The town of Gros Ventre was so far from anywhere that you had to take a bus to catch the bus. At that time, remote locales like ours were served by a homegrown enterprise with more name than vehicles, the Rocky Mountain Stage Line and Postal Courier, in the form of a lengthened Chevrolet sedan that held ten passengers besides the driver and the mailbag, and when I nervously went to climb in for the first time ever, the less than ample bus was already loaded with a ladies’ club heading home from an outing to Glacier National Park. The only seat left was in the back next to the mailbag, sandwiched between it and a hefty grayhaired woman clutching her purse to herself as though stage robbers were still on the loose in the middle of the twentieth century.

The swarm of apprehensions nibbling at me had not included this. Sure enough, no sooner did we pull out for Great Falls and the Greyhound station there than my substantial seatmate leaned my way enough to press me into the mailbag and asked in that tone of voice a kid so much dreads, “And where are you off to, all by your lonesome?”
How things have changed in the world. I see the young people of today traveling the planet with their individual backpacks and weightless independence. Back then, on the epic journey that determined my life and drastically turned the course of others, I lived out of my grandmother's wicker suitcase and carried a responsibility bigger than I was. Many, many miles bigger, as it turned out. But that lay ahead, where fame sometimes led the list of attractions and sometimes was cruelly crossed off, and meanwhile I heard myself pipe up with an answer neither she nor I were ready for, that my destination was none other than Pleasantville. When she cocked her head way to one side and said she couldn't think where that was, I hazarded, "It's around New York."

To this day, I wonder what made me say any of that. Maybe the colorful wall map displaying Greyhound routes COAST TO COAST--THE FLEET WAY, back there in the hotel lobby that doubled as the Gros Ventre bus depot, stuck in my mind. Maybe my imagination answered for me, like being called on in school utterly unready and a whisper of help arrives out of nowhere, right or not. Maybe the truth scared me too much.

Whatever got into me, one thing all too quickly led to another as the woman clucked in concern and expressed, "That's a long way to go all by yourself. I'd be such a bundle of nerves." Sizing me up in a way I would come to recognize in people, as if I was either a very brave boy or a very ignorant one, she persisted: "What takes you so awful far?"

"Oh, my daddy works there."

"Isn't that interesting. And what does he do in, where's it, Pleasantville?"

It's funny about imagination, how it can add to your peril even while it momentarily comes to your rescue. I had to scramble to furnish, "Yeah, well, see, he's a digester."
"You don’t say! Wait till I tell the girls about this!" Her alarming exclamation had the other ladies, busy gabbing about mountain goats and summertime snowbanks and other memorable attractions of Glacier National Park, glancing over their shoulders at us. I shrank farther into the mailbag, but my fellow passenger dipped her voice to a confidential level.

"Tries out food to see if it agrees with the tummy, does he," she endorsed enthusiastically, patting her own. "I’m glad to hear it," she rushed on. "So much of what a person has to buy comes in cans these days, I’ve always thought they should have somebody somewhere testing those things on the digestion—that awful succotash about does me in—before they let any of it in the stores. Good for him." Bobbing her head in vigorous approval, she gave the impression she wouldn’t mind that job herself, and she certainly had the capacity for it.

"Uh, actually," maybe I should have but I couldn’t let go of my own imaginative version of the digestive process, "it’s books he does that to. At the Reader’s Digest place."

There was a story behind this, naturally. I lived with my grandmother, who was cook at the Double W, the big cattle ranch near Gros Ventre owned by the wealthy Williamson family. One of the few sources of entertainment anywhere on the ranch happened to be the shelf of sun-faded Reader’s Digest Condensed Books kept by Meredice Williamson in the otherwise unused parlor of the many-roomed house, and in her vague nice way she had allowed me to take any of them to the cook shack to read, as long as Gram approved. Gram had more than enough on her mind without policing my reading, and lately I had worked my way through the shipboard chapters of Mr. Roberts, not so condensed that I couldn’t figure out what those World War Two sailors were peeking at through binoculars aimed to the bathroom on shore where nurses took showers.
Probably during that reading binge my eye caught on the fine print Pleasantville NY in the front of the book as the source of digested literature, and it did not take any too much inspiration, for me at least, to conjure a father back there peacefully taking apart books page by page and putting them back together in shortened form that somehow enriched them like condensed milk.

"Why, I have those kind of books!" my fellow passenger vouched, squeezing her purse in this fresh enthusiasm. "I read The Egg and I practically in one sitting!"

"He’s real famous back there at the digest place," I kept on. "They give him the ones nobody else can do. What’s the big fat book, Go Like the Wind--"

"Gone With the Wind, you mean?" She was properly impressed any digester would tackle something like that. "It’s as long as the Bible!"

"That’s the one. See, he got it down to about like yay," I backed that up with my thumb and finger no more than an inch apart.

"What an improvement," she bought the notion with a gratified nod.

That settled matters down, thanks to a war-time story cooked down to the basics of bare-naked nurses and a helping of my imagination. The spacious woman took over the talking pretty much nonstop and I eased away from the U.S. mail a bit in relief and provided uh-huh or huh-uh as needed while the small bus cruised at that measured speed buses always seem to travel at, even in the widest of wide open spaces like Montana’s. There we sat, close as churchgoers, while she chatted away the miles in her somber best dress that must have seen service at funerals and weddings, and me in stiff new bluejeans bought for the trip. Back then, you dressed up to go places.

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

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

Mercifully the highway soon curved and we passed Freezout Lake with its
islands of snowy pelicans, within sight of the one-room Tetonia school where I
went part of one year, marked mainly by the Christmas play in which I was the
Third Wise Man, costumed in my mother’s pinned-up bathrobe. A little farther
on, where the bus route turned its back on the Rockies to cross the Greenfield
Canal of the huge irrigation project, I was transported once more to a summer of
jigging for trout at canal headgates.

What a haze of thoughts came over me like that as memory went back and
forth, dipping and accelerating like a speedometer keeping up with a hilly road.
Passing by it all with everything unfamiliar ahead, maybe too much of a youngster
to put the right words to the sensation but old enough to feel it in every part, I can
only say I was meeting myself coming and going, my shifting life until then
intersecting with the onrushing days ahead.

That near-stranger who was me, with his heart in his throat, I look back
on with wonder now that I am as grayhaired as my talky companion on the Chevy
bus was. The boy I see is a stocky grade-schooler, freckled as a spotted hyena,
big for his age but with a lot of room to grow in other ways. Singled out by fate
to live a story he will never forget, I wish for him that things could have been
different enough then to let this boy on a bus start off as if on a grand adventure,
turned loose in the world at an age when most kids couldn’t unknot themselves
from the apron strings of home. He has never been out of Montana, barely even
out of the Two Medicine country, and now the nation stretches ahead of him, as
unknown and open to the imagination as Pleasantville. And he knows from
Condensed Books that unexpected things, good about as often as bad, happen to
people all the time, which ought to be at least interesting, right? On top of it all, if worse comes to worst, tucked in those new bluejeans is a roundtrip ticket home.

But that was the catch. Home to what, from what?

I must have been better than I thought at hiding my double-edged fear, because the chatterbox at my side seemed not to notice anything troubling me until I shifted restlessly in my seat because the object in my pants pocket had slipped down to where I was half sitting on it and was jabbing me something fierce.

“ Aren’t you comfortable? Heavens to Betsy, why didn’t you say so? Here, I’ll make room.” With a grunt she wallowed away from me a couple of inches.

“ Huh-uh, it’s not that,” I had to confess as she watched my contortions with concern, because I still needed to squirm around and reach deep into my pants to do something about the matter. Knowing I dare not show it to her, I palmed the thing and managed to slip it into my jacket pocket sight unseen while I alibied, “ My, ah, good luck charm sort of got caught crosswise. A rabbit’s foot on a key chain,” I thought up, hoping that would ward her off.

“ Oh, those,” she made a face, “ they sell the awful things so many places these days I’m surprised the bunnies have any tootsies left.” With that, to my relief she went back to dishing out topic after topic in her chirpy voice.

“ Donal,” she eventually got around to pondering my name as if it was one of the mysteries of the ages. “ Without the d on the end? That’s a new one on me.”

“ It’s Scotch, is why,” I came to life and informed her quick as a flash. “ My daddy said—says the Camerons, see, that’s us, were wearing kilts when the English still were running around buck naked.”
From the way her eyebrows went up, that seemed to impress her. Emboldened, I confided: “You know what else, though? I have an Indian name, too.”

Her eyebrows stayed lofted as for once I leaned in her direction, and half whispered as if it was just our secret: “Red Chief.”

She tittered. “Now you’re spoofing.”

People can be one surprise after another. Here she hadn’t let out a peep of doubt about anything I’d reeled off so far, but now when I told her something absolutely truthful, she clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth the funny way that means That’s a good one.

“No, huh-uh, honest!” I protested. “It’s because of my hair, see?” My floppy pompadour, almost always in need of a haircut, was about as red as anything from the Crayola box. And if that didn’t earn me a tribal alias, I didn’t know what did. Maybe, as Gram would tell me when I got carried away with something, this was redheaded thinking. It seemed only logical to me, though. If Donal was tagged on me when I came into the world bald as babies are, didn’t it make sense to have a spare that described how I turned out? Indians did it all the time, I was convinced. In the case of our family, it would only have complicated things for my listener to explain to her that my alternate name had come from my father’s habit of ruffling my hair, from the time I was little, and saying something like, “You’ve got quite a head on you, Red Chief.”

My seatmate had heard enough, it seemed, as now she leaned toward me and simpered, “Bless your buttons, I have a grandson about your age, a livewire like you. He’s just thirteen.” Eleven going on twelve as I was, I mutely let “about” handle that, keeping a smile pasted on as best I could while she went on at tireless length about members of her family and what I supposed passed for normal life in the America of nineteen fifty-one.
That fixed smile was really slipping by the time we pulled in to the Great Falls bus depot and everyone piled out. As the club ladies tendered their goodbyes to each other, in one last gush my backseat companion wished me a safe trip and reminded me to be sure to tell my father how much she enjoyed digested books. I blankly promised I would, my heart hammering as I grabbed my suitcase and headed on to the next bus ride which, while way short of coast to coast, was going to carry me far beyond where even my imagination could reach.
“Why dumb old Wisconsin, though?” I’d tried not to sound like I was whining, at the beginning of this. “Can’t I just stay here while you’re operated on?”

“You know better than that.” Gram went down on her knees with a sharp intake of breath to dig out the wicker suitcase from under her bed. “They need the cook shack for whatever gut-robber Wendell Williamson hires next.”

“Yeah, but--” In a panic I looked around the familiar tight quarters, lodgings for Double W cooks since time immemorial, not much more than a cabin-size room and a few sticks of furniture, yet it had providently housed the pair of us the past two years and if we were being kicked out, temporarily or not, I couldn’t help clinging to whatever I could. “I can stay on the ranch, I mean. Be in the bunkhouse with the haying crew, why not. I bet nobody would care and I wouldn’t take up hardly any room and--”

“For one thing, Donny, you’re not old enough for that.” Trying not be cross with me but awful close to it, she squinted my direction through the bifocals
that made her look like her eyes hurt along with the rest of her. "For another, Wendell may be short on brains, but he’s still not about to let you gallivant around the ranch on your own. So don’t talk just to hear your head rattle, we need to get a move on or you’ll miss the mail bus." After more or less dusting off the suitcase, which was the best that could be done with wicker, she flopped the thing open on my bed. I didn’t care that it came from the old country with my grandfather’s father or somebody, to me it was just outdated and rickety and I’d look like some ridiculous comic-strip character--PeeWee, the dimwitted little hobo in “Just Trampin’” readily came to mind--carrying it around. Ignoring my fallen face, Gram directed, “Hurry up now. Go pick out your shirts. Three will have to do you, to start with.”

I stalled. “I don’t know what to take. What’s the dumb weather like back there?”

“About like anyplace else,” she said less than patiently, “summer in the summer, winter in the winter. Get busy.”

Grudgingly I went over to the curtained-off nook that substituted for our closet. “Fuck and phooey,” I said under my breath as I sorted through shirts. I was at that stage--part of growing up, as I saw it--where cusswords were an attraction, and I’d picked up this expression from one of the cowhands being sent out in the rain to ride herd on stray cattle all day. It applied equally well to a dumb bus trip to Wisconsin, as far as I was concerned.

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

“Fine and dandy,” I mumbled as if I’d been talking to the shirts, and grabbed a couple I usually wore to school and my dressy western one. “Put that on to wear on the bus,” Gram directed from where she was aggregating my underwear and socks out of the small dresser we shared, “and these,” surprising
me with the new blue jeans still in store folds. “People will think you’re a bronc rider.”

Oh sure, a regular Rags Rasmussen, champion of the world at straddling saddle broncs, that’d be me, riding the bus like a hobo with a broken-down suitcase. Knowing enough not to say that out loud, I stuck to: “I bet they haven’t even got rodeos in Wiss-con-sun.”

“Don’t whine.” Cheering me up was a lost cause, but she made the effort. “Honest to goodness, you’ll look swayve and debo-nure when you get on the bus.” I took that as a joke in more ways than one, suave and debonair the farthest from how I could possibly feel, packaged up to be shipped like something out of a mail-order catalogue. She gave me a wink, not natural to her, and that didn’t help either. Folding things expeditiously like the veteran of many moves that she was, she had the suitcase nearly packed while I wordlessly changed into the stiff pants and the purple shirt with sky blue yoke trimming and pearl snap buttons, which ordinarily would have lifted my mood but not today. Back and forth between gauging packing space and my long face, Gram hesitated. “You can take the moccasins if you want to.”

“I guess so.” Truth told, I didn’t care what else went in the hideous suitcase as long as those did. The pair of decorated Blackfoot moccasins rested between our beds at night, so whichever one of us had to brave the cold linoleum to go to the toilet could slip them on. Each adorned with a prancing fancy-dancer figure made up of teeny beads like drops of snow and sky, they were beauties, and that couldn’t be said for any other of our meager stuff. Gram somehow had acquired them while she was night cook at the truck stop in Browning, the rough and tough reservation town, before she and I were thrown together. By rights, she deserved them. My conscience made a feeble try. “Maybe you’ll need them in the--where you’re going?”
"Never you mind. They’ll have regular slippers there, like as not,” she fibbed, I could tell. “And after”—staying turned away from me, she busied herself more than necessary tucking the moccasins into the suitcase—“the nuns will see to things, I’m sure.”

After. After she had some of her insides taken out. After I had been sent halfway across the country, to a place in Wisconsin I had never even heard of. My voice breaking, I mustered a last protest. “I don’t want to go and leave you.”

“Don’t be a handful, please,” she said, something I heard from her quite often. She took off her glasses, one skinny earpiece at a time, to wipe her eyes. “I’d rather take a beating than have to send you off like this, but it can’t be helped.” She blinked as if that would make the glistening go away, and my own eyes stung from watching. “These things happen, that’s how life is. I can hear your granddad now, ‘We just have to hunch up and take it.”’ Gram kept in touch with people who were no longer living. These were not ghosts to her, nor for that matter to me, simply interrupted existences. My grandfather died long before I was born, but I heard the wise words of Pete Blegen many times as though he were standing close beside her. Straightening herself now as if the thought of him had put new backbone in her, she managed a trembling smile. “Nell’s bells, boy, don’t worry so.”

I didn’t give in. “Maybe I could just go to the hospital with you and the nuns would let me live with them and—”

“That’s not how something like this is done,” she said tiredly, “don’t you understand at all? Kitty and Dutch are the only relatives we have left, like it or not. You have to go and stay with them for the summer while I get better,” she put it to me one last time in just so many words. “You’ll do fine by yourself,” she maintained. “You’re on your own a lot of the time around here anyway.”
living in a hide warehouse in there.” That may have been so, but the ranch headquarters, the so-called boss house with its dark wooded rooms and manly leather-covered furniture and bearhide rugs and horned or antlered heads of critters on the walls--most spectacularly, that of the bull elk shot by Teddy Roosevelt on one of his visits to the ranch before being president took up his time--held a sneaking allure for me. Cowhide furniture and trophy heads can do that to you when you‘ve lived the bare-bones style Gram and I were stuck with.

I went in the kitchen door without knocking, as the kitchen and the adjoining windowed porch where the ranch crew ate at a twenty-foot-long table were Gram’s domain, where I hung around to lick the bowls when she was baking and even did small chores for her like taking out the ashes and filling the woodbox. Pausing in the familiar surroundings to gather myself, I gazed around for possibly the last time at the cookstove of the old kind that cooks called a hellbox and the creaky cupboards and the rest of the tired kitchenware Gram had made do with, three times a day, three hundred sixty-five days a year, as the latest in the succession of Double W cooks fending with a shortage of modern conveniences and a surplus of Wendell Williamson, classic tightfisted employer. I swallowed hard. What I was about to do was a gamble, but I was a hundred percent sure it would work. Well, fifty percent at least, the rest maybe the kind of hope only someone at that age can have. “Hunch up and take it” might be good enough advice if you were willing to go through life like a jackrabbit in a hailstorm, but I was determined to try for better than that.

Getting ready, I smoothed open the autograph book. A memory book, was another name for it, because collecting autographs really was an excuse to have people dab in some lasting bit of wisdom, humor, or simply something supremely silly along with their signature.
course, remained to be determined, but I was working at it. And this next autograph request counted double, in a sense.

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

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

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

“Donny, I’d rather pull my tongue out than tell you this, but you can’t keep it.”
"W-why not? That's not fair!" Dismay sent my voice high. "I'm the one who found it, and if I hadn't, it'd still be there in the creek and the haying crew might break it when they pull the stacker across, and so I saved its life, sort of, and I don't see why I can't--"

"You can talk that way until you're blue, but I just don't like your having something that rightfully might be theirs," she laid down the law as she saw it. "Sparrowhead makes the riders turn in anything like this they come across, you know that." I absolutely could not see why the Williamsons were entitled to something that had fallen to the ground probably before the ranch even existed, but Gram's mind was made up. "Go on up to the house and give it to him."

"Good eye, Buckshot." was all the thanks I got from Wendell Williamson when I did so. "Lucky to find one of these. It's pre-Columbian." He liked to say things like that to show he had been to college, although Gram claimed it only went to prove he was an educated fool besides a natural-born one. Anyway, when I looked up the meaning of the phrase in the Webster's dictionary Meredice Williamson kept in the bookcase with the condensed books, I was awed. Older than Columbus! That made the black arrowhead even more magical for me. Just think, it had lain there all those hundreds of years, until as the man himself said I was lucky enough to be the one to find it. Equally unlucky, it had to be admitted, to be forced to part company with it. Well, that would not have to happen for good if my gamble of calling on the boss of the Double W paid off in that way, too.

With hope and trepidation, I now approached the office. The door was open, but I knew to knock anyway.

When he saw it was me, Wendell Williamson sat back in his swivel chair behind the desk which Gram claimed was the only thing on the ranch he knew how to operate. "What can I do you for, Buckshot?"
This was new territory for me, as I had only ever peeked in when he was not there, taking in with all due curiosity the large Charlie Russell painting of riders wrangling cattle with a picturesque square butte opportunely in the background, the many years of maroon ledgers shelved along the walls, and the surprisingly rickety mahogany breakfront where whiskey surely was kept. The room smelled of tobacco and old hides like the mountain lion skin and head draped over a cabinet in one corner, enough to set a visitor back a little, but I advanced as though life depended on it. “Hi,” I said, my voice higher than intended.

The man behind the desk, no taller nor heftier than average, had a kind of puffy appearance, from his fleshy hands to a pillow-like girth to an excessive face, his hairline in deep retreat until a cluster of curly gray in the vicinity of his ears. Gram called him Sparrowhead behind his back because of what she believed was the quality of birdbrain under that jag of hair. Or sometimes her remarks about her employer were more along the line that he was the sort of person who’d drown kittens to keep himself busy. Regardless of what she thought of him, or he of her, they had maintained a prickly standoff, the boss of the ranch reluctant to fire the tart-tongued cook because of her skill at feeding a crew on the cheap, and the often-disgusted mealmaker who ruled the kitchen putting up with his stingy ways on account of me.

Gram’s bad turn of health was about to bring all that to a crashing end, if I couldn’t do something about it. Wendell—I didn’t dare think of him as Sparrowhead just then—was examining me as if he hadn’t seen me every day of the past couple of years. “I hear you’re getting a trip to Minnesota.”

“Wisconsin.”

“Nuhhuh.” This strangulated utterance was habit of his. Gram said it made him sound like he was constipated in the tonsils. “It amounts to about the
same, back there.” I suppose trying to be civil, he drawled, “Come to say ‘Aw river,’ have you?”

The joke about “Au revoir,” if that was what it was, went over my head. “Uh, not exactly,” I stammered in spite of myself. “It’s about something else.”

He waited expressionlessly for me to get it out. Heaven only knew what rash requests had been heard in this office down through the years by one poker-faced Double W boss or the next. None quite like mine, though. “What it is, I want to get your autograph.”

Suspicious I was making fun of him for booting us out of the cook shack, he gave me a beady look. I quickly displayed the autograph book. “Mered--Mrs. Williamson already put in her name and a sort of ditty for me.”

That changed his look, not necessarily for the better. “She did you the honor, did she. You must have caught her when she wasn’t packing up for Beverley Hills again.” Thinking it over to the very end, he reluctantly put out a paw-like hand, saying he guessed he’d better keep up with her any way he could.

Taking the album 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*

*in the great state of Montana*

“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?”
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 cuss 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.”
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 was not 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.


“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
the Rockies was dwarfed in comparison and only any good for plowing, not a cow or horse anywhere in sight. 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. Things had been tossed turvy, and although I was the one cast out alone onto a transcontinental 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 to a terrifying extent what losing the world you have known means. Too many times had I 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.

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

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

The list didn’t stop there. These shirttail relatives I was going to be stuck with for an endless summer--why hadn’t this Kitty and Dutch pair, the Brinkers by name, 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.

I could have gone on and on like that, nose against the window and feeling sorry for myself, but that gets old, too. Stirring myself so plowed fields would not bore me out of my skull, to be doing anything I took out the autograph book. It opened to In the game of life, don’t lose your marbles. Right. If you were lucky enough to own any marbles to start with. Moodily I moved on from the Double W brand of advice, flipping to the front of the book. Naturally, Gram’s was the very first inscription. Wouldn’t a person think, in a nice autograph book that she’d spent real money for, she would have carefully written something like To my one and only grandson... Instead, in her scrawl that barely did for grocery lists:
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 when I hit it lucky, a bigshot like Senator Ridpath when he spoke in the Gros Ventre park on the Fourth of July. That was my prize one so far; the Senator was surely famous, if for nothing more than having been in office almost forever. 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 the pen being mightier than the sword composed there as balanced as a poem.

The Senator's elegant citation was even more fitting than he could have known, because along with the autograph book, Gram had given me my very own ballpoint pen--not the plain old type 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 a dog bus full of passengers, as captive I was, possibly presented a chance to fill a good many more of those pages with purplish inscriptions.

Sitting up as if I’d had a poke in the ribs, I uncertainly snuck a look toward the back of the bus for likely 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 wondered.

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

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

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

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

What had stopped me cold was her signature. \textit{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 nibbled her lip, disturbing the lipstick a bit, 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.*

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 nibbled her lip. “Something doesn’t seem quite right about that, don’t you think? Anyway, that’s why I’m wearing my work shirt,” meaning 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 flexed that finger away from the others. “My husband’s still in Browning. Tends bar there, chasing women on the side. We made a great pair.”
She shrugged as if the next didn’t matter, although even I knew it was the kind of thing that always does. “We split. He was jealous. There was this one trucker, Harv, I got a little involved with. Harv’s some piece of work,” she grinned saying it. “The strong silent type right out of the movies, you know? Doesn’t say much, but when he does, it’s right on the money.” The grin humorously tucked in on itself. “Even looks a little like Gregory Peck if you close one eye a little.” Then her face clouded. “Trouble is, he’s sort of hard to keep up with because he’s on the road so much, trucking here and there. But when he’s around,” her voice dropped to a confidential level, “sparks fly.”

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

“Real as they come.” She blew a smoke ring as I drifted along in the romantic mood. “We’re more or less engaged, or will be when that husband of mine gets it through his thick head to agree to a divorce.” Dabbing the ash off her cigarette, she mused, “Haven’t seen Harv lately, wherever he’s been. Hated to do it, but I had to leave word for him at the Buster that I’ve moved on to the Le Havre.” Then her grin sneaked back infectiously. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder, truer words were never. Harv’s good at catching up on things.”

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

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

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

Reaching in her purse, she took out a compact and redid her lipstick, which
surprised me because she'd already been wearing quite a gob. Working her lips
together to even it out the way women do, when she was satisfied she snapped the
compact shut and asked:

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

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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, which
surprised me because she’d already been wearing quite a gob. Working her lips
together to even it out the way women do, when she was satisfied she snapped the compact shut and asked:

"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.
“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
“Manitowoc.”

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

I repeated the tricky word, adding “My grandmother says it means, ‘Where ghosts live,’ in Indian,” which didn’t seem to help.

“Don’t know it at all. You, Mae?”

“Not a bit. Where in heaven’s sake is it, somewhere far? Back east?”

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

“No, no, it’s in Wisconsin, honest, see.” Producing the autograph book from my jacket pocket, I showed them the precious piece of paper with the Manitowoc address and phone number. And more than that, I told them the whole story, Gram’s scary operation and my parents killed by the drunk driver and the summer ahead of me in the hands of relatives who might as well be ghosts for all I knew about them, and the dog bus proving out Gram’s prediction that it gets all kinds, like the huffy little sheriff who thought I was a runaway and the slick convict who had almost made off with my suitcase--it spilled out of me in a flood, although I did hold back being soundly kissed by a vagabond waitress with Leticia stitched on her breast.

“Whew,” Mr. Schneider whistled when I finally ran down, “you’re a trouper for not letting anything throw you,” and Mrs. Schneider added a flurry of tsk's but the good kind that marveled at all I had been through. They put their heads together and figured out where Manitowoc must be from my ticket that showed I’d have to change buses in Milwaukee and ride for only a couple hours
Milwaukee. The last hazardous stop I had to get through appeared to me endlessly gray and runny, drizzle streaking the bus window, as though the church steeples every block or two poked leaks in the clouds. Either a very religious place or one in serious need of saving from its sins, this big city looked old and set in its ways, streets of stores alike from neighborhood to neighborhood even when the spelling on the windows was different kinds of foreign.

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

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

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

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

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

SHEBOYGAN MANITOWOC WAUSAU EAU CLAIRE

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

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

TUFFY PROPHYLACTICS

THE STRONGEST CONDOM COMING AND GOING!

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

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

Risking one of my few remaining coins, I turned the knob on the machine and into the trough at the bottom dropped a round packet disappointingly small. And when I unwrapped it, the so-called sheath seemed all too thin. Huh. I thought by reputation these things were made of rubber. Instead the material was sort of like fishskin, and while stretchy, didn’t strike me as all that strong. When I dug the arrowhead out of the suitcase and compared lengths, though, the condom thinger looked just about right.
For all I knew, maybe more than one at a time was needed in this matter of protection, like putting on extra socks in zero weather. I had a last couple of quarters left and inserted them one after the other into the Tuffy dispenser, drawing quite a look from a guy at the nearest urinal. Then over in a corner at the sink counter, working carefully, carefully, with a little toilet paper padding to help out, I managed to tug the triple layer of condoms over the arrowhead. Definitely sheathed, it fit in my pocket as not much bigger than an ordinary charm like a rabbit’s foot, and finally felt like a lucky piece should, ready and waiting.

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

Waiting there like that, one stop from my destination, something came over me, a feeling sort of like the start of a cold, but in this case recognizably homesickness about to happen. The funny thing about it, though--odd funny, not funny funny--was that what I was about to miss in the way a person does when familiar surroundings are gone was not the Double W cook shack, nor even the ranch nor Montana in general, but the bus itself. Sitting there in a usual window spot that my fanny by now knew as well as the seat of my pants, the long aisle somehow invisibly crowded with fellow passengers who had come and gone, the
whole Greyhound-grey upholstery of seat cushions and backrests as familiar and comfortable around me as a traveling living room, for the first time I wished I could stay on, keep on going, COAST TO COAST like the showy badge on the driver's cap, just ride the dog bus on through the open-ended summer ahead.

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

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

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

A disorderly line of kids, snaking from side to side like one of those Chinese dragons in a parade, was pouring out of the depot, each with a suitcase in hand. There was an absolute mob of them, and worse than that, entirely boys, and even worse yet, the worst I could imagine, they all were about my age and
there were more than enough redheads among them to confuse anyone. I knew it! Redheaded thinking it surely was, but this clearly was a disaster in the making. Just like I had tried to tell Gram, there was no conceivable way Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch could pick me out, confronted with red mopheads everywhere they looked.

The whole pack of them stormed onto the bus laughing and shoving and talking at the top of their voices as I sat dismally 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 none too friendly 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
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.

“Jeez, 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.

“Oh-huh, it’s cracked a little, too,” I shot back, making them laugh in spite of themselves, and matters relaxed somewhat.

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

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

\[\begin{align*}
&\text{Great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts,} \\
&\text{Mutilated monkey meat.} \\
&\text{Dirty little birdie feet.} \\
&\text{Great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts,} \\
&\text{And me without my spoon.}
\end{align*}\]

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

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

“So,” I blurted the first thing that came to mind, “you guys shoot bows and arrows, like Indians. That’s pretty good.”
“You bet your butt it is.” Unable to resist showing off, Kurt drew back archer-style with an imaginary *twang*, the other two loyally clucking their tongues to provide the *thwock* of arrow hitting target.

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

“How about guns?”

My question silenced them for a full several seconds.

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

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

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

“Magpies.”

“Yeah? What’s those?”

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

“Naw, I don’t think so.” He looked across uncertainly at Gus and Mannie, who were shaking their heads in slack-jawed ignorance of one of the most common birds in Creation. Talk about having a wire down; if any of these three had a brain that worked, it would be lonesome.
“Then how do you make any money?” I pressed my advantage, Kurt still leaning away as if his ass might get shot off from my direction. “See, there’s a bounty on magpies, on account of they eat the eyeballs right out of calves and lambs and things, and”--I had a moment of inspiration-- “they really do gobble gopher guts.” At that, my audience was agog, if slightly green around the gills.

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

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

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

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

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

Now even the would-be holy terrors of the frog world fell still as an announcement boomed out from the driver that we were not stopping in
Sheboygan as scheduled, because no one was ticketed to there and no more passengers could be taken on. Actually, I suspected he was in a hurry to get rid of the mess of campers. No doubt to put minds at rest, so to speak, about a rest room, he added, “Manitowoc in fifteen short minutes.”

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

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

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

I said I sure did, which brought about quite a reaction across the aisle. Gus giggled in Mannie’s face. “Gonna write My name is Manfred Vedder, I’m an old bed wetter, aintcha?”
“Sure, dipshit, just like you’re gonna sign yours Augustus Dussel, that’s me, I barely have brains enough to pee,” Mannie jeered back.

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

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

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

“We’ll get around to it,” he breezed by that. “Letcha know how the frog huntin’ goes.”

Getting really worried, I made a grab for the book. With a laugh, he tossed it across the aisle to Gus, who whooped and 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 swearwords came to my tongue. It was two against one, but they were underneath and I was all over them with flailing limbs. In the scuffle, I elbowed Gus hard enough to take the giggle out of him. Mannie was chanting
“Uh uh uh, don’t be grabby!” when I got on top of him enough to knee him in a bad place and snatch the album back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By then I had seen sixteen hundred miles’ worth of towns, from Palookavilles to the Twin Cities busy as double beehives to gray soppy Milwaukee spiked with churches. At this first sight of Manitowoc, though, I did not know what to think. Houses looked old, and many of them small and with gray siding, on streets with some flower gardens fringing the lawns but none of the 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. I was no whiz at other languages, but I had the awful growing suspicion that if ghosts walked in Manitowoc, they had better speak German to find their way around this weird town.

Like a thunderclap following that realization, the bus rumbled across a drawbridge over a murky river, with half-killed weeds clinging to its banks, and on past huge shed-like buildings with signs saying they were enterprises unknown to me such as boiler works and coal yards. Fortunately I caught a reassuring glimpse of a sparkling grey-blue lake that spilled over the horizon, and the best thing that had yet come into sight, a tremendously long red-painted ship in the harbor with ORE EMPRESS in big white letters on its bow.

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 halted 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 closet-size booth with GREAT LAKES PAYPHONE on it, all the way across the terminal. Payphone? Like a jukebox, was that, where you stuck coins in and a bunch of machinery was set in motion in the guts of the apparatus, or what? Everywhere I had lived, the construction camps, the ranch, telephones were a simple party line where you merely picked up the receiver and dinged two longs and two shorts or whatever the signal was for whoever you were calling. This was not the best time to have to figure out strange new equipment, especially if you were as close to having the heebie-jeebies as I was.

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

Trying to fight down the jitters, I cast another wild gaze around the teeming waiting room hoping for salvation in the form of anyone who might resemble Gram enough to be her sister. No such luck, not even close. People of every shape and form and way of dress, but none showed me any recognition and
of course I couldn’t 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 myself, 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 rabby bastards, were tossing the album around.

Distress hit like an instant paralysis, as a terrible omission caught up with me. Worse, what might be called the commission of an omission. I hadn’t bothered to so much as glance at the phone number or street address even when showing those to the Schneiders. Now I stood rooted there feeling worse off even than I was when stranded in Minneapolis—unmet, my clothing half torn off, as good as lost in a weird 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 surrender, 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 slope-shouldered, the other nearly as broad as the fat lady in a carnival. Longfaced and with that horsy grin and glasses that made his eyes look larger than human, with an odd glint to them, he was quite a sight in his own right, but it was her I was stupefied by. I could only think Gram hadn’t spelled her out to me to save the surprise. Oh, man! *She* was in our family, what there was of it? This was like a wish come true, life all of a sudden springing the better kind of trick for a change.

I still almost couldn’t believe it, but the more I looked at this unexpected personage, the more excited I became. I would have known her anywhere, an unmistakable figure in more ways than one, big around as a jukebox, jolly double chins, wide-set doll eyes, hairdo as plump as the rest of her, the complete picture. The exact same face I had seen big as life--well, *LIFE*, really, the picture magazine that showed what was what in the world every week--just that same day at the Minneapolis newsstand, and the melodious voice, familiar as if it was coming out of the radio that very moment. My Aunt Kitty was clearly none other than what the magazine cover described with absolute authority as America’s favorite songstress, and unless a person was a complete moron and deaf to boot, recognizable as the treasured vocalist of every song worth singing, Kate Smith.

At last, I had it knocked.
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 petrified log."

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

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

Around Gram, that question never came up. I simply took my place at the long table along with Meredice Williamson and Sparrowhead and the riders and the choreboy, and ate what a ranch cook cooked, mush and hotcakes and fried
eggs and bacon or sidepork and cinnamon rolls if a person still had room. There 
was no reason to think past the end of a fork. Surprised to be asked such a thing, 
I answered with more manners than good sense, “Oh, just whatever you’ve got.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello? This is... he.”

“I am Sister Carma Jean,” the voice sounding exactly like you would imagine a nun’s came as crisp as if it was in the room, instead of fifteen hundred miles away at Columbus Hospital. I was dazed, unsure, afraid of what I might hear next. “Last thing when I was at her bedside, your grandmother wished me to tell you yourself”--echo of last wish in that; I clung harder to the receiver--“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 had phooey as one of the words.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“See,” I tried to explain, “I was supposed to buy my school clothes with it, and whatever comic books I wanted, and go to a show once in a while if you said it was okay, and--” I looked at her angrily flushed face, twice the size of my
merely red one, and abjectly tailed off--"wasn’t supposed to be a nuisance to you about money."

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

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

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

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

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

"Job?" She drew the word out mockingly as she clattered stray breakfast dishes into the sink in passing. "That will be the day. The old pooter"--that bit of Gram’s language out of her startled me--"is out in that greenhouse of his again."
My mention of him did change matters, though, because at the cellar stairs she whipped around to me, with a different look in her doll eyes.

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

“Maybe I’ll go say hi,” I mumbled, and trooped out to the back yard where the odd shed of glass gleamed in the sun. Already at that time of the morning the Wisconsin air felt heavy to me, as if it could be squeezed out like a sponge, and I plucked at my one wearable shirt of the moment and unbuttoned my sleeves and rolled them back onto my forearms 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 leaning 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.

Growing interested in spite of myself, I 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. I regaled Herman with this, that, and the other about life on the Double W, from riding out with the actual cowboys to check on the cattle, to hunting magpies along the creek, making him exclaim I was a pistoleer, by which I figured
he meant gunslinger. Puffing away on his stogie and babying his plants with spoonfuls of fertilizer and careful irrigation from a long-necked watering can--a couple of times I interrupted myself to go and fill it for him from the spigot at the back of the house--Herman listened to all that as though I were a storyteller right up there with his idol who wrote the pile of books about cowboys and Indians, encouraging me with an occasional "Hah! Quite the thinkerer, you are."

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

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

Somehow I felt better for having poured out that much of the tale, even if it went into squarehead ears, so to speak. At first I was suspicious that Herman resorted to a kind of Indian speakum in talking about anything western, but no, it became clear that was genuinely his lingo from the old country. Whatever his background, I was finding this big husky man 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 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 scarcely 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 nearly a whisper:

“Who are they?”

“Manitowocers,” he said around the stub of his cigar, or maybe “Manito Walkers,” I couldn’t be sure which he meant. At the time, I assumed he merely meant those in the old days who had but to gallivant around town to think they were hearing their blest souls talk, according to the cross-stitched sampler hanging in the living room. I was disappointed the figures preserved in glass were as ordinary as that, but maybe that was Manitowoc for you, nothing to do but hoof around being airy.

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

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

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

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

“Oh, no, he’s been introducing me to the vegetables, is all.”

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

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

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

I watched her pick her way to the DeSoto, and drive off speedily.

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

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

"Are--are we gonna keep on?"

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

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

Deliberately or not, he kept me in suspense a while more. Finally he said, "More to see out west here, there is. Dog bus is how to git"--natural as breathing, he had absorbed the word from Louie-- "there, ja?"

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

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

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

"Yeah, well, gee, Herman--what do you want to see next?"
“Something without police breathing on us,” he thought. “Notcheral wonders, how about.”
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 announcing we would have plenty of sandwich meat, which to me meant baloney slathered with mayonnaise, something I was really ready for after the menu in this household so far. 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."

Some sense of caution caused me to peek under the top slice of bread, revealing 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."
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“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.”
“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 lightly tapped his eyeball with the spoon handle, *plink plinkety-plink plink plink* distinct as anything.

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

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

“Herman, that’s out the far end!” The squint of his good eye questioned me. “That’s soldier talk, it means something is really something! Can you do it again?”

He obliged, this time with the recognizable rhythm of *Happy birthday to you.* 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* and the birthday song and who knows what else 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—"Shut-eye 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 as she swung through on her way to hang up her purse in the sewing room.

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

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

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

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

"Now then," Aunt Kate finished a spate of instructions that had gone right over my head. Canasta had a basketful of rules, for sure. "Anything you don't understand, before we play out a hand?"
“Yeah, there is something,” I mustered myself, knowing it was now or never. Feeling vaguely traitorous but instinctively trying to save my own skin, I asked, “Why can’t Herman? Play cards with you instead of me, I mean.”

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

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

“Don-ny.”

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

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

Knowing when I was licked, I mumbled, “I guess I can try.”

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

Far from being the adventure I had been so excited about when I was met at the bus station by the living image of Kate Smith, my Wisconsin summer bogged down into the same old things day after day. Afternoons were canasta, canasta, canasta, and mornings veered from boredom when, after getting up hours earlier
anyone else and doctoring some puffed rice with enough spoonfuls of the white stuff, all I could find to do was to hole up in the living room reading an old National Geographic brought down from the attic, until the time came to tread carefully around the first of the battles of the Brinker household. Every day, Aunt Kate and Herman had a fight to go with breakfast. Generally it was her to start things off with a bang. “Can’t you quit that?” Her first salvo would make me jump, even though it was not aimed at me. “It’s childish and a nasty habit, how many times do I have to tell you?”

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

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

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

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

The one constant in the repeated quarrels was Aunt Kate holding her ground in the kitchen, while Herman retreated elsewhere waiting to scrap over toast scraps another breakfast time. Eventually, when it sounded safe, I would abandon the green leather couch and National Geographic --even the attractions of people pretty close to naked in “Bali and Points East” can hold a person only so long--and creep across the living room to peek into the kitchen. The remains of the daily toast war which might still be sitting there at lunch or beyond, I could not figure out. Sometimes on what had to be Herman’s plate would be nothing but crusts, other times a pale blob of toast from the middle of a slice that looked like something I almost but not quite recognized was the only morsel left over. In any case, I would face the inevitable and call out “Good morning” and she’d look around at me as if I’d sprung up out of the floor and ask “Sleep well, honeykins?” and I’d lie and reply “Like a charm” and that was pretty much the level of conversation between us.
I have to hand it to Aunt Kate, she was a marvel in her own way. To say she was set in her habits only scratches the surface. Regular as the ticks and tocks of the kitchen clock, she maintained her late start on the day, parked at the breakfast table in her robe striped like the world’s biggest peppermint stick as she dawdled over the Manitowoc Herald-Times and coffee refills, yawning and humming stray snatches of tunes, until at nine sharp she arose and clicked the radio on and one soap opera after another poured out, the perils of Ma Perkins and Stella Dallas and the others whom she worried along with at every devious plot turn afflicting them. The sudsy weepers filled the air until noon, always leaving the characters hanging in iffy circumstances at the end of the program. Myself, I thought the radio people ought to take a trip on a dog bus if they wanted some real situations, but Aunt Kate listened with both ears as she puttered away the rest of the morning, much of it spent in the sewing room with the Singer zissing softly under the radio voices.

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

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

Actually not a bad question, because the one thing I was sure of was what a mystifying place Manitowoc was, from toast fights to smoky portrait sitters inhbiting greenhouse windows to Manitou walking around dead to the strange nature of the neighborhood. I mean, I seemed to be the only kid anywhere. As used as I was to being in grownup company at the Double W, now I apparently was sentenced to it like solitary confinement, with the street deadly quiet, no cries of Annie-I-over or hide-and-seek or boys playing catch or girls jumping rope,
nobody much making an appearance except a grayhaired man or woman here and there shuffling out to pick up the morning paper or position a lawn sprinkler. It made a person wonder, did every youngster in Wisconsin get shipped off to some dumb camp to hunt frogs?

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

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

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

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

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

Under the circumstances, with no other choice except Aunt Kate, hanging around with Herman in the greenhouse suited me well enough. Whenever he wasn’t pumping me about ranch life or telling me some tale out of Karl May’s squarehead version of the West, I was free to sit back and single out some family or man and woman in the photographic plates overhead, catching them on the back of my hand thanks to a sunbeam, and daydream about who they might have been, what their story was, the digest version of their lives. It made the time pass until
lunch, when I'd snap out of my trance at Herman’s announcement, “The Kate will eat it all if we don’t get ourselfs in there.”

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

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

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

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

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

I gave something between a nod and a shrug.

“Now then, I’ll see whether Gerda”--she employed the names of the two missing players as if they were sitting there, ghostly, on either side of us--“is likely to discard one for you.” Expertly she swooped up the face-down hand of cards to
the right of me. “Not yet,” she announced in a singsong way, and slapped a useless five onto the discard pile as if that would to teach me a lesson.

I suppose it should have, but nothing was really penetrating me except the something else I kept thinking about. My money. The disastrous shirt-in-the-garbage episode that left me broke as a bum. No mad money meant no going to a show, no comic books, not even a Mounds bar the whole summer, for crying out loud. But that wasn’t nearly the worst. It bothered me no end that if I went back to Montana in the fall without the school clothes Gram had expressly told me to stock up on, I would have to go to class looking like something the cat dragged in.

People noticed when a kid was too shabby, and it could lead to official snooping that brought on foster care--next thing to being sentenced to the orphanage--on grounds of neglect. Gram would never neglect me on purpose, but if she simply couldn’t work and draw wages after her operation, how was she supposed to keep me looking decent? With all that on my mind, here was a case where I could use some help from across the card table, and I didn’t mean canasta. The one time I had managed to broach the subject of school clothes and so on between her morning loafing at the breakfast table and soap opera time, Aunt Kate flapped her fingers at me and said, “Shoo now. We’ll figure out what to do about that later.”

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

A little of that and Aunt Kate was grimacing in annoyance. “Don’t they have dentists in Montana? What happened to that tooth, anyway?”
“Nothing much,” I sat up straight as a charge went through me, my imagination taking off in the opposite direction from those modest words. “I got bucked off in the roundup, is all.”

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

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

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

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

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

That put the huff back into Aunt Kate in a hurry. “Whatever has gotten into Dorie?” she lamented, catching me off guard. “That sister of mine is raising you to
be a wild cowboy, it sounds like. Tsk," that tail end of the remark the kind of sound that says way more than words.

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

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

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

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

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

“Huh? Why not?”

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

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

“There are too many rules! This canasta stuff goes through me like green shit through a goose!”
I know it is the mischief of memory that my outburst echoed on and on in the room. But it seemed to. At first Aunt Kate went perfectly still, except for blinking rapidly. Then her face turned stonier than any of those on Mount Rushmore. For some seconds, she looked like she couldn’t find what to say. But when she did, it blew my hair back.

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

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

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

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

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

My face still as closed as a fist, I nodded about a quarter of an inch, a response she plainly did not like but took without tearing into me again. “That’s that,” she said through her teeth, and to my surprise, threw in her hand and began gathering in all the other cards on the table.
“I need to go and have my hair done, so we won’t try any more cardsie-wardsie today.” She fixed a look on me as I too readily tossed my hand in with the rest. “That gives us only tomorrow, because Saturday I have a million things to do around the house, and of course we can’t play cards on Sunday.” Heathen that she obviously thought I was, I didn’t see why not, but I still kept my trap shut.

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

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

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

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

Herman nursed the cigar with little puffs while he thought. “Cannot be terrible hard,” he reasoned out canasta with a logic that had eluded me, “if the Kate and the hens can play it. Betcha we can fix.” Telling me, cowboy style by way of
Karl May, to pull up a stump while he searched for something, he dragged out the duffel bag from the corner of greenhouse.

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

“We’re still sunk. Aunt Kate and them play partners, so it takes two decks.”

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

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

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

With a gulp, I spread more of the cards face up on the box table, which meant breasts up, legs up, fannies up, pose after pose of naked women or rather as close to naked as possible without showing the whole thinger. Who knew there were fifty-two ways of covering that part up? That didn’t even count the joker, a leggy blonde wearing a jester’s cap and coyly holding a tambourine over the strategic spot. Mingled with the Manitowocers’ shadow pictures from the photographic panes overhead, the frolicsome set seemed to be teasing the portrait
sitters into what a good time could be had if they simply took all those clothes off and jumped into bathtubs and swimming pools bare naked.

"French bible," Herman defined the fleshy collection with a shrug as I still was pop-eyed at it. Scooping the deck in with the tamer one, he shuffled them together thoroughly, the kings and queens and jacks now keeping company with their nude cousins and the ghostly Manitowocers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It took me a few blinks to rid myself of the mental picture of laying into Aunt Kate and Herta and Gerda with a bullwhip—“Take that, you canasta fiends!”—and figure out he meant bushwhack. Then to grasp his idea of an ambush, by holding back meld cards so Gerda and Herta wouldn’t have any clue to what was in my hand, until the twin cardplaying demons blindly discarded something I had a bunch of and could snatch up the pile and put together melds like crazy.

“Eye-dea is, surprise their pants off,” he formulated, already tracing through the dense print for further stunts I could pull. I giggled. That would put them in the same league as the undressed womanhood peeking various parts of themselves out from card to card. Canasta Herman style was proving to be worth ever so much more close attention than that of Aunt Kate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Giddy with this turn of events, I revamped my attitude about everything since I arrived. No wonder she stuck me away in the attic, in order to have the sewing room produce what I most lacked, a wardrobe! Forgiving her even for canasta, I nearly trod on her heels in my gratitude as my newly wonderful aunt paraded us across the living room to the sewing nook, dropping smiles over her shoulder.
“I do hope you like what I’ve done,” she was saying as we entered the snug
room full of piles of fabrics, “I put so much work into it.” I bounced on my toes
trying to see as she plowed right in to the stack on the day bed, lifting something
really colorful off the top.

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

“I bet it’ll all fit like a million dollars,” I loyally brushed away any doubt.

“You’re too much,” she tittered. “But let’s see.”

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

“My party outfit,” she said happily. “The girls will get their say at the party,
but I wanted you to see it first.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That took the twirls out of her in a hurry. She frowned at the reflection of the two of us in the mirror, seeing my point. My hopes shot up as she chewed on the matter, studying back and forth from the crazily colored muumuu to me dressed dull as dishwater as usual. I cast another longing look around at the waiting sewing machine and stacks of enough material to outfit me twenty times over, but she was not going to be oufoxed that easily.
"I just remembered, sweetums," she exclaimed as if reminding me, too.
"You have your wonderful rodeo shirt to wear, don't you." She smiled victoriously.
"We'll put on a fashion show for the girls, mmm?"

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

I was puzzled. "Can't I be in the greenhouse with Herman like always?"
"Hmpf," she went, pretty much her version of his Puh. "Him? Didn't the old poot tell you? He won't be here."

Just then Herman appeared from the direction of their bedroom, surprisingly dressed up, at least to the extent of wearing a blue-green tie with mermaids twined coyly in seaweed floating all over it. "She is right, can you imagine. Time to go take my medicine." He stuck a few small bills she must have doled out to him into his wallet, saying "It is not much, Your Highness."

She answered that with a dirty look and, "It's the usual, it will have to do--there's no such thing as a raise when there's no income, is there."

He shrugged that off, but juggling the car keys, he halted across the kitchen table from her. "Donny can go with, why not?"

Aunt Kate snorted and barely glanced up from the scandals of the Manitowoc Herald-Times. "Brinker, he is only eleven years old, that's why not."
“Old enough. We both knowed what is what in life by then, yah?” Not waiting for whatever she had to say to that, probably plenty, he turned to me with a wink of his glass eye. “Up to Donny, it should be. What do you say, podner?”

A trip along to a doctor’s office did not sound any too good, putting me in mind right away of Gram’s awful medical situation. On the other hand, it might help the case of cabin fever I was coming down with from my shacky attic room and the allures of Bali and other boundless places shown in the National Geographics.

“Sure, I guess so,” I said as if I didn’t care one way or the other, hoping that would keep me on the straight and level with Aunt Kate. According to the parting snort she gave as Herman and I headed out to the DeSoto, it didn’t.

In no particular hurry, Herman drove in that sea captain fashion, his big knuckly hands wide apart on the steering wheel while he plied me with questions about Montana and the Double W ranch and as many other topics wild, woolly, and western as he and Karl May could come up with. All of it was really on his mind, to the point where he asked how long my folks and Gram and hers had been out west. Oh, practically forever as far as I knew, I told him, Gram’s grandfather having been a Wegian--Herman gave me a hard look until I explained that was bunkhouse talk for Norwegian--wh packed up and came from the old country to homestead, which explained the wicker suitcase. And the Campbells, I guessed had similarly been in Montana about as long as Montana had been around.

“Must have been like Canaan for them, maybe,” he thought out loud. “Like in Bible--the Promised :Land, I betcha.”

“How do you know all this stuff?” I had reached the point of popping questions like that, since he never hesitated to bring up things out of nowhere. “The Bible and Longfellow and Karl May and so on?”