always wanted a lawn chair, I bet," she said expressionlessly.

"Uh, sure." Shoving the green stamp haul into my opposite jacket pocket from the autograph book, I turned to dash to the bus. Behind me I heard her recite, "God bless you real good, sonny,"

Already this was some trip, I thought to myself as I dodged through the depot crowd, enriched with a pocketful of trading stamps and a blessing, the latter I was not really sure I was glad of because that implied I might need it. In any case, I scurried out and vaulted back into the impressive silver-sided Greyhound. The same seat was available and I dropped into it as if I owned it.

There. I felt more ready. Now if I was trapped with someone who wanted to talk my ear off about canned succotash or similar topics, I could head them off by asking for their autograph and get them interested in my collection. It was at least a plan.

As the loudspeaker announced the last call for the eastbound bus, which was us, I waited tensely for whatever last-minute passenger would come panting aboard and, as surely as a bad apple falls tardily from a tree, plop into the seat next to mine. Someone probably dumb as Sparrowhead, arriving out of breath but that would not stop him or her from telling me all the travails that made them late, I could just hear it coming.

Sure enough, the sound of that someone setting foot on the steps. I reared up half out of my seat to see, startling the driver as he climbed into the bus. Guiltily I sank back down. Shaking his head to himself, he did a passenger count, starting with me, then slid in behind the steering wheel and started the motor. In no time we were pulling out of Great Falls, past the smelter and its gigantic smokestack that was the city's signature all the way to the horizon, and lurching onto the highway that ended, as far as I was concerned, a million miles from Gram and the cook shack.

Once underway, the bus lived up to that tirelessly loping emblem on its side, cruising right along, I had to admit. In short order, the country along the highway turned into all grainfield, miles of green winter wheat striped with the summer fallow of strip farming and tufted here and there with low trees planted around farm buildings as windbreaks. I stayed glued to the window, which for a while showed the blue-gray mountains I had been used to all my life, jagged tops white with snow left over from winter. All too soon, the familiar western peaks vanished behind a rise and did not come back. Apparently everything this side of

add having scene stuff?

see blue sheet, next p.

the Rockies was dwarfed in comparison and only any good for plowing. I could just imagine Wisconsin, the whole place a cornfield or something equally boring.

Watching the miles go by, with no company but my indistinct reflection, loneliness caught up with me. It had been held off by the woman talking a blue streak at me on the ride from Gros Ventre and then the confusion of getting settled on the Greyhound, but now if I could have seen myself, hunched in that seat amid the rows of passengers confined within themselves by the cocoon of travel, surely I matched the picture of despair in one of those sayings of Gram's that said it so well, lonely as an orphan on a chamber pot.

Eleven going on twelve is a changeable age that way. One minute you are coltish and sappy, and the next, you're throwing a fit because you're tired or hungry or something else upsetting is going on inside you. Right then my mood churned up a storm. Life was against me, was all I could think, Gram and me both. I resented the human plumbing or whatever it was in her case that produced this situation. If that nun 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?

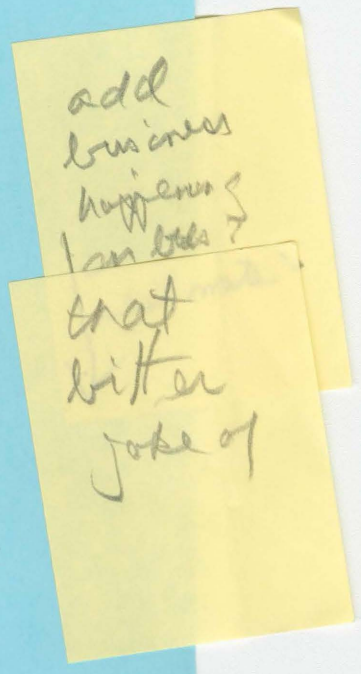
And getting booted out of the cook shack and off the ranch like we were nobody--if that wasn't enough cause for resentment, I didn't know what qualified. I could have driven that stacker team in haying time just fine, and if Wendell Williamson didn't think so, he needed his sparrow head examined.

Then the 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.

**p. 33 opssible add/change**

Watching the miles go by, with no company but my indistinct reflection, loneliness caught up with me. It had been held off by the woman talking a blue streak at me on the ride from Gros Ventre and then the confusion of getting settled on the Greyhound, but now if I could have seen myself, hunched in that seat amid the rows of passengers confined within themselves by the cocoon of travel, surely I matched the picture of despair in one of those sayings of Gram's that said it so well, lonely as an orphan on a chamber pot.

Eleven going on twelve is a changeable age that way. One minute you are coltish and sappy, and the next, you're throwing a fit because you're tired or hungry or something else upsetting is going on inside you. Right then my mood churned up a storm. Things had been tossed turvy, and although I was the one cast out alone onto a transncontinental bus, home was running away from me, and had been ever since some doctor's dire words to Gram. For if I lost the last of my family to the poorfarm or worse, with it went everything connected to the notion of home as I had known it, and I would be bound for that other terrifying institution, the orphanage. Full of instinct and intrigue as a schoolyard is, kids grasp what losing the world you have known means. Too many times I had heard the whisper race through recess, jackrabbit telegraph, that So-and-so was "going to the other side of the mountains." Packed up and dumped in the state-run orphanage over at Butte, across the Continental Divide; news that always came as grim in its way as a hushed remark at a funeral. Designation as an orphan truly did sound to me fatal in a way, the end of a childhood in which my real parents literally moved earth, and would have done the same with heaven had it been within immediate reach, to keep me always with them no matter how unhandy the circumstances. My father once bulldozed out a mile of irrgation ditches in exchange for an Indian rancher enrolling his three kids long enough to keep open



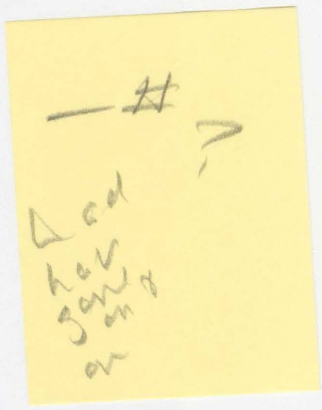
the foothills one-room school for me to go to. At other places construction jobs took us, my mother bucked snowdrifts winterlong in our chained-up pickup to get me to and from schoolhouses tucked into creek valleys where the Rockies were practically straight overhead. Gram kept up the tradition by pitching in gas money, and occasionally a dozen eggs the Double W henhouse would never miss, for neighbors to swing by the ranch and pick me up on the way to the Noon Creek school with their own kids. Everybody stretched for my sake, and it could be said I came out of such care selfish. By which I mean self-ish, highly aware of my self and what it had taken in family sacrifice to shape a boyhood like mine. To make me the self-conscious--that word again--striver that an only child can be, with flights of imagination as natural and common as the turning of the earth.

Right then, it did not seem at all imaginary that life was against me, Gram and me both. I resented the human plumbing or whatever it was in her case that produced this situation. If that nun 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.

Then the 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.

Miserably I huddled for a while like that, nose against the window, viewing the whole matter as unfair, unwanted, and unsettling. In other words, fuck and phooey.



Yet I could not just sit there feeling sorry for myself and staring at plowed fields hour after hour. To be doing anything, I took out the autograph book and opened it. *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. 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:

*My love for you shall flow*

*Like water down a tater row.*

*Your Gram*

*Dorie Blegen*

I was finding out that people came up with surprising things like that almost automatically when presented with the autograph book. It was as if they couldn't resist putting down on the page--their page, everyone got his own, I made sure--something of themselves, corny though it might be, and happily signing their name to it. Wistfully thumbing through the inscriptions even though I knew them by heart, I lost myself for a while in the rhymes and remarks of my school friends and teachers and the ranch hands and visitors like the veterinarian and once in a while when I hit it lucky, bigshots like Senator Ridpath when he spoke in the Gros Ventre park on the Fourth of July, and Major Williamson straight from New York. Those were my prize ones so far. The Senator was surely famous, if for nothing more than having been in office almost forever. And though I could only guess at the Major's measure of reknown in a big city

such as New York, on the ranch he was "well thought of," a substantial endorsement from Gram if there ever was one, and it sounded to me like a sizable step toward fame. What a pretty piece of writing his was as I looked at it with admiration again, every letter of the alphabet perfectly formed and the lines about sword and pen as balanced as a poem.

More than that. The Major's elegant citation stirred me to appreciate the ink it was written in, another thing to thank Gram for. Along with the autograph book, she had given me my very own ballpoint pen--not the common brand then that was an ink stick with a cap on the end, but a fancy new retractable kind called a Kwik Klik. It wrote in a purplish hue that seemed to me the absolute best color for an autograph collection, and I made sure to have people use it when composing their ditties rather than just any old writing instrument. Of course, there were exceptions--Wendell Williamson was represented in that deathly black Quink fountain-pen stuff--but page to page, the creamy paper showed off the same pleasing ink, like a real book, thanks to my fervor for the Kwik Klik.

And then and there, the way a big idea sometimes will grow from a germ of habit, it dawned on me that the dog bus with its captive audience presented a chance to fill a good many more of those pages with purplish inscriptions.

I sat up as if I'd had a poke in the ribs. What might have been just a stray thought meant turning my thinking completely around, from resorting to the autograph album if necessary as a defense against being talked half to death--as a conversation stopper, really--to taking the initiative and striking up conversations that would lead to words on paper. Not as simple as it might sound, for I wasn't over being leery about close contact with other passengers for hours on end. That sort of thing could wear out a person's eardrums, my experience on the mail bus taught me. Still, if I wanted to give the autograph book its due--and, admit it, boost myself toward the record number that would enroll me in Believe It Or Not,

And then and there, the way a big idea sometimes will grow from a germ of habit, it dawned on me that the dog bus with its captive audience presented a chance to fill a good many more of those pages with purplish inscriptions.

I sat up as if I'd had a poke in the ribs. What might have been just a stray thought meant turning my thinking completely around, from resorting to the autograph album if necessary as a defense against being talked half to death--as a conversation stopper, really--to taking the initiative and striking up conversations that would lead to words on paper. Put yourself in my place and this is not as simple as it might sound, for I wasn't over being leery about having my eardrums worn out from close contact with other passengers, as my experience on the mail bus taught me. Still, if I wanted to give the autograph book its due--and, admit it, boost myself toward the record number that would enroll me in Believe It Or Not, early fame of a kind--I would need to approach people and tell them what was what, wouldn't I.

Uncertainly I snuck a look toward the back of the bus for candidates. The soldiers were talking up a storm, joking and laughing in their own world. The tourists yakked on across the aisles, a gauntlet of talk. A number of passengers were napping. The only ones not occupied, so to speak, were the nun and the sheepherder.

early fame of a kind--I would need to approach people and tell them what was what, wouldn't I.

Uncertainly I snuck a look toward the back of the bus for candidates. The soldiers were talking up a storm, joking and laughing in their own world. The tourists yakked on across the aisles, a gauntlet of talk. A number of passengers were napping. The only ones not occupied, so to speak, were the nun and the sheepherder.

Drunk or not, the sheepherder immediately looked a whole lot better to me.

Mustering my courage, I stacked my jacket to save my seat and started down the aisle, swaying when the bus did. Saying "Excuse me" a dozen times, I made my way past pair after pair of aisle-sitting conversationists. I swear, the sheepherder read my mind, dragging himself upright and lopsidedly grinning at me as if he was thirsty for company.

Just as I reached his vicinity, the bus rocked around a curve and I lurched and lost my balance, dropping into an empty seat like a pinball into a slot. The one directly behind the sheepherder.

The big soldier who had been sitting by himself raised a bushy eyebrow at my abrupt arrival beside him. "Hi," I piped up as I recovered, the top of my head barely reaching the shoulder patch of his uniform.

"What's doing, buddy?" he drawled.

My voice high, I hurriedly told him, displaying the autograph book. His eyebrow stayed parked way up there, but he sort of smiled and broke into my explanation.

"Loud and clear, troop. If there's a section in there for Uncle Sam's groundpounders, you've got them up the yanger here." Holding out a hand that swallowed mine, he introduced himself. "Turk Turco." Rubbernecking for all

they were worth, the soldiers across the aisle sent me two-fingered salutes and chipped in their names, Gordon in the near seat and Mickey by the window.

"Mine's Donny," I said to keep things simple. "Where you guys going?"

The one called Gordon snickered. "Sending us east to go west, that's the army for you. We catch the train at Havre. Then it's Fort Lewis, good old Fort Screw Us, out by Seattle. And after that it's," he drew out the next word like it was sticky, "Ko-re-a."

"Where we'll get our asses shot off," Mickey said glumly.

Turk sharply leaned over, just about obliterating me. "Lay off that, will you, numb nuts. You're scaring the kid. Not to mention me."

The gulping thought that the Korean war, which like any American youngster of 1951 I grasped only from *G.I. Joe* comic books and radio reports, could claim the lives of people I knew face to face, even on short acquaintance like this, had never occurred to me. It struck with lightning force now. Glancing guiltily around at the three soldiers, fresh-faced in their pressed khakis, I almost wished I had lit in with the mussy sheepherder, who could be heard carrying on a muttered conversation with himself in front of us. The nun had cast a severe look at me as I flew past, then disappeared into her holy hood again.

"I'm just saying," Mickey stayed insistent. "Think about it, there's Chinese up the wazoo over there"--I was fairly sure that must be the same as up the yanger and could be not good--"must be a million of the bastards, then there's us."

"And the whole sonofabitching rest of the army," Turk pointed out. "C'mon, troop, this is no time to come down with a case of nervous in the service."

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?"

"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. An experimental fib, 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 imagination. 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. "Don't get rambunctious," Gram would warn whenever I got carried away 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, rambunctious or not. 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?"

Gordon turning the air blue in response, Turk nudged me for the autograph book. "Somebody's got to go first." I instructed him in the mystery of the Kwik Klik, and with it in hand, he balanced the book on his knee and wrote for a good long time. When he was through, I passed things across to Gordon, who looked over Turk's entry with a mocking expression but didn't say anything before writing his own.

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.

*Roses are red,*
*violets are blue.*
*The other way around,*
*we'd have something new.*

Not bad as such things go, I thought. Reluctantly about to thank her and excuse myself to get up and leave, I was stopped cold by the signature. *Letty Minetti.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

White as bones, the trio of short metal crosses stood in memoriam at roadside on the long slope up from the Two Medicine River. One for my father, one for my mother, and although I could not see why he deserved the same, one for the drunk driver whose pickup drifted across the centerline and hit theirs head-

on. Only once had I seen the crosses, on a school trip to the Blackfoot Museum in Browning not long after the funeral, and I had to swallow sobs the rest of the trip. I almost wished the American Legion post would quit marking highway deaths like that--for some of us, too much of a reminder--but my father had been a favorite at Legion halls, someone who came out of the D-Day landing badly wounded but untouched in his personality, ready with a laugh and a story any time he and my mother blew in for a drink and a nice supper and some dancing. The flowers, which I remembered were yellow, must have been Gram's own ongoing remembrance, by courtesy--a great deal more than that--of Letty Minetti.

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

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

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

drinks in them, you'd be surprised. And truckers leave their change on the counter. It adds up."

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

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

That didn't sound good. People were always saying about Havre, off by itself and with not much going for it but the railroad that ran through, *You can have 'er*. Chuck Manning, one of the younger cowhands in the Double W bunkhouse, had been a flyboy at the Air Force radar station there and claimed even migrating birds avoided the place.

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

"Aw river, maybe."

"Nah, more than that. See, the place where I'll be working is called, capital *T*, The Le Havre Supper Club." She gnawed her lip. "Something doesn't seem quite right about that, don't you think? Anyway, that's why I'm wearing my work shirt"--she meant the uniform top with the prominent stitching--"in case I have to go on shift right away. Some morons," she pronounced it mo-rons, with the same note in her voice as when Gram would say 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, Rudy, I got a little involved with. But never mind. What's done is done. You ought to have that in your book." She mashed out the latest cigarette. "Hey, enough of the story of my life. How's Dorie these days? Why isn't she with you?"

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

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

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

"Ever been kissed?"

"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.

# 4

"Havre, the Paris of the prairie," the lanky driver called out in a mechanical way, "you may disembark if you so wish and stretch your legs. The Greyhound bus depot, proud to serve you, has full conveniences."

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

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, and that way I could splurge on something like chicken-fried steak for supper, she topped off the menu for me.

Which sounded okay in theory, but less so in a a thronged bus depot when I was hungry as a wolf. The problem was 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 got 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--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 be prepared, I extracted the album from my jacket and made the Kwik Klik ready to perform. I could hardly wait to see what he would write on the page, what his own name would be, Buffalo Belly or Son of Sitting Bull or something else great like that.

My manners were strained pretty thin by now. Havre was turning out to be a town strewn along the highway for a long distance, the bus taking its sweet time to gravitate past stretches of stores and gas stations and farm equipment dealerships, so I tried to keep busy with myself, working my mouth over with my handkerchief for any trace of chocolate 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 gotten once today, that I was a livewire who reminded my seatmate of someone--maybe a kid of his own, with an Indian name! That would put us right smack to Red Chief.

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

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

I was stymied. Talk about manners and the wraith of Gram riding herd on me. I couldn't very well poke a total stranger in the ribs and tell him, "Hey, wake up, I want to 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.

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 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. *Dummy, there aren't any empty seats.* I'd have to stand up all the while as I went along the aisle visiting with people to introduce them to the notion of giving me their autographs and whatever else they wanted to put on the page, and I saw in the rearview mirror the driver already had his eye on me.

Defeated, I dropped back in my seat, silently cussing to the limits of my ability. Trapped there, I apologetically fondled the autograph album and to console myself ate my last Mounds. Maybe my luck would change at the next stop, I told myelf, 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 woke me. Yawning and groggily forcing my eyes open, I looked up and down the aisle of the bus, trying to come to grips with my surroundings. Then looked again, blinking to see whether I was in a dream, not a good one.

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

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

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

Swallowing hard 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 ston loneseome 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 loneseome, which meant jail. I sat up sharply.

Sure enough, up into the bus stepped a rangy man with strong features like Gary Cooper or Randolph Scott in the movies. A figure of few words, his stoic expression doing the talking for him, you could tell by looking at him; someone who could tame a town just by stepping out of the shadows at high noon.

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 Stetson and a star badge. "Here, stupid," 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."

"Weren't going that fast."

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

"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 don't have to be quite so tickled about it."

"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 'splained that, Carl," the prisoner drawled. "My girlfriend Janie waits tables at the Glasgow Supper Club. How else am I 'sposed to get to see her?"

My imagination lit up at that. Just think: If Leticia kept working her way job by job in the direction she was, she might well reach the supper club frequented by the escape-artist convict, as I thought of him, in pursuit of his waitress girlfriend, and there she couldn't help but become acquainted with the pair of them and in all likelihood the ornery sheriff as well. And I'd have witnessed the whole sweep of coincidence, from Letty's flowers on the roadside crosses to Harv carrying on a romance in spite of jail, incredible as it all added up to. One of the lessons of the dog bus seemed to be that everyone stood a chance of meeting everyone else, by the end.

The sheriff sighed in exasperation at the logical explanation about Janie, sweetheart of the supper club. "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."

"Besides," the prisoner righteously gestured, handcuffs and all, to the green countryside as though the evidence there ought to be plain enough, too, "haying season is gonna be late this year, on account of the weather."

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 she be, Carl. What's left of the river, hey?"

"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 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."

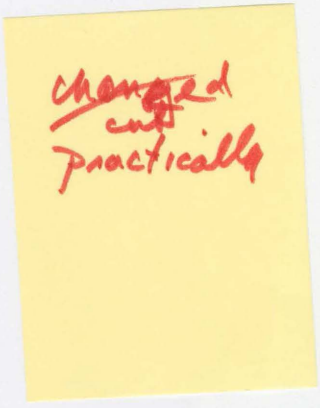
That was a mistake. His apple-doll face turning sour, the sheriff spoke as if he had caught me red-handed. "You wouldn't be pulling my leg, would you?"

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 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 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 'skinners when the ground thawed, with me attending whatever one-room school happened to be anywhere around, my folks had hopes of moving up from wages to contracting projects on their own. They had managed to take out a loan on a D-10 Caterpillar dozer and were on their way to the Cat dealer in Great Falls to sign the final papers, when the drunk driver veered across the center line on the Two Medicine hill.

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

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

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

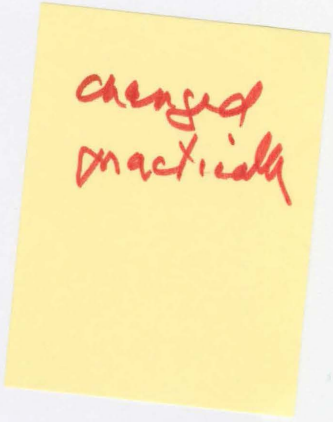
"No!" I was scared, alarmed, dumbfounded--could a person be arrested for riding a Greyhound bus? And if so, would my suitcase be searched? How

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 heavy-lidded 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.

Fear has a mind of its own. It can be blind, deaf and dumb, and still exert a superhuman sense of touch, an unshakable feeling of danger pressing in. Even if it had no business to, fright gripped me across the aisle there from the scowling little man with a badge for a simple reason, lodged backward in that accusing question of his but no less hazardous for that. Home was running away from me, and had been ever since some doctor's dire words to Gram. For if I lost the last of my family to the poorfarm or worse, with it went everything connected to the notion of home as I had known it, and I would be cast into that other terrifying institution, the orphanage. Full of instinct and intrigue as a schoolyard is, kids grasp what losing the world you have known means. Too many times I had heard

the whisper race through recess, jackrabbit telegraph, that So-and-so was "going to the other side of the mountains." Packed up and dumped in the state-run orphanage over at Butte, across the Continental Divide; news that always came as grim in its way as a hushed remark at a funeral. Designation as an orphan truly did sound to me fatal in a way, the end of a childhood in which my real parents literally moved earth, and would have done the same with heaven had it been within immediate reach, to keep me always with them no matter how unhandy the circumstances. My father once bulldozed out a mile of irrgation ditches in exchange for an Indian rancher enrolling his three kids long enough to keep open the foothills one-room school for me to go to. At other places construction jobs took us, my mother bucked snowdrifts winterlong in our chained-up pickup to get me to and from schoolhouses tucked into creek valleys where the Rockies were almost straight overhead. Gram kept up the tradition by pitching in gas money, and occasionally a dozen eggs the Double W henhouse would never miss, for neighbors to swing by the ranch and pick me up on the way to the Noon Creek school with their own kids. Everybody stretched for my sake, and it could be said I came out of such care selfish. By which I mean self-ish, highly aware of my self and what it had taken in family sacrifice to shape a boyhood like mine. To make me the self-conscious--that word again--striver that an only child can be, with flights of imagination as natural and common as the turning of the earth.




All of which now threatened to go out the bus window. 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"

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 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

the way around

"No! The opposite! 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 Rampin'" hobo PeeWee and his ~~xxxxxx~~ buddies encountered a sheriff like this, they squawked, "Yeeps! The constabulary!" (ital) and their hair turned into a red pompadour reaching for the sky, but it felt that way can't say more as I faced the scowling little lawman across the aisle I was as dumbfounded as I was scared.

in England where surgeons put in rods and spliced portions of tendon from elsewhere in him into his knees and on down. Eventually he came home to my mother and me, at least to Fort Harrison hospital in Helena where he advanced from casts to crutches to learning to walk again. Perhaps it says most about my father that he went right back to being a catskinner, even though you operate a bulldozer as much with your legs, working the brake pedals, as with your hands. Whatever it cost him in pain and endurance, Bud Cameron never veered from that chosen line of work, and in a way his stubborn climb from a cripple's life summed up our family situation, because we were always getting on our feet. Money was tight when earthmoving jobs shut down for the winter, and Montana winters are long. Hopping to whatever water project was first to hire 'skinners when the ground thawed, with me attending whatever one-room school happened to be anywhere around, my folks had hopes of moving up from wages to contracting projects on their own. They had managed to take out a loan on a D-10 Caterpillar dozer and were on their way to the Cat dealer in Great Falls to sign the final papers, when the drunk driver veered across the center line on the Two Medicine hill.

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

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

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

"No!" I was scared, al[illegible]could a person be arrested for riding a Greyhound bus? A[illegible]itcase 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 heavy-lidded 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.

move to p. 33 & trim?

Fear has a mind of its own. It can be blind, deaf and dumb, and still exert a superhuman sense of touch, an unshakable feeling of danger pressing in. Even if it had no business to, fright gripped me across the aisle there from the scowling little man with a badge for a simple reason, lodged backward in that accusing question of his but no less hazardous for that. Home was running away from me, and had been ever since some doctor's dire words to Gram. For if I lost the last of my family to the poorfarm or worse, with it went everything connected to the notion of home as I had known it, and I would be cast into that other terrifying institution, the orphanage. Full of instinct and intrigue as a schoolyard is, kids grasp what losing the world you have known means. Too many times I had heard

the whisper race through recess, jackrabbit telegraph, that So-and-so was "going to the other side of the mountains." Packed up and dumped in the state-run orphanage over at Butte, across the Continental Divide; news that always came as grim in its way as a hushed remark at a funeral. Designation as an orphan truly did sound to me fatal in a way, the end of a childhood in which my real parents literally moved earth, and would have done the same with heaven had it been within immediate reach, to keep me always with them no matter how unhandy the circumstances. My father once bulldozed out a mile of irrgation ditches in exchange for an Indian rancher enrolling his three kids long enough to keep open the foothills one-room school for me to go to. At other places construction jobs took us, my mother bucked snowdrifts winterlong in our chained-up pickup to get me to and from schoolhouses tucked into creek valleys where the Rockies were practically straight overhead. Gram kept up the tradition by pitching in gas money, and occasionally a dozen eggs the Double W henhouse would never miss, for neighbors to swing by the ranch and pick me up on the way to the Noon Creek school with their own kids. Everybody stretched for my sake, and it could be said I came out of such care selfish. By which I mean self-ish, highly aware of my self and what it had taken in family sacrifice to shape a boyhood like mine. To make me the self-conscious--that word again--striver that an only child can be, with flights of imagination as natural and common as the turning of the earth.

All of which now threatened to go out the bus window. 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 jottings 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, turning a kid young as you loose in the world."

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

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

Although I was still shaky from the close call, my impulse was to get back to an even footing as a legitimate Greyhound passenger if I possibly could. Screwing up my courage, I took a gamble. "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.*

*--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, "Janie 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, tthis Janie must be another Letty in the making. What was it about supper club waitresses?

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

"You don't suppose it's humanly possible I might of made it up myself, Carl?" Harv responded with the dignity of an author. "With handcuffs on, even."

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."

Learned it in army

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 myelf, 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, with a force of breath. It was one of those where you try to hide but never get anywhere, in this case 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 ov I'll tell your folks."* Panting hard, I looked up and down the aisle of the bus, trying to come to grips with y 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. A Stockman Bar, a Mint Bar, a Rexall Drug, a Buttrey's grocery, those could be anywhere. Then I spotted a storefront window with the lettering, GLASGOW TOGGERY--MEN'S WEAR AND MORE. Glasgow! I had slept away a sizable portion of Montana. The Indians, including my seatmate whom I had only managed to coax the single word "Howdy" out of, 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 loneseome 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 loneseome, which meant jail. I sat up sharply.

Sure enough, up into the bus stepped a rangy man with strong features and a set expression as if he was on a mission. From the way he carried himself, determination written all over him, he was someone you did not want to fool around with.

He looked like he could carry nothing as anything a gun. Know how 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, loverboy," 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."

"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 blurt startled both men. "She was on the bus, see, and I met her and she was really nice to me." I reported further to the surprised prisoner, "She told me all about you, sort of. The trucker part."

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

The prisoner ignored all that, 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, Red? Start at the beginning."

With both of them staring at me across the aisle, it seemed a good time to kkeep the beginning close to the end. "She got sick qand tired of chintzy 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 litle 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 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 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 l943 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 'skinners when the ground thawed, with me attending whatever one-room school happened to be anywhere around, my folks had hopes of moving up from wages to contracting projects on their own. They had managed to take out a loan on a D-10 Caterpillar dozer and were on their way to the Cat dealer in Great Falls to sign the final papers, when the drunk driver veered across the center line on the Two Medicine hill.

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

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

"That's as maybe," he allowed, leaning toward me as if to get a better look. "Tell me something, laddy boy." His tone turned 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 heavy-lidded 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 jottings 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.*

*--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, tthis Janie must be another Letty in the making. What was it about supper club waitresses?

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

"Learned it on a roop carrier when we invaded Guam, along with *Kilroy Was Here*," 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."

# 5

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

change stone-faced- Letty's boyfriend strong silent type

no space? or cut entirely

That spot of time, the night hours of my lone journey, has stayed with me everlastingly. There was no such thing as a divided four-lane Interstate freeway yet, and so the oncoming headlights and the bus's lit up the highway white centerline in overlapping beams--jackrabbits trying to cross didn't stand a chance. While the Greyhound advanced steadily into the Dakota darkness, making quick drop stops in silent towns with only street lights on, the other passengers one by one nodded off around me, until my only company besides the driver was the same moon over a square state as shone down on puzzle-piece Montana behind me, with a lot of road in between. I had probably traveled more miles that day than in the rest of my life combined. On my own. Halfway there, to whoever and whatever awaited in Wisconsin. But was it the big half or the small half, as another of Gram's sayings posed the question. Sleep had a lot of competition.

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--flyng 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, 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.

"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 are 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." 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."

"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. Wresting 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?"

pp. 83-~~100~~ 99 transferred to revise

# 8

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 caused 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, packing it protectively to the rest room with me. Done there, I headed straight for the long bank of swinging doors with arrivals and departures posted beside them, not even pausing at the 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

Out in the boarding area, I planted myself beside the still empty bus. When the new driver showed up, 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.

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, packing it protectively to the rest room with me. Done there, I headed straight for the long bank of swinging doors with arrivals and departures posted beside them, not even pausing at the 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

Out in the boarding area, I planted myself beside the still empty bus. When the new driver showed up, 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 itself, but the bus. 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 poor speller. 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.

a victim of poor spelling

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?"

"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 Manitowocee, 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 raucously 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. The only shortcoming was, if they clamored to see it I'd have to confess it was in my suitcase and they'd give me a hard time about why I didn't carry it on me all the time if it was so lucky. I could just hear them yapping away like that. 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 shoveled 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 swear words 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.

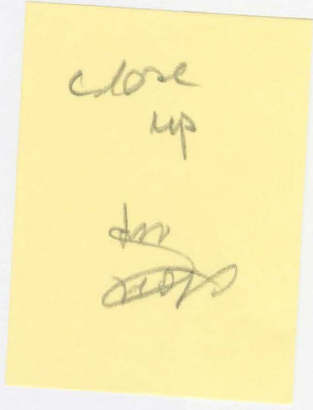
By now the grownups who supposedly were in charge of this band of thieves had floundered onto the scene and were pulling me off a howling Mannie, while the bus driver bellowed, "Everybody siddown!"

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 overtowering 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 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."

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 topping off lunch in Minneapolis with a candy bar, hadn't I, like a natural-born fool. To get coins to call with, I would need to break a ten-dollar bill

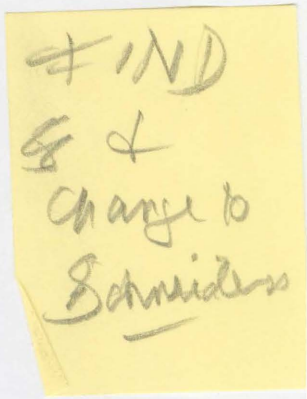
from the stash under my remaining shirt pocket, which meant undressing even further right here in the most public place there was, where anyone like the convict in the suit and tie could be watching as I unpinned the money, because I didn't dare retreat to the men's room to do it out of sight--that was 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 to 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 Zimmermans. 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.

"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 stooped, the other nearly as broad as the fat lady in a carnival. Longfaced and with that horsy grin and glasses that

change stooped

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.

# 9

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paying no attention to that, she seemed to make up her mind to smile at me, the extra chin and the famous chubby dimples involved. She had the bluest eyes, which mine swam in guilelessly. "If you're ready, honeybunch," she was saying in that voice so melodious I was surprised she could pass herself off in public as Aunt Kitty at all, "we may as well go."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How is Montana?"

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

"Yah, I betcha."

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

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

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

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

"Yeah!" Only minutes before I would have had to fake this kind of answer, but landing in the spacious lap of Kate Smith, in a manner of speaking, I

had no trouble whatsoever being enthusiastic. "This is so much better than there, it knocks my socks off."

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

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

Tentatively I sneaked a peek at the source of so much fame. Speaking of writing, if she wanted there was enough room on her bosom to sew not only her name waitress-style but something like, *America's favorite singer and sweetheart of the airwaves.*

Letting that thought pass, I cleared my throat to make my request. "Can I ask you for a real big favor?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was dark by the time the DeSoto rocked into a bumpy driveway. The house, painted that navy gravy gray shade like in pictures of battleships and with a peaked roof and lit sort of ghostly by the nearest streetlight, appeared big as a

ranchin' mansion to me after the cook shack, although looking back, I realize that only meant it had an upstairs as well as a downstairs.

As we went in, Aunt Kate instructed Herman to leave my suitcase at the foot of the stairs to be dealt with after dinner. Since it was pitch black out, I deduced that must mean supper, another Wisconsin mystery like schnitzel and schnapps and going to camp with a bunch of boy hoodlums.

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

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

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

Not this boy, because Gram viewed frankfurters--weinies by any other name, right?--with dire suspicion whenever she was forced to boil up a batch to feed the crew toward the end of a month's kitchen budget, convinced that the

things were made from leavings lying around the butcher shop. "Tube steak," she'd mutter as she plopped weinies by the handful into the pot, "you might as well be eating sweepings from the slaughterhouse." Not the best thing to build an appetite for frankfrurters. But my stomach and my hunger had no time to debate that, as I was shooed out of the kitchen, told I was free to look around the house while dinner was being fixed.

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

Meanwhile I edged into the living room and onto a pea green rug so deep I left footprints wherever I stepped. It was like walking on a mattress. Intimidated, I crept across the room, studying the unfamiliar surroundings. A big long leathery davenport, also green but closer to that screaming shade of lime Kool-Aid, sat prominently in front of a bay window where the sill was crammed with potted plants. Pretty interesting, I thought, going over to the whopping davenport, that as funny green as it was, right here in Wisconsin was furniture made from cowhide or something like it. I laid my hand on the covering and sure enough, it had that clammy feel like the seat of a saddle when you settle into it on a chilly morning. So I figured at least a person's fanny would be cooled down by plopping onto the davenport on a warm day, somewhat like Kool-Aid does for the tummy.

On an end table next to the arm of the davenport rested a phone, pink as bubblegum, of another type I had no experience of, with a cradled receiver and a circular dial full of numbers and letters. Whatever else this strange territory of the summer proved to be like, it definitely did not seem to be party-line country.

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

Unquestionably Aunt Kate went in for wall decoration, so I searched around for what I was eager to see, photos of her singing for the troops and overseas in palaces and such. Wouldn't it be great if she went on one of those 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, right? 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 weinie 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 weinie 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 weinie, 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--"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 pincered 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"--my latest teacher, at the Noon Creek school--"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, Schmidt, 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.

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

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

Dinner in Manitowoc made me homesick for supper in Montana. First of all, the table cloth was spotless white linen instead of oilcloth, and I was scared of spilling on it. Then there was the food itself, the sauerkraut so sour it actually made the weinies not bad in comparison. My stomach was finding Wisconsin to be a state of confusion.

Aunt Kate piled into her meal as if she hadn't eaten in days and Herman did a job on his, while I worked my way to a polite clean plate swallow by hard swallow. Seeing me put down my fork, she started to pass me the serving dish of

'kraut and motioned Herman to do the same with the plate of remaining weinies, urging "Don't be bashful, darling, have more. A growing boy needs to eat up, mmm?"

"No, no, that's fine," I let out. "I've had an elegant sufficiency, any more would be a superfluity."

Aunt Kate looked at me as if I had sprouted another head. Herman guffawed. "Big talking," he commended, more on the mark than he knew. I relished big words of certain sorts, even ones I only half understood like my father's stomach-patting saying when he'd had plenty to eat. The longer the better, generally, like *Gloccamorra* in the song--now that sounded like quite a place. *Prestidigitation* as in card tricks seemed ever so much more attractively sneaky than *sleight of hand.* And so on, wherever the alphabet ran crazy that way. Chances to use what Gram called dollar words didn't come along any too often, but Aunt Kate eyed me warily for any more I might pop out with.

When none was forthcoming, she said pointedly, "All righty right, mister dictionary, I hope you've saved room for dessert."

Good thing I did, because it turned out to be something I since have realized was a classic sachertorte, chocolate-frosted chocolate cake with jam between layers and a mound of whipped cream on the side. Pretty much a meal of sugar and chocolate in itself, that was more my kind of eating, and when I praised Aunt Kate to her face for her baking, Herman laughed out loud and said Schultz's Bakery would be surprised to hear that.

"Hush, you," she told him, but not as sharply as in her earlier exchanges with him.

No sooner was dessert ingested if not digested than Aunt Kate declared in a sweetened mood, "Chickie, you look tuckered out from your trip," which I



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

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

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

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

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

It took all the restraint I had, but I didn't let on that right over there in my suitcase was a little something from Montana that may have slain many a buffalo. This Herman was wound up enough as it was; the night might never end if we got off on more or less lucky arrowheads and so on. I stuck to the strictly necessary. "Can I tell you something? It's Mon-TANA, not MONT-ana."

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

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

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

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

"Such schluffen!" he marveled, which I figured must be squarehead lingo or Manitowoc talk, of the *schnapps* and *schnitzel* kind, for dance steps, like shuffling or something. Still fondling the moccasin as if he couldn't let go, he asked in wonder, "You got from Indians?"

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

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

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

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

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

didn't think I did, but she topped that off with the message impossible to miss, "Your room is ready for you."

The night was still a pup compared to the Greyhound's long gallop through the dark, but whiz, just like that, I was bypassing the cubbyhole sewing room and instead trooping upstairs behind Herman, with him insisting on lugging my suitcase--"You are the guest, you get the best, hah!"--while in back of us, Aunt Kate strenuously mounted one tread at a time. And as the stairs kept going, quite a climb by any standard, the suspicion began to seep in on me as to where we were headed, even before Herman shouldered open the squeaky door.

To this day, that 'room', up where the hayloft in a barn would be, is engraved in me. A slapped-together chamber cluttered with this, that, and the other that memory stands no chance in this world of ever clearing out. Aunt Kate could call it what she wanted, but I had bounced around enough with my parents in makeshift quarters to recognize this as nothing more than the attic. Bare roofbeams and sharply sloping underside of the roof and probably mice and spiders, the whole works. Correction: no more than half the attic, with a plywood partition walling off the rest into a makeshift closet.

Trying to take in the situation, I had the weirdest sensation of slipping into the past, back to Gram's cramped upbringing among shacks of the homestead days as testified by the voices of the departed that spoke through her in terms like *You couldn't cuss a cat in that place without getting hair in your mouth.* That about summed it up for me.

As I tried none too successfully to sort out this hodgepodge that was supposed to be my home for the summer, the first thing to strike my eye was the frilly bedspread flowered with purple and orange blossoms the size of cabbages, instead of the cozy quilts Gram and I slept under every night of our lives, and

pillows, pillows, pillows, the useless small square ones with tassels or gold fringe or sentiments stitched on such as IT TAKES TWO LOVEBIRDS TO COO. Peeking from the bottom of the pile was a depleted pillow of regular size, which I could tell too many heads had rested on before mine. The top of the cheap fiberboard dresser similarly was snowed under, enveloped in white doilies starched to a stiffness that defied a person to set anything down on them. A rickety straight-backed chair and a bedstand holding a lamp with a stained shade amounted to the rest of the furniture. The remainder of the space was taken up with stacks of storage boxes labeled in ways such as *Xmas tree lights & curtain material* and some stray outmoded suitcases, although none seemed as old and well-traveled as mine, and the unmistakable yellow spines of many years' worth of *National Geographic*s shelved in a sagging bookcase. As to the clothes closet in the partition that closed off the area from whatever was in back of it, it was so crammed with winter clothing and coats and, I very much suspected, dresses that Aunt Kate no longer could fit into, that she grunted with the effort of forcing apart the solid wall of garments enough to scrunch in anything of mine worth hanging, only my jacket at the moment, my shirts casualties of my trip.

But what caused me to gulp hardest while moving in, to call it that, was what hung above the bed. The thing on the wall, I immediately thought of it as, and still do. That dimestore plaster-of-Paris wall plaque no kid old enough to be acquainted with death wants to have to see the last thing before the lights are put out, the pale kneeling boy in pajamas with his hands clasped and eyes closed perhaps forever, praying a prayer guaranteed to sabotage slumber:

*Now I lay me down to sleep,*

*I pray the Lord my soul to keep.*

*If I should die before I wake*

*I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

That spine-chilling ode to death in the night, making it out to be no big deal as long as you got on your knees right before going to bed, unhinged me so badly that if someone had written it in the autograph book, I honestly believe I would have scissored it out.

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

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

Bunkhouse vocabulary failed me as what looked like endless nights in this miserable excuse for a room stared me in the face.

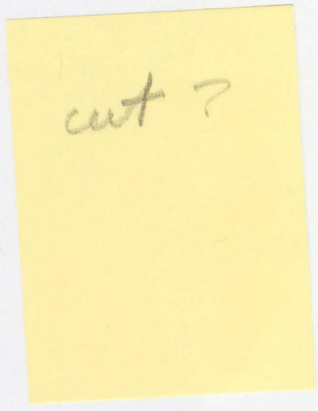
How did I land in this fix, which made a bus seat seat look good? The Double W cook shack had been the opposite of elegant, and some of the construction site lodgings where I had lived with my folks could not be called much more than shelter from the weather, but never had I been stuck up under the rafters like another piece of the junk that collects there. It seemed unbelievably unfair. I had ridden the Greyhound halfway across the entire country like I was supposed to, doing the best I could with the limited resources a person eleven

going on twelve has for coping with all kinds of utter strangers and unforeseen situations--a trouper, no less, whatever that stacked up to be--only to be stuck away in a condensed version of Palookaville. Even the black arrowhead had let me down, my luck running out little by little like the tick of a damn clock in the Wisconsin night.

In that foul mood, I undressed for bed, slung away the decorative pillows, tried to pound some life into the squashed one, positioned the moccasins at bedside for the middle-of-the-night descent to the bathroom, turned out the light, and slipped under the dank covers in my shorts and undershirt. Like my father, I was never a believer in dressing head to foot to go to bed.

There I lay, trying to stay as still as possible because the least little movement made the bed creak like it was going to fall apart. Every squawk of the springs made me yearn for the tidy sewing room and its day bed. Goddamn-it-all-to-hell-anyway, I'd even rather have slept down there on the chilly-butt living room davenport than on this rusty old bunk.

Sleep was a distant matter in any case, what with the commotion of both the bed and my head. Literally, what hung over me, nailed to the wallboard, would not leave my mind. The stupid plaster kid, perfectly happy to die because he thought he had a sure ticket to heaven. My guess was they didn't even give Green Stamps on that trip.




The more I thought about the thing on the wall, the more I stewed. Did people such as that, the sunny kid on his knees and whoever wrote the catchy verse, even know anyone who died? They ought to ask me. I could tell them how white crosses on the shoulder of the highway cost far more than any hey-diddle-diddle rhyme about heaven could ever make up for, and what agony it is to wait for the result of something happening in a distant hospital with a white cross

out front. Already I was missing Gram so mightily I felt half sick every time she crossed my mind, the cook shack years with her a separate life beyond the inventiveness of even my imagination, not an easy existence in any way yet worth it to have one last guardian to put up with my redheaded thinking.

What was going through me, truthfully, was a new and different fear of losing her, if the day's operation proved not have turned out all right. Queerly, the overwhelming dread I'd had before parting with her there at the ranch, that one way or the other--death and the poorfarm went together in my mind--this troubling summer might take Gram from me by the time the dog bus brought me back to Montana, that original anxiety now gave way to one much more immediate. Ending up back there as a ward of the county and thrown to chance in the orphanage the other side of the mountains would be awful enough. Yet what if, instead, the only future I had was under jailbar-like rafters in Wisconsin? Captive to an aunt who not only was not Kate Smith, but thought I must be missing a part between my ears?

Nor could I see any clear way out if Aunt Kate as my last remaining blood relative--I wasn't sure what Herman, formerly Dutch, counted as--decided to keep me if Gram no longer was in the picture. Three perforated ten-dollar bills would not carry a person very far in running away, would they. I'd have to think about that a lot more, but for the time being, the only advice I could find for myself was that bit whispered from those interrupted existences Gram kept in touch with. Hunch up and take it.

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

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

"Donny? Are you sleeping?"

"I guess not."

"Good. I come in."

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

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

This was a case where you could tell a book by its cover. *Deadly Dust*, with cowboys riding full-tilt while firing their six-shooters at a band of war-painted Indians chasing them in a cloud of dust. At first glimpse it might have been any of the Max Brand or Luke Short or Zane Grey shoot-'em-ups popular in the Double W bunkhouse, but the name under the title was a new one on me. Recalling my earlier encounter with the kind of person who spelled his perfectly ordinary name with a *K*, I asked skeptically, "Who's this Karl May guy?"

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

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

# 10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Toast does not need help!"

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

Whoa. I backed off to the bathroom, out of range of the blowup in the kitchen, in a hurry. Staying in there a good long while, I ran the faucets full blast

and flushed the toilet a couple of times to announce my presence, and finally cracked the door open to test the atmosphere. Not a sound of any kind. Deafening silence, to call it that, was spooky in its own way and maybe not an improvement, but I couldn't stay in the bathroom permanently. Mustering all the courage I had, I approached the deadly quiet kitchen.

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

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

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

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

Around Gram, that question never came up. I simply took my place at the long table along with Meredice Williamson and Sparrowhead and the riders and the choreboy, and ate what a ranch cook cooked, mush and hotcakes and fried

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

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

Swallowing on that fact, if not much else, I found a bowl in the cupboard as she directed and a milk bottle in the refrigerator and spied the sugar bowl and did what I could to turn the dry cereal into a soup of milk and sugar. A parent would have jumped right on me for that, but she paid no attention.

Evidently the kind of person who did not have much to say in the morning--although that was not what it had sounded like from the stairwell--she kept on drinking coffee and going through the paper, occasionally letting out a high-pitched hum of interest or exasperation at some item, as I spooned down the puffed-up cereal. The scatterings of crust on what must have been Herman's plate seemed like a fuller meal than mine.

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

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

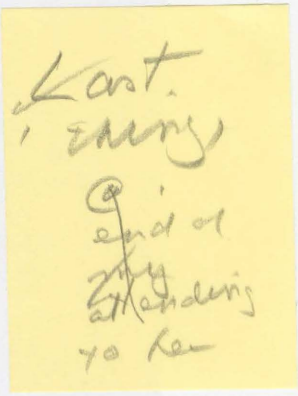
"This is she," I learned a new diction while attending to my toast. That voice of hers turned melodious even in talking on the phone, rising and falling with the conversation. "Yes. Yes. You're very kind to call. That's good to know." Wouldn't it be something if people sounded like that all the time,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

"Donny, come to the phone."

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

"Hello? This is... he."

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



I breathed again, some.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That got me started, almost as if I was back on the dog bus telling yarns free and easy. For Herman's benefit as well as my own longing for the Double W, I visualized the crew as they sat up to the long table laden with Gram's cooking, everyone taking the same place every meal strictly according to longevity in the bunkhouse or higher rank in running the ranch, Wendell Williamson of course by inheritance at the head of the table in spite of the fact, as I made perfectly plain to an intrigued Herman, that the cows had more brains than he did, then Meredice doggedly next to him when she hadn't managed to scoot to California, and beside her, Gram's spot, when she was not on her feet hustling food dishes to and from the table. At Sparrowhead's other side presided the foreman with a drooping gray mustache, Cal Petrie, who actually divvied out the day's orders to the crew, then came the choreboy, always some old hand too crippled up to ride horseback any more, slowgoing Thurl Everson the current one. By some kind of ranch creed strict as the Bible, those five all rated chairs, and the bunkhouse men lined themselves out on backless benches down both sides of the table.

Cowboys such as them were a shifting picture, honesty compelled me to stress to my rapt one-man audience, with somebody like the oldtimer Joe Henty, bowlegged as a pair of pliers, spending his life riding the range where cattle with the Double Dub brand roamed hither and yonder, while someone else--a widely known wrangler of recent vintage called Runaway Shea came to mind--barely mussed the blankets on his bunk before blowing his wages in town on a weeklong drunk and moving on to the next ranch that would take a chance on his corral skill with its ponies.

Puffing away on his stogie and babying his plants with spoonfuls of fertilizer and careful irrigation from a long-necked watering can--a couple of times I interrupted myself to go and fill it for him from the spigot at the back of the house--Herman listened to all that as though I were a storyteller right up there with his idol who wrote the pile of books about cowboys and Indians, encouraging me with an occasional "Hah!"

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

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

Somehow I felt better for having poured out that much of the tale, even if it went into squarehead ears, so to speak. Whatever his background, I was finding Herman to be the one thing about Wisconsin that I felt vaguely comfortable with, despite his evident quirks and odd appearance. In most ways, he was homely as a pickle. That elongated face and the prominent teeth, taken together with the cockeyed gaze magnified by his glasses, gave him the look of someone loopy enough that you might not want to sit right down next to, although of course there I was, plotched beside him like just another potted plant. Together with everything else in the humid greenhouse, he himself seemed to have sprouted, his stooped shoulders topping my head as he stretched from his stool here and there to reach

into his menagerie of vegetation, his big knuckles working smoothly as machine parts in crimping a leaf off a tomato plant near its root--"Pinch their bottoms is good for them," he told me with a naughty grin--or tying a lagging bean stalk to a support stick. The dappled light streaming through the glass ceiling and walls brought out the silver in his faded fair hair, which I suspected made him older than Aunt Kate, although there was no real telling. I'd have bet anything gray hair did not stand a chance on her; she would rather, as not much of a joke had it, dye by her own hand.

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

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

I tipped my head back and must have gaped, my eyes adjusting even if my brain was lagging. When looked at closely, reversed faces spookily gazed down from every glass pane, eyes and hair empty of color while the rest of the countenance was dark as night. Bygone people, for I could make out old styles of men's collars and women's hairdos--the lady who appeared on my hand again when I hesitantly put it out and held it at the right distance to bring her portrait pose into full miniature was done up in marcel curls, her probably black tresses tumbling ever so neatly down the sides of her head.

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

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

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

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

I more or less grasped that, but still was spooked enough to ask in neary a whisper:

"Who are they?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I watched her pick her way to the DeSoto, and drive off speedily. Showing less interest in the tomato plant now, Herman peered at me through his specs. "The Kate thinks we can't feed us. Puh." Given what the woman of the house had put on the table so far, I was perfectly willing to try bachelor grub if it came to that.

"Now then," he luxuriously mimicked that word combination of hers that made less sense the more you thought about it, patting around on himself to find his matches and light up another cigar, as if in celebration of the Kate being gone. He gave me a man-to-man grin. "So how do you like Manito Woc?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yah, like Gitche Gumee, from the poem?"

He looked saddened when I had to tell him I was not up on Hiawatha.

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

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

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

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

Supposedly it takes one to know one, right? So, then and there my own sometimes overly active mind, red in the head or however the condition of seeing things for more than they are can best be described, was forced to acknowledge that this odd bespectacled yah-saying garden putterer and henpecked husband, fully five times older than me, had a king hell bastard of an imagination. Possibly outdoing my own, which I know is saying a lot. Wherever Herman Schmidt got it from, he'd held onto the rare quality that usually leaves a person after a certain number of years as a kid, to let what he had read possess him. I saw now why Aunt Kate was forever at him about taking to heart too much the stories of Karl May in what seemed to be, well, squarehead Westerns. Not that I wanted to side with her, storyteller of a sort that I sometimes turned into. But from my experience of his mental workings so far, notions Herman had picked up out of

books did not appear to be condensed from their imaginative extent any at all, let alone properly digested.

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

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

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

With an opening like that, how could I resist?

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

"Heart? Like gives us life, yah?"

"Yeah--I mean, yes, same word anyhow."

Herman leaned way toward me, cigar forgotten for the moment. "Heart Bee-yoot. Bee-yootiful name. Tell more."

I didn't bother to say that was the only thing of any beauty at the remote and tough little Blackfoot Reservation school where, around Dwayne Left Hand and Vern Rides Proud, I wisely kept my trap shut about my Red Chief nickname and endured being called Whitey and Brookie for the freckles that reminded them

of the speckles on Eastern brook trout. That Heart Butte schoolyard with its rough teasing and impromptu fistfights was at least as educational as the schoolroom. But if Herman was gaga about things Indian, here was my perfect chance to confide the Red Chief nickname to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One thing about hanging around with Herman, time went by like a breeze. That noontime, with Aunt Kate gone to canasta, the house was without commotion as Herman assembled lunch, laying out the kind of store bread that came sliced and without taste, but cutting into a loaf of what I figured was lunchmeat. I stayed out of the way by reading the funnies in the newspaper and so didn't pay any attention to what he was making until he called me to the table. "Meal fit for an earl."

When I looked blank at that, he winked and said, "Earl of Sandwich, invented guess what."

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

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

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

This Wisconsin incarceration evidently requiring digestive juices of various kinds, I stayed at the table stewing on matters, trying to assimilate what all had

happened since my arrival into this unnerving household, while Herman pottered at washing up our few dishes. When he was done and hanging up the dish towel in a fussy way not even the Kate could criticize, I ventured: "Can I ask you a sort of personal thing?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the shake of my head, he instructed, "This is ore boat. *Badger Voyager*, pretend. Table is Great Lakes. Gee-oh-graphy lesson, hah?"

Plotching a hand here and there across the table top, he named off the bodies of water--Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, Ontario--while I paid strict

attention as if about to be called on in class. Done with that, he steered the sugar bowl toward me.

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

Very instructive, yes, if you were interested in that kind of thing. "But what about--"

"'Dutch', yah. Coming to that."

He peered at the sugar bowl through his strong glasses as if encouraging me to have a close look, too. "He is on the ore boat, see. Me, I mean. Twenty years." Pride shown out of him as he sat back, shoulders squared nearly enough to burst out of his shirt, in making the pronouncement, "A stoker I was."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I show you."

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

"Strait of Mackinaw," he pronounced the word that is spelled *Mackinac*. For some moments, he didn't say anything more, a tic working at the corner of his eye as if he had something in it, all the while staring at the imaginary piece of water. At last he said in a strained voice: "Bad place any old time. Bad and then some when Witch of November comes."

Another one of those? One more Great Spirit of Gitche Gumee or whatever, I didn't need. My skin was starting to crawl again just from how he'd said that. "Herman, hey, really, is this like Manitou, because I don't think we ought to be fooling around with--"

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

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

"Wind like you never saw."

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

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

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

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

Drowning like a cat in a sack was definitely no good, as he'd said about throwing money in the garbage. That description did make quite a bit of an impression, I had to admit. But we still weren't anywhere near how the name Dutch went down with the ship and Herman was sitting there big as life. Maybe I was being a sucker, but I said, "Go on,"

"Night of thirtieth of November, *Badger Voyager* gets to Strait of Mackinac," his voice growing husky as he maneuvered the sugar bowl. "We feel lucky, no Witch that year. Then big storm comes up, middle of night--Witch of November saving up all month, hah? Worst I was in, ever." Sugar shook from the bowl, he quivered it so hard. "The *Badger Voyager* sinked, like I say. Big waves broke her in half," he lifted his hands and mimicked snapping a branch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Glass," he said with a half wink this time, donning the eyeglasses again. "Like a greenhouse of the head, hah? Only it grows this, from the ship company." He rubbed his thumb and fingers together, which with a penniless pang I recognized meant money. "Dutch is name buried at sea," he dropped his voice as if at a funeral. "Herman stays on land, no more Witches of November."

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

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

So, after lunch when Herman went off for a nap--"Shuteye is good for the digestion," he surprised me yet again--I figured I had better show some progress on the jigsaw puzzle or I'd hear about it from Aunt Kate when she came home. Spilling out the pieces that half covered the card table and sorting the ones of different colors with my finger, I had quite a stretch of the sky-blue top edge fitted into place, strategy recalled from having done the damn thing before, working my

way down onto George Washington's acre of forehead, when I heard the DeSoto groaning up the driveway and then Aunt Kate's clickety high heels on the kitchen floor, instantly stilled when she reached the plush living room rug.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And now, can you believe it, Minnie Zettel is going off on a long visit," Aunt Kate mourned as if Minnie Zettel was also going off the rails. "Why anyone would be gallivanting off to St. Louis in the summertime, I do not know. She will

melt down until there is nothing left of her but toenails and shoe polish, and it will serve her right."

Her chins quivered in sorrow or anger, I couldn't tell which, but maybe both--they were double chins, after all--as she fumed, "The other girls and I are beside ourselves with her for leaving us in the lurch."

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

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

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

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

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

"Good. Then you can learn canasta and fill in for Minnie."

I don't know if my hair stood straight on end at that or what. While I didn't actually think she was ordering me to put on a girdle and a dress and sit for

hours on end in some wacky card game with three gossipy old women, it amounted to the same. Instinctively I was filled with misgivings and couldn't help that it was written all over me.

Aunt Kate busily began dismissing my swarm of doubts before I could sputter them out, cranking her chairback up higher with every burst of sentence. "There's no way around it, we need a fourth for canasta and that's that."

Upright in the chair by now and facing me dead-on, she manufactured a sort of smile. "You needn't look so alarmed, kitten. I'll teach you the ins and outs of the game. We have an entire week for you to learn, isn't that lucky? It will help take your mind off your imagination, mmm?"

Still speechless, I tried to think how to head her off in more ways than one as she heaved herself out of the recliner and quickstepped over to me. "Now then. It's too bad, but we need the card table."

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