“Plenty of time to read on the ore boats,” he answered soberly. “Badger Voyager and the others gived me my learning, in manner of speaking.”

I didn’t doubt that, and let the matter go as I tried for some learning of my own, trying to figure out Manitowoc if I was going to be stuck there for the whole long summer. It appeared to be an even more watery place than I’d thought, the river with the same name as the town taking its time winding here and there–Gitche Manitou really got around on his spirit walks–before finding Lake Michigan. When we reached downtown, street after street of stores occupied brick buildings grimy with age–if this was the pearl of Lake Michigan, it needed some polishing. An exception was the movie theater with a marquee full of colored lightbulbs brightly spelling out the current show, TOMAHAWK with Van Heflin and Yvonne DeCarlo, which I immediately set my heart on seeing until I remembered I was broke.

As Herman puttered us through the downtown traffic a fraction as fast as the van driver tore through the Twin Cities, I passed the time noting more of those stores with the same caliber of names that I’d spotted from the dog bus, as if anyone going into business had to line up way down the alphabet. Schlieslider Tailoring. Schloter Brothers Grocery. Schroeter Bakery. The schushy sound of the town sounded awful German to me, and I tried to savvy at least a little of it.

“Hey, Herman? What’s schnitzel?”

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

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

“Yah. Fixed fancy with stuff on, you got schnitzel. Old German recipe.”
“What’s schnapps, then?”

“Firewater, Red Chief. Old German drink.”

“Boy oh boy, those dumb old Germans really went for some funny stuff, didn’t they.”

“Story of mankind,” he gave a blanket answer to that.

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

“Neck oil.”

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

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

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

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

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

There. My full pedigree. Stuff that in your pink telephone, why don’t you, Aunt Kate. I grew an inch or two and swaggered after Herman to a bar stool just like I belonged. As I scooted on, Gus met me with a belly laugh—he had the full makings for it—while saying he didn’t get many cowboys in the Schooner and warning me not get drunk and tear up the place. Just then the building shook, and I started to bolt for dry land.

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

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

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

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

Sure enough, he took the little glass of beer in a long slow sip, almost like you do drinking creek water out of your hand. Swirled it in his mouth as if thinking it over, then swallowed with satisfaction. “Hah, easy--Olde Rhine Lager.”
The bartender slapped the copper top of the bar with his towel in mock fury. “God damn it, Herm, how do you do it? I had that brought in all the way from Buffalo to fool you.”

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

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

“So how’s Tugboat Annie?”

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

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

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

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

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

Herman was maybe somewhat tanked up on Olde Rhine Lager, but his answer was as sober as it comes. “Job I had in old country. Story for another time, when you want your hairs raised. Get in, Donny. We must go home and face the Kate.”
of July observance in the park and at the county fair and everything of the sort. And the name Big Tiny Little Junior just seemed so right for a parakeet. The little dear is a budgerigar, you know.” I didn’t have a clue that was what a shrunken parrot was called, and my face must have given me away because Herta gave a little giggle of compassion and spelled out, “So there you have it, don’t you see? Biggie the budgie. He even knows his name.” To prove it, she twittered across the room, “Pretty bird, who’s my pretty bird?” The wild-eyed parakeet cocked its head and squeaked, “Big-ee, Big-ee” over and over.

During this, Gerda was dealing out cards with mere flicks of her fingers, faster than I could pick them up. We had barely started and already I was scared half sick at the way this so-called game was shaping up. Characters such as Old Shatterhand in Herman’s shoot-’em-ups faced situations all the time where a person’s fate could be decided on the turn of a card. But in real life, my future with Aunt Kate rested just as precariously on my gameness, to call it that in all possible senses, to cope with great big handfuls of canasta cards.

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

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

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

"We’ll see about that, Kittycat," Gerda declared.

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

"Are we playing for blood?"

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

"If you mean are we gambling, dearie, you most certainly are not," she set in on me with a warning frown. "I am standing your share, aren’t I," underscoring the point by picking up a wealth of quarters and letting them trickle from her hand. "The Minnie share, we can call it."

The other two tittered appreciatively at that. "As to our teensy wagers," Aunt Kate spoke as if this might be hard for me to follow but I had better try hard, "we are simply making the game more interesting, aren’t we, girls. To liven things up a little, mm?" So saying, she shoved a quarter each for herself and me, the
would-be Minnie Zettel, out next to the deck to form the kitty, Gerda did the same for her and Herta, and that was supposed to be that.

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

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

Almost as if peeking into my mind, Herta right then chose to ask with a certain slyness, “Are you musical, like your auntie who even talks like there’s a song in her voice?”

“Oh, now, Hertie, don’t get carried away,” Aunt Kate responded as if she was being teased with that as well as me. Huh. Maybe I wasn’t the only one to see the Kate Smith resemblance she didn’t play down.

Anyway, I answered up to Herta’s dig or whatevet it was. “Naw, I’m the kind who can only play one instrument,” I fell back on the old joke, “The radio.”

“Are we playing cards or musical chairs?” Gerda asked pointedly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Herta blurted, “You actually eat those?”

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

Yum did not seem to sit well with the ladies. Thinking it might be because they were used to nibbles, as Aunt Kate called the candy gunk which bite by bite didn’t amount to much and Herta’s crackers-and-cheese treat which tasted like dried toast and library paste, I kept trying to present the case for Rocky Mountain oysters despite the discreet signals from across the table that enough was enough. Not to me, it wasn’t. I had an argument to make. “Honest, you can make a whole meal out of not that many nu--testicles, see. They’re about yay long,” I held my fingers four or so inches apart, the size of a healthy former bull calf’s reproductive items.
Herta seemed to take that in with more interest than did Gerda, who just looked at me as if sorting me out the ruthless way she did cards. Apparently deciding I could be coaxed off the topic, Herta crooned in practically birdie talk, “That tells us so much about ranch life. Anyway, aren’t you cuter than sin in your cowboy shirt.”

Without meaning to—much, anyway—I gave her the full snaggle smile for that, the one like I might bite. “Heavens!” She jerked her cards up as if shielding herself from me. “What in the world happened to that boy’s t—?”

“He fell while he was working on the ranch,” Aunt Kate wisely did not go into the roundup tale. “They have a favorite dentist back there and his grandmother is taking him to be fixed up good as new, the minute he gets home from the summer to Montana,” she topped that off smooth as butter. This was news to me, but not the kind intended. My supposedly no-nonsense aunt could story as fast and loose as I could.

After that performance on my part, as I knew Aunt Kate was going to level the word at me later, the game dragged on with the score steadily mounting against us and the quarters in the kitty regularly being scooped in by Gerda. It turned out that livening things up a little, as Aunt Kate called it, included many an ante during play as well as the payoff for winning each hand. Natural canastas, without wild cards, brought groans and a forfeit of quarters, as did things Aunt Kate characterized as Manitowoc rules, such as melding all black aces. I watched with apprehension as the score steadily mounted against us and Aunt Kate’s stake of quarters dwindled. In bunkhouse terms, we were up against sharpies. Gerda was a terrifying player, seeming to know which cards each of the rest of us held, as if she had X-ray vision. Herta was no slouch either. As I desperately tried to keep...
up with what cards were played and the passel of rules and the kitty being won by them instead of us two times out of three, I was concentrating nearly to the point of oblivion when I heard the word green, followed by stamps.

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

"Oh, those, I never bother with them," Aunt Kate pooh-poohed the trading stamps. "They're so little use, you can't even trade them in for decent clothes."

"We all have *ravishing* clothes, Kitty," Herta responded with a bland glance at Aunt Kate's muumuu of many colors. "What *I* want is that lawn chair. *Free* and for *nothing* and with not even a *fee*, as the saying is." All three tittered at that. Then Herta sighed and consoled herself with a nibble. "I've been saving up and saving up, but it's a slow process."

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

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

Before I could make up an excuse, Aunt Kate spoke up. "Oh, he insists on carrying some piece of rock he thinks is his secret lucky charm, it's harmless."
Luckily enough, that took care of that, and on the next go-round, my ears ringing with Herman’s advice—Hold back, discard one like you don’t got any use for it, and watch for same kind of card to show up on pile in your turn. Bullwhack the hens—I discarded one of the five sevenspots I had built up. Sure enough, two rounds later, Gerda the human card machine operated on memory and tossed onto the pile what should have been an absolutely safe seven of spades. Saying nothing and maintaining a poker face if not a canasta one, I produced my double pair of sevens and swept up the pile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, do you?” A glob of cheese spread had smeared onto the edge of the plate and she cleaned it off with her finger and ate it, with a wrinkle of her nose at me that said it would be just our secret, wouldn’t it. Thinking I was making too much of too little, she kept her voice low in saying, “You must have been with Kitty or that husband of hers at one of those gas station where they give out Green Stamps few and far between, is that it?”

“Oh-uh. I have a whole book, pasted in and everythibng.”

She sucked her finger while studying me with deepened interest. “What’s a boy like you doing with all those?”
Sixteen hundred and one hard-earned miles on the bus, that was what. But I only said, "I got them with my ticket here. So I was wondering if we could sort of make a trade, since they're called trading stamps, right?"

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

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

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

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

"A real funnybone tickler, you bet."

"Just between us, of course."

"Cross our hearts and hope to die."

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

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

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

"I know."

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

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

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

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

The pile built and built more temptingly as we all drew and discarded several more times, until Herta drew, stuck the card away and as if distracted by Biggie's latest rant of chirrups, discarded an ace of spades. Immediately she went into flutters and the full act of "Oh, did I play that card? I didn't mean to!"

She made as if to pick it back up, which Aunt Kate headed off so fast her hand was a blur as she protected the pile. "Oh no you don't. Against the rules, Hertie, you know perfectly well." Tossing down her natural pair of aces, she gobbled up the whopping number of cards and began melding, the black aces sidebet and rainbows of other highscoring combinations across half the table, canastas following canastas, while Gerda squirmed as if enduring torture and Herta tried to look remorseful, although with little glances sideways at me marking our secret. I pressed my cards to my chest with one hand, nervously rubbing the
arrowhead in its sheath with the other to summon all the luck I could. It must have worked. Finally done laying down cards, Aunt Kate looked around the table with a smile that spread her chins.

“Guess what, girls. Donny and I seem to have 5100 points, also known as out.” She reached for the stream of silver Gerda was unhappily providing by yielding up quantities of quarters while Biggie screamed as if celebrating our triumph.

I felt like a winner in every way as Aunt Kate, humming away as pleased as could be, started to drive back to the house. Victory over the canasta hens! Herman would get a great kick out of that. And winnings, actual money, the first gain of that kind since I had alit in Manitowoc. Manitou’s town itself was even showing a more kindly face, leafy streets and nice houses surrounding us as she took a different way than we had come because of the “nasty traffic” of the shift change at the shipyard.

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

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

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

Was I going to admit to her that frequent warning of Gram’s, Don’t be a handful”? Not ever. “Naw, you know how Gram is. She calls a spade a shovel, dirt on it or not, like she says, and I guess I’m the same.”
From her pained expression, she apparently thought that described her sister all too well and me along with it. She drew a breath that swelled her to the limit of the driver’s seat and began. “I’m not putting down your grandmother, I know she’s done the best she could under the”—she very carefully picked the word—“circumstances.”

That could only mean Gram putting up with my redheaded behavior, and now I was really wary of where this was heading. Once more Aunt Kate took her eyes off the road to make sure I got the message. “So this is for your own benefit”—which was right up there in the badlands of being a kid with don’t take this wrong—“when I say you are a very forward youngster.”

I hadn’t the foggiest notion of what that meant, but I risked: “Better than backward, I guess?”

She stiffened a bit at that retort, but a lot more when I couldn’t stop myself from saying, “And I can’t help it I’m a youngster.”

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

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

I was getting mad, but not so mad I couldn’t see from her expression that I had better retreat a little. “Yeah, well, I’m sorry if Herta and Mrs. Horssstetter took the testicle festival the wrong way. I thought they’d be interested in how we do things in Montana.” Figuring a change of topic would help, I went directly to, “Anyhow, we beat their pants off, didn’t we. How much did we win?”
“Mm? Five dollars.” She reached down to her purse between us on the seat and shook it so it jingled. “Music to the ears, isn’t it,” she said with a smile that would have done credit to Kate Smith.

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

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

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

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

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

“That is hardly the case,” she didn’t give an inch. “I’ll take you shopping with me, you can be my little helper at the grocery store and so on. Then there’s the jigsaw puzzle now that you’ve learned canasta, and always the greenhouse to visit, isn’t there.” Her voice went way up musically as she said the next. “Don’t worry, bunny, you won’t lack for entertainment if you just put your mind to it. And here’s a surprise for you.” By now she was cooing persuasion at me. “On the Fourth, we’ll go the park where they’ll have fireworks and sizzlers and whizbangs and all those things, and hear that wonderful Lawrence Welk orchestra Herta talked about. Won’t that be nice?”
Who did she think I was, Biggie the budgie? But before I think up a better retort, she let out an alarming sigh as if the air was going out of her. I saw she was stricken, for sure, but not in an emergency way. Everything about her appeared normal enough except her eyes were not the road, her attention seized by something we were passing. “I’m sorry, buttercup,” she apologized in another expulsion of breath, “but the sight of it always almost does me in.”

I jerked my head around to where she was looking, expecting a hospital or cemetery at the worst, some place ordinarily sad to see. But no, I saw why the sight so unnerved her, as it did me. The forbidding old building set back from the street was spookily familiar, even though I was positive I had never seen it before. The sprawling structure, rooms piled three stories high, each with a single narrow window, seemed leftover and rundown and yet clinging to life like the skinny little trees, maybe a failing orchard, that dotted its grounds like scarecrows. “What is that place?” I heard my own voice go high.

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

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

“Y-you mean Herman?”

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

“But--why?” I was stupefied. “How’s he gonna end you up in the poorfarm, I mean house?”
“Have you ever seen that man do a lick of work? If only,” she said grimly. 

Another sigh as if she as about to collapse scared me as much as the first one. “To think, what a difference it would make if Fritzie was here.”

“Huh? Who?”

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

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

She noticed, and said offhandedly, “Husband, who else?”

I gaped at her. She seemed like the least likely person to believe the plural of spouse is spice, as I’d overheard grownups say about Mormons and people like that. “You’ve got another one besides Herman? They let you do that in Wisconsin?”

“Silly. Before Brinker, I mean.” She gazed through the windshield “Fritz Schmidt. A real man.”

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

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

Not satisfied, I again stared until she had to answer. “Storm, slick deck.”

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

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

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

All this whirling in my head after her news about Fritzie’s sad fate, I miraculously managed to hold my exclamation to a high-pitched “That’s awful!”

“Yes, it’s a tragedy.” She gazed steadily ahead at the road. “But that’s in the past, we have to put up with life in the here and now, don’t we,” she said as if she didn’t want to any more than I did. As if reminded, she glanced over at me and patted her purse enough to make it jingle again in a sort of warning way. “You did fine in today’s game, honeybunch, but stay on your toes. Next time, the party is at our house and we’ll do as usual and play two out of three.”
Dear Gram,

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

Gram had made me promise, cross my heart and so on, to write to her every week, but doing so when she was in the middle of complications after her operation stayed my hand from so much I really wanted to say, none of it good news as far as I was concerned. Carefully as I could, I was doctoring, to use that word, life with Aunt Kate. If word ever came from that intimidating nun, Sister Carma Jean, that the patient was better, maybe I could somehow sneak a phone call to let Gram know I was being bossed unmercifully, from being kept flat broke to being stuck in the attic. On the other hand, what could she do about it from a hospital bed when Aunt Kate was right here, always looming, seeming as big as the house she dominated top and bottom and in between.
Already she had stuck her head in to make sure I was keeping at it on a space of the card table that didn’t have presidents from Mount Rushmore staring at me with scattered jigsaw eyes. She left me to it but not before singing out, “Don’t forget to tell her the funny story of mistaking me for Kate Smith, chickie,” which wild horses could not drag out of me to put on paper. Instead:

_Aunt Kate and I play cards some, not pitch like we did in the cook shack but a different game I’ll tell you about sometime._

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

“For two bitses, _pthht_. Hens play for chickenfeed, notcherly.”

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

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

_Your loving grandson,_

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

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

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

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

So the next couple of days after writing Gram how fine and dandy everything was in Manitowoc, I hung around with Herman in the greenhouse as much as possible to keep my morale up. He was good company, better and better in fact, as he read up some more from Karl May and other books in his corner stash and gabbed with me about cayuses and coyotes--relying on me to straighten him out on which were horses and which were canines--and the wonders of Winnetou as a warrior and the spirit of Manitou living on and on and making itself felt in mysterious ways. “Here you go, Donny, Indians believed Manitou lived in stones, even, and could come out into a person if treated right, if you will imagine.” With
the fervor of an eleven-year-old carrying an obsidian arrowhead in his pocket, condom wrap notwithstanding, I certainly did turn my imagination loose on that, seeing myself riding the dog bus west sooner than later to a healthy and restored Gram, her with a job cooking on some ranch where the rancher was no Sparrowhead, me back at things I was good at like hunting magpies and following the ways of cowboys, poorfarm and orphans out of our picture. In other words, in more luck than I was used to lately.

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

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

Just then, though, I heard a mysterious outburst where a woman was definitely roused, but not that way.

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

“Does not take any much brain to know you are talking crazy,” came Herman’s raised voice in return.
“Oh, I’m the one, am I. I’ve told you before, don’t be filling his head with useless things. When I was out seeing what flowers I could cut for our next little party, I heard you telling him more of that Manitou nonsense.”

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

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

“Don’t get any ideas about who’s in charge of our little bus passenger for the summer! You’re not wearing a Kraut helmet any more, so don’t think you’re the big boss around here!

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

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

Shocked nearly senseless as I was, by instinct I scooted for the stairs and scuttled up to the attic while she still was storming around the kitchen. I would have retreated farther than that if I could, after what I had heard. Before long, Aunt
Kate's voice was raised again, this time in my direction and straining to sound melodious.

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

I stayed absolutely still, gambling that she would not labor up the stairs to seek me out. And if I could make her think I was at the greenhouse with Herman instead, she likely wouldn't want another shouting match out there. Silence, rare as it was tried in this household, might save me yet. After some minutes, I heard the DeSoto pull away, and so hurt and mad at being deceived that I could hardly see straight, I raced down the stairs two and three at a time, bound for a showdown in the greenhouse.

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

I wanted to holler at him, _No, something you did, turning out to be a German soldier!_ Swallowing hard, I managed to restrict myself to saying, "I-I heard Aunt Kate bawling you out in there."

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

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

Wincing at that language, he looked up at me in surprise. "She should wash her tongue and hang it out to dry." The big shoulders lifted, and dropped. "But, ja"--which I finally heard for what it was instead of _Yah--"that is one way to put it."
“So you really truly are a”—I had trouble even saying it—“a German?”

“Ja, double cursed,” he made a face. “The name ‘Herman’ even means ‘soldier’ in German language, if you will imagine.”

“But then how come you don’t talk like they do in the movies?” I demanded to know as if his squarehead accent was a betrayal. “The Nazi bad guys, I mean.”

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

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

“No-o-o,” he drew the answer out as if calculating how far to go with it. “‘Dutch’ was sailor talk for ‘Deutsch,’ which means ‘German.’ Better than ‘Kraut,’ but not much.”

That clinched it. A Kraut by any other name, even his shipmates recognized it. Imagination did me no favors right then. My head filled with scenes, of landing craft sloshing to shore under a hail of gunfire from Hitler’s troops, and sand red with blood, and a figure on crutches in the hallways of Fort Harrison hospital trying to learn to walk again, which was not imaginary at all. Giving Herman the German, as he now was to me, the worst stink eye I was capable of, I demanded:

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

“Hah? What kind of beach?”

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

Realization set in on him, his face changing radically as my accusation hit home. “Donny, hold on to your horses. I am not what you are thinking. The Great War, I was in.”
What, now he was telling me it was great to have been in the war where my father got his legs shot to pieces? I kept steadily giving him the mean eye, hating everything about this Kraut-filled summer and him along with it, until he said slowly so I would understand, “World War Ein. One.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At first I thought he was not going to answer further, but finally he came out with, “I was at Hohe Toter Mann, was enough.”
That didn’t sound bad, nothing like Omaha Beach. Disappointed at his evidently tame war, I said just to be asking, “What’s that mean, Ho-huh whatever you said?”

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

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

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

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

“The shovel is sometimes better friend than the rifle,” he said simply. “Learned to dig such foxholes, I did, could have given fox a lesson.” He paused to frame the rest of that story. “Here is a strange thing soldiers go through. The more of my comrades died on Hohe Toter Mann, the more it saved my life. My outfit, I think you call it?”--I nodded--“Second Company, lost so many men we was moved to rear guard duty. Behind the lines, we had chance to survive the war.” His face took on an odd expression, as if skipping past a lot to say: “And here you see me, in America.”

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

“Private No Class, my soldiering was more like,” he told me, memory turning toward mischief now. “Not what you might call hero. Mostly, behind the lines I was chicken hunter.”
“Uhm, Herman, that sounds awful close to chicken thief.”

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

“Forage?”

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

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

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

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

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

Finally swinging out of bed, I hurried into my clothes, Tuffy-wrapped arrowhead in my pocket for luck, and slipped into the moccasins. Cracked the door open, listening for any sound downstairs. There was none whatsoever except that nighttime not-quite-stillness of the house holding people deep asleep. Quiet as a shadow I crept down and into the sewing room. I didn’t know what I was going to say if I got caught at this. Something would have to come. It usually did.

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

 Summoning my courage before it left me entirely--this already was way risky, being in here at all int the middle of the night--I cautiously hobbled over to where the sewing machine was located. If I was right, a Singer model this fancy might have a small light beneath the arm of the machine to shine down on close work. My blind search ultimately fumbled onto a toggle that switched on a small bulb above the needle and router, perfect for my purpose. In its glow I could pick out objects shelved around the room, stacks and stacks of cloth and pattern books and such. But nothing like a jar holding the loose change of canasta winnings.

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

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

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

"Are you done, you little thief?"

She was practically filling the doorway, in a nightdress as tentlike as the muumuu and wearing those fuzzy slippers which were noiseless on the living room rug. At first my tongue did fail me as I stared at a greatly irate Aunt Kate and she at me, an outpouring of words no problem for her. "I was on my way to the bathroom when I noticed this funny little glow from in here. It's not like me to leave the sewing machine on like that, is it. And what do I find, Mister Smarty Pants, but you stealing for all you're worth."
I didn’t know anything to do but fight back. “Why is this stealing when I won the pot in the canasta game just as much as you did, remember? I bet Minnie Zettel got her share every time the two of you won. So why can’t I?”

“I went over that with you in the car—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While I hadn’t said a word to her as I mushed up puffed rice and sugar, she in turn kept her head down over the Herald-Times, to say as if my behavior was reported in the newspaper, “Donny, last night was very upsetting to me and I hope nothing like it happens again.”
"I didn’t like it any either. You were futzing at me and Herman like we were criminals of some kind," I responded, unable to resist giving her a dose of stink eye.

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

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

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

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

I found out disastrously soon when she cleared her throat and said:
"Donny, I have something to tell you. After breakfast, pack your things. I'm sending you home."

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

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

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

Talk about a coward's way out. She did the deed by letter instead of telephone so there could be no argument on Gram's part. And to keep clear of that starchy nun Carma Jean asking where her sense of charity was. And 'upset'? How about overturned and kicked while I was down?

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

She had the decency to flinch when I flung that charge at her, but she also dodged. "Donny, dear, it won't be as bad as you think. We have to believe that your grandmother will recuperate just fine and be able to take care of you again, don't we. But in the meantime, there are foster homes that take in children for a while." I knew those to be little more than a bus drop stop on the way to the
orphanage. "To make sure, I went to the county welfare authorities here and got a list of such places in Great Falls. It's all there in the letter I sent. Your grandmother will only have to fill out a form, or two and you'll gave a temporary home until she gets well."

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

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

I pushed aside my breakfast, too sick at heart to eat, and went for my suitcase for hundreds upon hundreds of miles of travel agony ahead.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It would take a lot to argue with that, but before I even had any chance she had her purse up and was diving a hand into it. “Oh, and take this.” She pressed some folded money into my hand. In amazement, I turned the corners of the bills back, counting. Three tens. The exact same sum as had been pinned inside my discarded shirt.

“What--how come--”

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

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

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

If she hadn’t cried, I would have given in to tears. As it was, I sat there trying to hunch up and take it, one more time. Two days and a night ahead on the dog bus, doom of some kind waiting at the Great Falls depot. Convinced that everything that could go wrong was going wrong, I sent a despairing look up the aisle of the bus. All the situation needed now was something like that bunch of hyena campers to torment me. But no, my fellow passengers mainly were men dressed up for business, a Manitowoc Herald-Times up in front of someone like a last mocking farewell reminder of Aunt Kate, and a few couples where the women were as broad-beamed as seemed to be ordinary in Wisconsin. Nothing to worry, I thought bitterly of Herman’s wording.

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

“Hallo.”

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

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

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

“Long ride ahead, we watch out for each other.”

“Y-you’re going to Montana with me?”

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

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

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

“Today was last straw on camel’s back,” he said next, the words echoing Enough’s enough. I listened open-mouthed as Herman continued in a more satisfied tone, “The Kate will run around like the chicken with its head chopped off a while, but nothing she can do. I am gone like the wind.” He looked at me with the greatest seriousness. “Donny, this is the time if I am ever to see the West and
how it was the Promised Land for people. I must do so now, or I am going to be too soon old.” To try to lighten that heavy thought, he winked at me with his bad eye. “So, we are on the loose, ja?”

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

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

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

It sunk in on me. No one in the entire world knew that the two of us were free as the breeze. Herman wasn’t merely flapping his lips; we really were footloose, or at least bus-loose. Crazily like the comic-strip characters in “Just Trampin’” who were always going on the lam, hopping on freight trains or buming rides from tough truck drivers to stay a jump ahead of the sheriff. Herman and I did not even have to do any of that, the fleet of Greyhounds ran anywhere we wanted to go. It was a dizzying prospect. Goodbye, battle-ax wife, for him, and no Hello, orphanage, for me--it was as simple as sitting tight in a bus seat to somewhere known only to us, the Greyhound itself on the lam from all we were leaving behind.
I tell you, scratch a temptation like that between the ears and it begins to lick your hand in a hurry. "You mean, just keep going?" The question squealed out of me in my excited state. "Like for all summer?"

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

"Yeah, but, that'll cost a lot. I don't know about you, but I've only got thirty dollars."

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

"Really truly? How much?"

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

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

"Pah. Woman talk. We will live like kings, Donny. Here, see." He took out the fat wallet from inside his coat and spread it open for me to see. Lots and lots of the smaller denominations, of course, but I hadn't even known fifty and hundred bills existed, as maybe half the wad consisted of. "Outstanding!" My excitement knew no bounds, money raining down on my situation after that spell of being flat broke.

There was a catch to simply taking off into the yonder, though, isn't there aways? "See, Gram has me write to her every week," I fretted. "She'll know right away I'm not back there with you and Hippo--the Kate like I'm supposed to be if those are mailed from any old where."

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

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

“Ja, tell each week the way you like. Make it sound good so she is not to worry.”

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

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

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

Herman made a face that had nothing to do with the South Dakota version of breakfast as he read over what, unbeknownst to either of us in the literary dark back then, would turn out to be as famous a set of words as I could ever hope to coax into the autograph book.

"He must have meant 'boogered,' don't you think?" I stuck up for my fellow long-distance writer. "Sort of snotted up like with a bad cold, maybe?"

Herman opened his mouth, but chose not to enlighten me. By then I was already on to the next thing that threw me, that signature, the strange name which sort quacked its way around in the alphabet. "I thought from what the lady said he was John Louie de Something."

Herman gave it that salute. "The French."

By then we were in in the linoleum-floored cafe section of the otherwise dead Greyhound depot in Aberdeen, the breakfast stop before the long remainder of South Dakota ahead. To my disappointment, the fully named Jean-Louis de
Kerouac and his Sweet Adeline had vanished, if I had to guess, to an accommodation more horizontal than a bus seat.

I did not think anything much out of the ordinary in bus depot experience when our food arrived not particularly well cooked. My stack of hotcakes was burned to a crisp around the edges, and the ham and eggs must have come from tough pigs and pygmy chickens. Nonetheless I tied into the meal, because food is food. Herman at his, though, turned out to be what Gram would have called a pecky eater, and then some.

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

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

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

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

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

“Hah-uh. Think bigger.” When I didn’t catch on, he hinted: “Gee-oh-gaphy.”

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

“Italy?”

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

Where Aunt Kate thought his way with toast was disgusting, I was totally impressed. “Out the far end, Herman! Can you do other countries?”

“Everything in the book,” he claimed grandly. “On ship and in army, you pass time best you can, so I learned world of toast.” He grinned just about wide enough to fit a piece of it in. “Winned lots of bets that I could not do Australia or somewheres, too.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Must be done,” he insisted. “Otherwise, what if she calls before a letter
comes from you, talks to the Kate? Pthht, we are.”
I had to take his point about our secret trip being kaput if that happened, and even more, the mile-deep trouble I’d be in if Gram had any inkling I was not where I was supposed to be. That fast, I was the one worried about the situation in Manitowoc, and surrendered to whatever scheme Herman had in mind this time.

“So, what do I say?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Mrs. Blegen, you mean?” The nun sounded none too willing. “She is still getting over the complications from her surgery, I’m sorry to say, and is not allowed visitors yet. Doctor’s orders. Can this wait?”
“Huh-uh,” I gulped out honestly enough with the instigator of this phone conversation nearly breathing down my neck. “I’m calling all the way from Wisconsin, see,” I made use of Manitowoc, “so I’m not really a visitor, am I.”

There was silence on the phone as if Sister Carma Jean was reckoning that distance against the doctor’s orders, until eventually she took mercy on me. “I suppose that changes the matter. She’s at the other end of the ward. Hold on, I’ll bring her in the chair.”

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

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

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

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

“For now, it’s best,” she skipped past that as if everybody traveled that way. “What was that noise on the line?”

“The radio. Aunt Ka--Kitty plays it a lot. How come you’re in a wheelchair?”

“Oh Donal, what in the world am I going to do with you?” That panicked me, the issue slambang like that in her own words. Luckily it turned out to be only Gram being Gram. “How many times do I have to tell you, boy, don’t worry so about me. I had a little setback, is all.”
“Are you gonna be okay?” I quavered. Herman had his ear down almost on top of mine, both of us waiting in anxiety.

“I’m sewn up like an old quilt, but I’ll be good as new. It just takes time.”

What she was saying did not match what I was hearing, the strain in her talk coming through despite her best effort. My uncharacteristic silence, maybe with Herman’s piled onto it, made her try it over. “The only thing about it is, I have so many stitches the doctor doesn’t want me exerting myself any, and so they wheel me around everyplace. The nuns are awful kind, Sister CJ and the others treat me like the Queen of Sheba.”

Charitable to a charity case, I heard that as. “That’s something, I guess.”

“Donny, this is quite some surprise, hearing from you like this.”

“I--I was thinking about you.”

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

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

“My birthday is in October, like yours.”

Herman’s heavy breathing in my ear indicated there was exasperation with me at both ends of the phone line to be dealt with in a hurry, and I hastily tried.

“Oh yeah, sorry. I must have got that mixed up with, uh”--the calendar of this loco summer tended to blur on the dog bus--“the Fourth of July. Happy firecracker day, Gram.”

“You’re a little early on that, too, funnybones. What’s got into you?” She sounded more like her old self. “If there’s nothing else on your mind except birthday candles and firecrackers, let me talk to Kitty a minute, please.”
This was the memorized part. “She’s, uh, too busy to talk to you, she said. Getting ready to go to her canasta party. Told me not to spend too much time on the phone with you because it’s long-distance and costs money.”

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

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

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

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

“Playing ’nasty, is she,” Gram could not resist. “Anyway, tell Miss Stuck Up for me I’m dreadful sorry I missed her.”
“Yeah, sure,” I trailed off, my end of the conversation exhausted. “Gram, wait a minute, Herm—I mean, Dutch wants to say hello.” He was shaking his head, but I thrust the receiver at him.

“Hallo? How is your operation?”

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

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

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

“Must go, somebody at the door,” he made up with an ease that impressed me. “Donny is nothing to worry yourself. He is a good boy.”

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

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

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

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

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

Herman was like a kid on Christmas morn as we rushed across to the
WRANGLERS WESTERN WEAR, conveniently right next to the bar with the flashing
bronz and rider. As we went in the store, he was gamely peeking into his wallet
until I told him, "Put that away, this is on me." It was rambunctious of me,
because I had handed over my thirty dollars to him for safekeeping since I had no
safety pins and a history of money somehow getting away from me. But the
smaller sign I had spotted on the storefront was irresistible: S&H GREEN STAMPS
ACCEPTED. Sorry about the lawn chair, Herda, but fate made our deal kaput.

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

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

“Cowboys ones,” Herman contributed.

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

“That’s not fair,” I said.

“It’s policy,” said the clerk.

“Proves it is not fair,” said Herman, the veteran of Der Kaiser’s army.

“Folks, I just work here,” the clerk recited.

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

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

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

The clerk was speechless, kept that way by Herman’s spiel about how I, favorite nephew accompanying him on one of his countless trips from Vienna to the land of Old Shatterhand and the like, had collected Green Stamps all the way across America with my heart set on obtaining cowboy hats for the two of us when we reached the real West, which was to say Miles City, and now here we were and being offered rubbish like lawn chairs instead. “I hope I don’t got to tell my million readers Green Stamps are not worth spitting on.”
I held my breath, watching the clerk shift nervously. "Mr.--uh, Herr May, let's be reasonable," he pleaded. "The problem is, it takes a special transaction form to substitute anything for catalogue merchandise. It's only done when the item you want is out of stock, but that doesn't quite fit this--"

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

I did exactly that, and the defeated clerk led us over to the selection of Stetsons. Quickly I picked out a pearl-grey Junior Stockman model, the dress-up kind without a high crown or wide brim--even President Truman had one like it--while Herman glommed onto a white floppy ten-gallon type until I convinced him he'd look like the worst duded-up greenhorn this side of Hopalong Cassidy in it, and talked him down to about an eight-gallon one in sensible tan. Without a whimper the clerk shaped the hats for us, working the brims in the steam machine until we each had what we wanted--mine with a neat downward crimp in front, Herman choosing to have his curled up on the sides like the cowboys on the cover of Deadly Dust.

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

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

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

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

“Sure! Anything!”

Oh, S&H, S&H,
What would I do without you
To stretch my wage?
To trade for stuff
page by page?
Everybody craves ’em,
I bet even Jesus saves ’em.
Little green stamps, little green stamps!
Sperry & Hutchinson
Does wonders for my purchasin’.
My book is full at last,
I better spend’em fast.
I’ll get that lamp with the frilly shade,
I’ll fill the tub with free Kool-Ade.
Oh, those bonus-givin’
Guaranteed high-livin’,
Super excellent little green stamps!
For another twenty smackers, Louie Slewwfoot’s going rate for saving our skins or at least mine, he drove us to Billings, a safe distance from Crow Fair and its cops in braids, and dropped us at the Greyhound station there.

“You fellows sort of make a full day,” he remarked as he handed down the wicker suitcase and duffel bag from the back of the camper, although incredibly enough it still was only suppertime. Life with Herman packed a lot into the hours, I was definitely finding out.

“Take good care of that arrowhead, chiefie, so it’ll take care of you,” Louie advised me with a sly wink as he took his leave of us with a slam of the camper door. But not before, big medicine or whatever doing its work, I coaxed him into an autograph and more.

Say, do your remember the time
I slipped on a banana peeling
and hit the ceiling
while wondering why
I had a stye in my eye
and how in hell
my nose runs while my feet smell?
Oh, I was in tough condition
because life's a rough proposition--
but at least it makes a nice rhyme.
--Louie Slewfoot
Off the rez and on the go

"Not Longfellow, but not shabby," Herman approved, reading over the inscription from a genuine Indian that I had finally proudly attained. "More to him than meets an eye. Too bad he is not Apache."

Handing me back the autograph book, he switched his attention to the old standard, the red-webbed route map on the Greyhound depot wall. "Scenery everywheres, I betcha," he observed about the many roads trending west. "So, Donny, what does your fingers say?"

This was almost too easy. On tiptoes, I jabbed a finger to the most famous spot west of Crow Fair.

"Yallostone," Herman ratified, looking over my shoulder. "Old Faithful geezer is there?"

Fixing his pronunciation, I assured him that besides geysers there were bound to be natural wonders popping up all over the place in Yellowstone National Park.

"Not only that," it must have been the big medicine still working in the pouch around my neck that had me thinking so expansively. "See there, then we can go on through the park," my finger confidently traveled down the spine of the West, arriving in Arizona, "all the way to where the Apaches live, how about."
tell Herman too was thrown by the religious wraith’s sudden appearance. For if
my conscience had a few uncomfortable things on it, the one in the seat next to
mine must have been considerably weighted down with the phony tale of going
back to Germany and this entire disappearing act he had thought up for the two of
us. No tracks behind do we leave did not sound so simple after Wendell
Williamson and now this delver into people’s souls.

“May I ask how you two are related?” the minister pressed on. “I see such
a striking resemblance.”

He did? Was I growing to be like Herman that much? Oh man, there was
another weighty question--good or bad, to take on the homely yet compelling
characteristics of somebody one-eyed, horse-toothed, and, well, Hermanic?

“Great-uncle only, I am,” he postponed the matter as best he could, with a glassy
glance at me. “Donny is best grandnephew ever made. A good boy.”

“How fortunate you are, sir,” a click and a chuckle from across the aisle.

“Great by dint of the fruit of the family tree.”

“Ja, I guess.”

“By the way, my parishioners called me Reverend Mac,” came next, with
an extended hand of introduction. “It’s from my middle name, Macintosh,” which
had quite a clack to it as he said it.

Seeing no way out of it, Herman and I shook hands with him and
introduced ourselves back, and the Reverend Mac promptly followed up with just
what we did not want to deal with.

Smiling to the fullest under the rim of mustache, he made the modest
gesture toward his collar again. “A contribution I can still make to the good cause
is to distribute Bibles into hotel rooms,” he confided. “I have been doing so in
Billings, which needs all the salvation it can get.” He gave another clickety
chuckle, Herman and I trying to politely match it with heh-hehs. I think we both
“Fuck and phooey, Herman!” my voice came back. “You mean we’re skunk broke?”

“Hah?” He looked so anguished I was afraid he really might have a heart attack. “If that means all gone, ja again.” He slapped his pants pocket, which did not jingle one bit. “Spent the chickenfeed on candy bars, even,” he moaned.

I still was in shock. This was a hundred times worse than the ex-convict trying to steal my suitcase at that Minnesota Palookaville. “Who--how--” We needed to do something, but what? “Let’s ask on the bus, maybe Reverend Mac saw somebody--”

“Not just yet, hah-uh,” he stopped me. He still looked stricken but in a different way. “Something is tickling my mind. Quick, your book. Let me see.”

Blankly I handed over the autograph album, and peered along with him in the barely lit parking lot as he flipped pages to Reverend Mac’s inscription. With some kind of swearing in German, he put his thumb next to the signature, Isaac M. Dezmosz.

“Should have seen. Dismas was thief crucified with Christ.” It took me a moment to put together the initials with that pronunciation and come up with it: I Am Dismas.

"Lying in his false teeth, he was," Herman bleakly summed up the so-called Reverend Macintosh.

I blew my top. “The smart-ass little sonofabitch of a thief! Distributing Bibles, my butt! C’mon, we’ll show him troubled times.”

I tore across the parking lot to where the bus was idling, ready to go, Herman galloping after me. I banged on the door, and Herman joined in as if he would tear it open with his bare hands.
Still as mad as could be, I piled off the bus to do that very thing, my view of law enforcement having come around full circle in the past few minutes, with Herman more slowly following.

“Hurry up,” I called over my shoulder, half frantic or maybe more, as he lagged on the way across the parking lot, “let’s get some kind of cops after the thieving bastard.”

“Donny, hold back. Over here, please.”

Disconcerted by the detour, I uncertainly trailed after as he veered off to the gigantic wooden deck at the geyser side of the Inn, where people could sit out to watch Old Faithful display itself, although at that time of night we were the only ones anywhere around.

He dropped his duffel bag in a corner away from where everyone else was sitting, so I set my suitcase there too until it would become clear what this was about. More and more unnerved, I whispered when I didn’t have to, “Why’re we wasting time here when he’s getting away with--”

“Shhh, notcheral wonder is coming,” he gently shut me up.
Herman hardly let our newfound wealth rest in his hand before buyng bus tickets out of the natural wonderland of Yellowstone, but then tucked away the remainder of the money, this time in a shirt pocket that buttoned tightly, with the firm pronouncement, “Belly timber must wait, up the road. No candy bars even, until we git where we go.”

So it was that we arrived worse for wear inside as well as out, several hours and a couple of bus changes and long stretches of highway later and not done yet, at the Greyhound terminal in Butte, of all places, with Herman unshaven for a couple of days and badly looking it and me in a wrinkled rodeo shirt showing every sign that I had been living in it day and night. Grooming was not foremost on our minds, however. Hunger was making me so cranky Herman had to relent on the candy bars, and he wolfed into the first of his as readily as I did mine while we hustled from the Greyhound newsstand on into the waiting room. For once, we did not have to run eyes and fingers over the almighty map lettered COAST TO COAST THE FLEET WAY for our connection and destination. Up on the
knocked out or worse and stuffed in a toilet booth? My worry grew every time I checked the depot clock.

At last, thanks be, Herman emerged, still in one piece. Although not quite. I had to look twice to be sure of what I was seeing. Surprise enough, he did not have his eyeglasses on, which he all but slept with. But the shocker was that he had taken out his glass eye.

Face squinched out of shape to stretch the eyelid down and cheek skin up to cover the empty eye socket, he looked different from his WANTED picture, for sure. More like a sideshow freak winking gruesomely.

Words failed me as he said out of the twisted corner of his mouth, “Ready to git, Donny.”

Talk about walking like Winnetou and Manitou are with you in the tracks of braves through all time--I was overawed at the amount of guts it took to bring out that grotesque wound for the world to see. I could not help staring, and no doubt people would--but chances were the only resemblance anyone could take away would not be to a years-old picture of a seaman turned fugitive, but more like one of those illustrations in Treasure Island, of a beached one-eyed pirate.

It was too much for me to tell Herman he only lacked a parrot on his shoulder, though. I barely got out, “Didn’t know you could do that with your peeper.”

“All kinds advantages to have glass in your head, ja,” he said tartly. “Hurry, buy tickets before somebody sees Killer Boy Dillinger under my hat.”

At the counter, the clerk idly doing a crossword puzzle took in my suitcase and Herman’s duffel with a bored glance as we stepped to the ticket counter. The missing eye didn’t faze him a bit. “You boys for the special?”
Herman gave an elaborate shrug as if he didn’t grasp that, pretty much the the case for both of us, and left the matter to me. Accordingly I answered with a question. “How do you mean?”

“The special,” the clerk recited as if it was common knowledge. “Last bus to Wisdom.”

The last?

That makes a person think. As in, last chance ever? Or something like dead last, some kind of bus especially for unswift customers who missed out on the real thing?

I still was trying to digest the meaning, Herman now squinched up in thought as well as one-eyed nearsightedness, when the clerk put down his puzzle and pencil and took fresh account of the two of us and our ratty luggage. “Or am I seeing things, and you aren’t that sort?”

“Uhm, sure, that’s where we want to go. To Wisdom, you bet.”

“Then let’s see the color of your money, gentlemen.” As Herman dug out the fare, which may have been special but still took nearly all of what we had left, the clerk spun on his stool and called to an arthritic-looking man dabbing away at paperwork in the cubbyhole office behind the counter. “Two more, Hoppy.”

“The merrier,” the man croaked, clapping on a battered-looking Greyhound driver’s hat and strapping on the holster for his ticket punch. “Makes a full house, Joe, any other ’boes are gonna have to hoof it.” Rounding the counter with a hitch in his gait about like Louie Slewfoot’s, he jerked his head for us to follow him. “Let’s git to gitting,” he said, instantly winning Herman over.

As we trailed the gimpy driver past departure gate after departure gate to the loading bay at the very end of the depot platform, I was more than curious to see what was up with this special bus. As we neared, it became evident this was not
one of the sleek modern fleet, but a stubby early model that had seen more than its share of miles--even the galloping greyhound on its side looked like time was catching up with it, its coat of silver dimming to dusky gray--and plainly was brought out only as a spare. That description probably fit the aged driver hopscotching along ahead of us as well, Herman and I realized with a glance at each other.

What really caught our attention, though, was the horde waiting to board. It was all men. If we thought the Butte waiting room crowd were tough lookers, they were an Easter parade compared with this ill-assorted batch of customers, lounging around on bedrolls that looked none too clean and smoking crimped roll-your-own cigarettes, giving every appearance of having come straight off freight train boxcars. Most of them wore the cheap dark-gray work shirts known as Texas tuxes which didn’t show dirt, but even so, the wearers appeared to be badly in need of a washday. I know Herman was squinting apprehensively at this down-on-their-luck collection of mankind who would be our fellow passengers, and surely I was doing the same.

Apparently we were on the driver’s mind as much as he was on ours, because he halted under the overhang of the depot just out of earshot of the waiting passenger mob, and gave us a dubious look.

“Free advice, worth what it costs, but maybe you gents ought to find some other way to git to Wisdom. ‘Gainst regulations, but I can sneak you a refund.” He inclined his head toward the squat old bus. “This is what’s called the hay wagon, unnerstand. These scissorbills aim to hire on in haying, down there in the Big Hole.”

“Yeah, well,” I spoke right up, Herman backing me with vigorous nods, “that’s us, too. Haymakers.”
“I dunno,” the driver looked us over even more skeptically. “Nothing personal, but one of you seems sort of young and the other one pretty much along in years, to keep up with fellas like these.”

To my surprise, Herman now said a piece. “Not to worry. Ourselves, we are from Tough Creek, where we sleep on the roof of the last house.”

Wherever he had that from in Germanic shoot-‘em-up westerns, it was enough to make the driver croak out a laugh and stump off toward the bus. “Join the fun, then. Let’s go.”

I didn’t, though, holding Herman back by his sleeve, too. A vision had come to me from the funnies, unsought but vividly there, of PeeWee the dimwitted little bum and his shabby pals mooching along in “Just Trampin’,” from the looks of it about like these poor excuses for humanity we were about to join. The question quavered out of me.

“W-Wait. Are all of them--bums?”

Quick as I said that, the driver turned to us in a sort of crowhop. “You got that all wrong, sonny,” he schooled me, “bums don’t ride busses. Tramps, now, they maybe might if somebody was to give them the money,” he furthered my education. “Been known to happen. But these fellas,” our gaze followed his to the waiting men, “are hoboes, whole different thing. They ain’t your total down-and-outers, more like hard-luck cases. Got to hand it to them, they travel around looking for work. Seasonal, like. Apple glommers, almond knockers, sugar beeters”--Herman’s expression skewed even more as he tried to follow the driver’s tally---“what hoboes do is follow the crops. Haymakers, about now, tough a job as any,” he added pointedly with another skeptical look at the pair of us. “You better unnerstand, living rough like they do, hoboes by nature are a hard lot. Have to be. For them, it’s root, hog, or die.”
He paused to make sure it all, or at least enough, was sinking in on us.

"That refund is still ready and waiting."

Herman must have given that the quickest think in history, for I immediately felt his bolstering hand in the middle of my back, making our decision. I spoke it, in our biggest leap of fate or faith yet. "Nothing doing. We’re going with on the what’s it. The special."

Shrugging as if our blind determination was water off his back, the driver crowfooted away toward the waiting bus. "Hop on."
The last two seats were way at the back of the bus, which meant the entire hobo contingent had a chance to look us over from stem to stern as we wove up the aisle. Stepping aboard right after us, from tossing my suitcase and Herman’s duffel into the baggage compartment with a collection of bedrolls and what looked to me like bundles of belongings but for some reason were called bindles, the driver sang out, “Okey-dokey, final call. Last bus to W-I-S-D-O-M, for those of you who know the alphabet.”

“We’re all scholars of the Braille sort,” a man taller and brawnier than the rest called out.

“I bet you’ve put the touch on many a thing all right, Highpockets,” retorted the driver, counting heads to make sure the total matched the number of tickets he had punched. “Talk about faces a person can’t forget even if he tries. Druv the majority of you scissorbills at this same time last year, if I don’t miss my guess.”

“That’s us, Hoppy, last but nowhere near least,” a scrawny old fellow with a cracked voice was heard from next. “Had a chance to take drivin’ lessons since then, have ye?”
The driver snorted and made as if to fling his cap at the offender. “I have
druv longer than you been off your ma’s hind tit.”

“That makes you older than the pharoah’s dick, don’t it, Hop,” the fellow
plenty far along in years himself cracked back, to hoots of encouragement and cries
of “Lay it to him, Skeeter.” Of course I was following this like a puppy lapping
milk, until Herman tugged my ear to bring me close enough for a whispered,
“Phoo. Rough tongues. Don’t listen too much.”

“Let’s can the mutual admiration and get this crate goin’,” the one called
Highpockets spoke with authority. “Else the best kips are gonna be taken at the
Wildwood Waldorf.”

“Birds like you can always roost in the diamond willows,” the driver
responded crossly. Nonetheless he dragged himself into place behind the steering
wheel, managed to find the clutch and brake pedal with his feet, fiddled around
some on the dashboard, and eventually ground the starter—it growled so much like
the DeSoto back in Manitowoc that Herman and I couldn’t help trading bemused
glances—until it eventually caught, and the bus bucked its way out of the depot
driveway as if hiccupsing.

Hoppy mastered the gearshift somewhat better on the downhill run from the
Butte business district and away, I could now hope, from the nightmarish
orphanage. Herman was breathing easier, too, as the bus hit the highway, with the
splash of MOST WANTED posters receding behind him. The tortured side of his
face missing its eye relaxed a little, even.

Pretty quick we had something new to worry about as big Highpockets,
who by all indications was some sort of topkick of the hoboes, made his way to the
rear and squatted in the aisle by us. Up close, he showed more wear and tear than
at first appearance, what Gram called weary lines at the corners of his hooded eyes.
would have told me not to get red in the head and over-imagine things, but this last bus carrying Herman and me and our rough-and-ready gang of new companions inevitably made my mind fly around. Here we were, on a journey my imagination couldn’t resist playing with, like being on a stagecoach—if the dog bus didn’t qualify sufficiently as the modern version, the Rocky Mountain Stage Line and Postal Courier surely did—packed with the equivalent of owlhoots, the roamers and ramblers, taking new names for themselves as they pleased, out to experience everything of the West.

On the immediate other hand, Herman Brinker and Donal Cameron were now masquerading as a gramps and grandson known to the hobo world as Snag and One Eye, and that in itself should have been a wild enough journey to occupy my mind to the fullest.

My reverie was broken when Peerless Peterson, whose nickname became self-evident as he stuffed a chaw in his cheek from a packet of Peerless tobacco, leaned toward me and asked confidentially:

“Hey there, Snag, what was it that happened to your grampop’s peeper?”

“Knife fight.”

That impressed all those listening in as much as I’d hoped. Herman, as surprised as anyone, thought fast and joined the spirit of things. He took me by the ear one more time but only to tug me close so he could go on at whispered length. I almost could not believe what he was coming up with. It was perfect! Herman at his absolute little-think best beat Karl May by a mile, and when he was finished now, I gave my brightest snaggy smile and reported:

“Gramps says to tell you our last name is Schneider, not that it counts for anything in the here and now, we savvy. But he wants you to know schneider
“Then all’s you need to do is wait till payday and keep an eye out then,” the man known as Skeeter counseled. “Them that takes their wages in hard money prob’ly can’t write their names to endorse a check. The rest of us is regular scholars enough to cash our skookum paper right there in The Watering Hole, that’s the bar in town. More efficient that way.”

I thanked him for that vital lesson and scooted back to my seat. Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, I hunched there stewing to myself, was there no limit to what I had to learn by hand, this summer like no other? Feeling sorry for myself and the autograph book, I was fanning through the empty pages that would never know Overland Pete and Bughouse Louie and maybe too many others to make the pursuit worthwhile, when Herman came to the rescue. “Donny, nothing to worry. Other people will write in your book up to the full, I betcha.” I hadn’t even known he was awake—it was twice as hard to tell, after all, with only one eye to judge by—but now, same as ever, he took in the passing landscape as if the West still was the Promised Land, rough road to get there or not.

“Tell you what,” he eased my disappointment, whispering low to not attract further attention from the hoboes in their of bottle and gab, “I will tell to you by heart an old German verse and we will make it into English, or something like.” That sounded like it was worth a try, and I perked up as he and I went back and forth over how words looked and what they meant, until we were both satisfied.

*When you take a look in your memory book
Here you will find the lasting kind,
Old rhymes and new, life in review,
Roses in the snow of long ago.*

“Wow, that’s pretty nice,” I said when the final version stood out on the album page in Herman’s scrawly handwriting, “although I’m not sure if I get it all.”
We reached the campfire circle in time for mulligan, served in tin billies from a stash somewhere in the kip, along with spoons that no doubt were missing from many a cheap cafe. Both of us feeling starved—candy bars had been a long time ago—we dug into the stew nearly thick as gravy and featuring chunks of potato and pieces of some meat everyone knew better than to ask about. Amid the concentrated eating and mild conversing, Highpockets suddenly lifted his head, Skeeter doing the same. Clicks of someone walking on gravel could be heard, and across the campfire from where we sat, a rangy man stepped out of the night into the fireshine. He had something about him that made the circle of hoboes stir nervously.

"Got room for one more?" he drawled in a spare way I’d heard before.

I blinked, but he didn’t change. It was Harv the jailbreaker. Who was supposed to be in that stony Lonesome at the far end of the state, but obviously was not.
Hats beaten up and hearts beating fast, we headed into the hobo jungle in the brush beside the Big Hole River. The kip, as they called it, turned out to be a gravel bar down from a state highway department gravel pit and storage area, where culverts and bridge beams and steel guard rails were stacked. Bunched there in the open air kip, maybe twice as many as were on the bus with us, was a band of men sitting around rolling their smokes in brown cigarette paper. Like beached pirates, was my thought, to go with Herman’s roguish missing eye. Imagination aside, it was written in the sparks flying upward from the open campfire and the bubbling of the blackened stewpot hung over the flames that we were joining the bottom end of society, manual laborers with leather gloves stuck in a hind pocket, maybe their only possessions beyond a bindle and a bedroll. Now I was the one swallowing hard.

Blessedly, Highpockets intercepted us before we reached the campfire circle.

“Now I’m not saying you two don’t know how to take care of yourselves,” that point made itself in his tone of voice. “But after dark here, it’s colder than old Jesus.” Night was fast coming on, and I was remembering the gripping chill outside the Old Faithful Inn. Highpockets shifted his gaze significantly to my wicker suitcase and Herman’s duffel. “I don’t notice any bedroll makings on you. Better do something about that.”

“Ja, what is your recommend?” Herman surprised us both.

“Doesn’t speaka the English, eh?” Highpockets gave me an unblinking look. “That’s your own business. Up town at the merc, they sell bedroll fixings, old army blankets and the like.”

“I will get fixings,” Herman startled me further. Chicken hunter he may have been, but Wisdom did not seem to offer much prospect along that line.
I would worry about that later, right now I had a basic concern about getting any kind of shelter over us for the night. “Ah, Mr. Highpockets, I was wondering—”

“No misters in the Johnson family,” he said not unkindly.

“Okay, sure, uhm, Pockets. Do you suppose Gramps and me could have dibs on one of those culverts?”

“That’s inventive, anyway. Sling your plunder in there to stake your claim,” he gave his blessing, turning away toward the kip “Then better come on down for mulligan before it’s gone.”

I hustled to the nearest steel shelter with my suitcase, Herman following with his duffel and looking thoughtful at the prospect of the metal tunnel just large enough to hold us if we slept end to end. “Go be acquainted,” he more less shooed me to the hobo gathering. “I will be a little while in town.”

Another worry popped out of me. “What are you gonna use for money? We’re just about broke again, remember?”

“Nothing to worry. I have eye-dea.”

Whatever it was, I left him to go to town with it, in all meanings of the phrase, while I made my way down to the kip and its inhabitants. But beforehand, at the edge of the brush I encountered Pooch hunched over like a bear as he scrounged dry branches along the riverbank for firewood. When I asked if I could help, he replied “Damn straight” without looking up, and I started tromping downed cottonwood limbs in half until I had a good armful.

I don’t know that it would be in any book of etiquette, but I was a lot more welcome walking into the hobo gathering with an armload of firewood than if I had merely strolled in with my face hanging out. “Good fella,” said Midnight Frankie,
stirring the black pot of mulligan, otherwise known as a rindom kind of stew. I dumped my armload on the firewood pile and retreated to the farthest spot on one of the logs that served as seating surrounding the campfire, wishing Herman was with me to provide moral support or at least company.

“For any of you who didn’t have the pleasure of his company on the last bus, this here’s Snag,” Highpockets did the honors of making me known to the other batch of hoboes and them to me. Similar to our busload, they had names all over the map, Candlestick Bill and Buttermilk Jack and Dakota Slim and the Reno Kid—not to be confused with the California Kid—and Left-handed Marv, who had an empty sleeve where his right arm should have been, and so on through enough others to confuse St. Peter at the gate. My presence as a kid with no kind of a capital K did not seem to bother anyone since Highpockets vouched for me and he clearly was the topkick of the whole bunch, the Big Ole—the squarehead kind—as I soon learned this unelected but acknowledged type of boss was called. Why the hobo community fashioned an oversize Swede as the last word in leadership, I hadn’t the foggiest idea—it was their lingo, not mine—but in any case, Highpockets saw to things that needed seeing to, including keeping the peace now when Peerless Peterson and the Reno Kid scuffled over which of them had claimed the spot under a favorable cottonwood first. With that settled by Highpocket’s threat to knock their heads together, things went toward normal, with wine bottles appearing out of bindles every so often and lubricating a general conversation that ran toward the unfairness of a world run by fat cat capitalists and sadistic small-town sheriffs.

By now I was nervously glancing out into the dark, wondering what was delaying Herman and kicking myself for not going with him into town and keeping him out of trouble, or at least being on hand when it happened. Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, could even the remotest of towns like Wisdom conceivably be plastered with MOST WANTED posters, and he’d been thrown into whatever variety
of jail the Big Hole held? I was torn, between holding our spot in the campfire community and plunging into the darkness to go searching for him. What was worse, scared stiff about either one, pinned to my place on the log because deciding either way seemed worse than the other.

Meanwhile the hoboes were loosened up by the circulating bottle and another that magically appeared out of some other bindle, to the extent where there was now a jolly general demand, "C'mon, Shakespeare, give us one."

"My kingdom for a source," that individual half comically half dramatically put a hand to his brow as if seeking inspiration. Mimicking a high-powered thinkerer--or maybe there was no mimicking to it, with him--he pondered aloud, "Now what immortal rhyme would a distinguished audience of knights of the road wish to hear, I wonder?"

"Quit hoosiering us and deliver the goods, Shakey," Highpockets prodded him.

"As you like it, m'lord," the response pranced out, over my head and probably all the others as well. Crossing his legs and leaning on his knees with his arms, the learned hobo lowered his voice confidentially enough to draw his listeners in, me included.

"There was an old lady from Nantucke--"

Audience cries of "Hoo hoo hoo" greeted this promising start.

"Who had a favorite place to tuck it."

The way this was going, I was momentarily glad Herman was not there to tell me not to listen too much.

"It slid in, it slid out--" the recital bounced the springs toward its climax, there is no more apt way to say it. I could see Pooch moving his lips in repetition to catch up with the words, while Midnight Frankie smirked like a veteran of such moves. Other hoboes banged fists on their knees along with rhythm of the limerick
The scatter of buildings the bus pulled into at our destination did not look like much of a town. Much of anything.

While the tired dog bus chugged along a wide spot in the highway that was the main street, I tallied a couple of gas stations, a mercantile, a farm equipment dealership, a post office, the Watering Hole saloon as mentioned by the Jersey Mosquito, a supper club that looked like it had started life as a hashhouse, and a sprinkle of houses around. I had to admit, I'd seen Palookavilles that amounted to more. Yet the community of Wisdom famously carried one of the best names ever, by way of Lewis and Clark who were thinking big when they passed through the area on their expedition and grandly dubbed three nearby rivers the Philosophy, the Philanthropy, and the Wisdom. None of those graftings lasted through time and local reference--the Wisdom became altered simply to the Big Hole River, which proved to be the roundabout torrent our road had hugged so closely, and still was flowing good and wide here at our destination--but the little town picked up the name and used its remote location to good advantage as the provision point for the
The circle around the campfire went tensely silent as he checked from man to man, “Anybody else the bloodhounds might be after, for anything? No? Let’s make sure or we’re all in for it.” On one side of me, Harv looked on innocently, and on the other, Herman somehow was an equal picture of guiltlessness. For my part, I had to sit tight and try not to appear as guilty as I felt about landing the pair of us in this fix, besides associating us with a jailbreaker of Harv’s caliber. Luckily, Herman’s whisper put some backbone in me. “Remember, big medicine you have. Makes you brave.” Newly conscious of the arrowhead and whatever power it carried, there next to my heart, I managed to guilelessly meet Highpockets’ eyes as his gaze swept over the three of us, lingered, then moved on.

“All right, we seem to be in the clear. We’ve lucked out, some,” he reported in a low voice as he recognized the advancing lawman in the moonlight, “it’s Mallory, the deputy sheriff over here. He’s not the worst as hick dicks go.” He still was some kind of sheriff and Herman still was featured on a MOST WANTED poster, and I still was his accomplice or something, skating on thin ice over the bottomless depth of the orphanage. I gripped the arrowhead pouch through my shirt, my other hand clasped in Herman’s to tie our fortune together, good or bad.

The deputy and Highpockets acknowledged each other by name as the local lawman stepped into the circle of light cast by the campfire. They did not shake hands, which would not have sat well with either of their constituencies. This officer of the law was half again bigger than Harv’s banty-size Glasgow nemesis, somewhat beefy the way people get from sitting behind a desk too much, but without that air of throwing his weight around unnecessarily. He did not look overly threatening except for the pistol riding on his hip. That six-shooting symbol of authority, however, was more than enough to draw resentment, loathing, hatred
“Still waters can bust dams,” Harv drawled, spooning into the billy of stew remnants Midnight Frankie had handed him. After an unsure moment, general laughter broke out. “Stick that in your rear aperture and smoke it,” the Jersey Mosquito joshed Peerless, who grinned painfully and retreated into silence while conversation built back up to normal among everyone else. Harv in the meantime silently kept at his mulligan.

“Come on,” I tugged at Herman, “let’s scooch around there to him.”

He was as intrigued as I was. “Ja, he is quite the man, you can see from here.”

Thinking back, I realized my name hadn’t come up back there on the bus in the company of the sheriff, just things like “button” and so on. Relieved that I could stay Snag, I circled around, Herman on my heels, and edged down on the log next to the newest hobo on earth, making us into old-timers. “Hi again.”

He chewed stew which had reached that point, before saying, “You’re the kid with the autograph book.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Kinnick,” I swiftly used his name to emphasize I full well remembered who he was, back there in handcuffs, too.

“Harv,” he corrected that quietly but in a way that told me not to forget it.

Herman cleared his throat, a signal that prompted me to introduce him as One Eye, my grandfather from the old country and so on, and on some sort of hunch, some inkling that we would be wise to have on our side someone with a knack for evading lawmen, I leaned close as I could to Harv, considerably above my head as he was and confided, “He’s sort of staying out of the way of the, uhm, authorities too.”

Herman stiffened at first, then caught up with my thinking and Harv’s apparent circumstances. “We are not much liking jail either.”
"Then we have a lot in common," Harv said, proffering a hand even larger than Herman’s outsize mitt.

After the handshakes, I had to ask. "How’d you spring yourself from Wolf Point this time?"

"Wasn’t that tough as jailbreaking goes," the veteran at it reflected, both of us listening keenly but Herman with real reason to. "They have a habit there of making the prisoner mop the cell, and when Baldy, that’s the deputy," he said as if jailer was an old acquaintance, "had to go to the toilet, I reached the key ring off the wall peg with the mop handle. I was out and hightailing it down to the tracks by the time Baldy pulled his pants up, I guess. Caught the next freight going west and linked up with Lettie after her shift at that Le Havre." The mention of his girlfriend brought a pining expression, which he resolutely shook off. "Had to move on from Havre, of course," summing up in an aside to me, "you can guess how Carl is when he heard I’m out free again." Did I ever, the half-pint sheriff on the bus suspiciously grilling me as if I was a runaway when I wasn’t--yet--still a memory I wished I didn’t have.

From Harv, this had grown to a speech of practically Bible length, and he wasn’t through yet. "I sort of wish Carl would take it easy on me for slipping jail, when it’s not even his," he said as if there was more than one kind of justice.

"Yeah, he’s a mean little bugger," I said boldly, Herman’s good eye policing me not to go too far. "He sure did you dirty, back there on the bus to Wolf Point."

"Aw, Carl maybe means well," said Harv out of brotherly loyalty or at least step-brotherly. "It’s just that you put a big badge on a little guy, his head swells along with it."

After that evident truth, he turned reflective again.
“Still and all, he had something there on the bus, that I should go haying. Taking him up on it, though he doesn’t know it,” he concluded. He shifted attention to us. “Do I savvy you’re here to make hay, too?”

“You bet I am. I mean, we are,” I hastily included Herman.

“I thought you were getting sent someplace back east.”

“That, uh, didn’t work out. See, One Eye is my closest relative from back there, and he wanted to see the West.”

“Ought to be able to get your fill of it around here,” Harv smiled a little.

“Can I ask,” I maybe shouldn’t have pressed the question but he was the one who had racily all but drawn her into the autograph album, “what about Lettie? I mean, you’re here and she’s there, all the way up in Havre.”

That cast him into silence for some seconds, evidently dealing with his longing until he could put it into words. “We’re working on that. I’m going to save my wages, and after haying we’ll get married and find some way where I’m not running from jail all the time.”

Herman looked as if he would have liked to add advice to that, but only nodded silently.

At that moment—I’ll never forget it, it is clocked into memory as if with a stopwatch dividing that night of my life—came an outcry from Fingy, stumbling into camp still buttoning his pants from taking a leak in the bushes. “We got company! The town whittler.”

The atmosphere around the campfire changed like a gun had gone off. Certain hoboos evaporated into the willow thicket on the river bank, the others sitting up rigid in a collective stare toward the road, where a black-and-white patrol car with a big star on the door luminescent in the moonlit night was pulling up. Harv stayed as he was, as though none of this turn of events applied to him, and
Herman and I caught up in his example, whether or not we should have taken to the brush.

Right away, Highpockets was on his feet and in charge. “Anybody been yaffled lately?”

“I done a jolt a little while back,” Buttermilk Jack, the oldest of the hoboes except for Skeeter in our bunch, owned up to. “Fifteen days, vag, in Miles City.”

“Good time, or did you scoot?” Highpockets pressed what must have been the most veteran vagrant to be found anywhere.

“Served my sentence honest and true,” the old hobo swore. “Then they run me out of town. If anybody’s on the lam, it ain’t me.”

No, it was the trio of us at the other end of the log from old Jack, broadly speaking a jailbreaker, an enemy alien, and a kid accused of theft, who fit that description up, down, and sideways. Fear gripped me so savagely I could scarcely breathe. Would my all too readable face, between Harv’s imperturbable one and Herman’s contorted one, give us away, first of all to Highpockets? He had no stake in us, and as the Big Ole, his responsibility was toward the bunch he traveled through the fields of the West with, the Johnson family compressed into that last bus. He could dust his hands of strays like us to any inquiring lawman, to everyone else’s benefit but ours. I am sure my eyes were rabbity and my freckles gone to pallor as I apprehensively watched Highpockets read faces in the firelight.

But just before he reached ours, Peerless Peterson spat a sizzle of tobacco juice into the fire. “Why can’t the bastards let us alone? We got as much rights as anybody, but they treat us like dirt when we’re not sweating our balls off doing the work for them.”

“Shut your flytrap,” Highpockets snapped at him, “until we see what this is about. You go poking Johnny Law like that and he’s likely to poke back with a billy club, you ought to have learned that by now.”
They all were big days, in the Big Hole. And I was the first to see this one come, at least as represented in human form.

Herman and I crawled out of the culvert at earliest daylight, stiff in every joint and sore in corrugated bands across our bodies, the morning chill making us ache all the more. Were we ever thankful that down at the kip Skeeter was already up--hoboes do not sleep late--and rebuilding the fire while Midnight Frankie was working on mush of some kind in the mulligan pot. The encampment was gradually coming to life as its inhabitants groaned their way out of their bedrolls, abandoning the bed of earth to face another day. Harv could be seen rolling up a bedroll no doubt provided by loyal Janie. As we crossed the road to head on down for whatever this day would bring, Herman blearily said he was going to the river to wash up, while I needed to take a pee so badly after the night of confinement in the culvert that my back teeth were swimming. Off he went to the gravel bar and I ducked into the brush below the road.
work for used to be the Hashknife--maybe some of you put in some time there?"

On our side of the campfire, someone muttered, "That sure as hell fit the grub there. All knife, no hash."

"Don't get your feathers up," the foreman forged on. "The spread is under new management. Fresh owner, with money to burn. I was brought in to cut loose anything that wasn't working, which meant just about every stray sonofabitch on the place. So, but for a few riders summering the cows and calves up in the hills, my crew is out of whack."

"Enough said," Highpockets took over. "Try us."

"First of all, I'm looking for a man who isn't allergic to hay by the load and hard work."

A number of the hoboes took a half step forward. "What's the work?"

"Stack man."

The Jersey Mosquito, who looked like it would be all he could do to push around an empty pitchfork let alone one shoving swads of heavy fresh hay into place, asked possibly out of pure mischief, "Do ye favor building them haystacks big as Gibraltar?"

"Sizable," was as close to that as the foreman would come, but it was admission enough about giant haystacks in high old Big Hole style.

The hoboes, even Highpockets, stepped back to where they were. "A strong back and a weak mind, is what he means," Shakespeare expounded.

"Donny, what are they talking?" Herman whispered worriedly. "Nobody wants haymaking job?"

"Shh. Watch Harv."

Without twitching a muscle, the fugitive from the Wolf Point stony lonesome still seemed to be studying the first pronouncement, before the strong
sun caught the small silvery clasp, not much bigger than a locket but distinct as anything, that held his fancy hatband together.

I grabbed Herman’s arm so fiercely he drew back from me in a pained squint. “We absolutely have to get on this crew.”

“Hah? How?”

That I had no idea of, but I knew our best chance in the Big Hole was about to be lost if we didn’t try something. “C’mon, grab our stuff, we need to catch up with him.”

We did so, crashing our way out of the hobo jungle so loudly the foreman looked around at us in surprise as he reached his pickup. “Hey, wait, Mr. Jones, sir. Didn’t you maybe forget you need a stacker team driver?”

The ranch honcho leaned against a rear fender, crossing his arms at my challenge. “Not really. I figure to handle that myself, be right there at the stack with the crew that way.”

“But then what if there’s a breakdown and you have to go to town for parts or somebody’s cows get into a field and you have to go and dog them out or there’s a runaway and a dump rake goes all skoogeey from hitting a ditch and maybe the raker does, too” I started down a well-remembered the list of the Double W haying mishaps. “Or what if the cook throws a fit and quits and--”

“Hey, hey, I have enough keeping me awake at night already,” the foreman put a stop to my onslaught.

Thinking over what I’d reeled off, he pushed away from the pickup and turned to Herman, who was trying to encourage our way onto the crew with nods and shrugs and grins while keeping a silence and leaving things to me. “Your boy here makes a pretty good argument for you. It’s not necessarily nutty to have somebody else drive the stacker team and free me up for whatever the
hell else happens. You do look like you’ve had experience of some kind”—maybe too much experience, from his tone as he eyed Herman’s lined face and general muss from sleeping in a culvert—“but where’d you last do your teamstering?”

“Not him,” I rushed the words before Herman could say something guaranteed to confuse the issue. “Me.”

“Yeah?” Jones laughed. “You’re the horseman of the family?”

“Oh sure, you bet. I’ve been a stacker driver since I was eight. On a big ranch. Up north.”

“Eight, huh.” He played that around in his mustache as he studied me.

“Just how old does that make you as we’re standing here on the green earth?”

I was perpetually being told I was big for my age. Wasn’t it logical for that number to grow to catch up with the rest of me, in this instance? “Thirteen,” I said.

He looked skeptical. “My next birthday.” The next after that, at least. An approximation.

He waited for me to say more, but when I didn’t, he let it go. Now he scanned Herman from his city shoes to his eyeglasses. “How about the mister here, who you seem to do the talking for? I don’t hear him owning up to advanced years like some.”

“He’s my grandfather, but he married young,” I hoped that would help in my fudging away from whatever Herman’s age was. “See, we’re all each other has,” I laid that on thick while Herman instinctively stayed mute, “and we’re sort of on hard times. We really, really need jobs.”

The foreman still hesitated “Nothing against you, but you’re still just a kid, and you can’t have been around workhorses any too many years, whatever you say.”
“Hah, he is some thinkerer,” Herman, nervous spectator, took that way of warning me not to point out half of that problem could be solved with the French bible deck in his duffel.

Curiosity got the best of me, all this talk of “the owner” as if it was some deep dark secret. Feeling invincible after my harnessing success, I rashly brought the matter out into the open.

“Is Rags around?”

The foreman looked at me sharply, then included Herman. “All right, geniuses. How’d you already figure out the place is his? Most of these ‘boes could be working for Hopalong Cassidy, for all they know.”

When I related sighting the purple Cadillac at Crow Fair and what ensued, and with Herman chiming in about what a bee-yoot-iffle ride Rags had made, Jones relaxed his scrutiny of us somewhat. “Well, good for you. I don’t advertise who owns this outfit, right off the bat, because guys can get the idea somebody like Rags ought to pay higher wages. No worries about that with you two who are just lucky to be here, am I right?” he secured headshakes from Herman and me as if Oh no, any notion of a larger paycheck would never cross our minds.

“Anyway, Rags is riding the circuit,” the topic was finished off, “he’ll pull in here big as life sooner or later.” Shoving off from the wall, the foreman headed out of the barn saying gruffly, “Leave the team tied up until I get the rest of this world-beating crew lined out on their jobs. Come on, let’s go to the bunkhouse and settle you in.”

My feet barely tickled the ground, I was on such a cloud as I crossed the yard of the ranch owned by the champion saddle bronc rider of the world. Was this perfect or what? Miles better than my try at talking Gram into letting me hang on at the Double W back at the start of summer. Look at all that had happened since--in
up matters for the future choreboy. Our defeated adversary started to try a kick and thought better of it. Herman gingerly reached in from the side and undid the pigging string. Eyeing him as best she could from the stanchion, Waltzing Matilda now switched her tail, but neither kicked nor unloosed manure. I swear the cow got the idea.

And Jones surely did.

“One Eye, I want to see you after you get that milk up to the house,” the determined foreman headed us off as we were leaving the barn and everyone else had dispersed. Me, he provided, “You’re on your own for the day, laddie buck, find something to do to keep yourself out of trouble,” fairly civilly for him.

At loose ends, I drifted across the ranch yard, habit directing me to the bunkhouse while my mind speeded to every here and there. In contrast, the hoboes had an enviable talent for taking time off, and the crew was a hundred percent at leisure. Sunning themselves in chairs propped against the bunkhouse, Shakesepeare was working a crossword puzzle and Harv was deep in a Police Gazette. At the horseshoe pit, the others were trying to solve Midnight Frankie’s evident ability to win at any game of chance ever invented, without success according to the clangs of his ringers and their echoes of frustration. I went and sat on the steps, waiting.

It did not take long. Herman emerged from the boss house and headed straight for me, the shift of his eyes as he neared telling me he wanted to talk in private.

That meant conferring in the crapper again. With our reflections registering us in the silvered mirror, Herman in high spirits and me still emotionally back and forth, he horse laughed as he described Mrs. Costello nearly fainting away at receiving a milk bucket without Waltzing Matilda’s splatter on it.
Then his words slowed, half proud, half cautious. “I am choreboy for good, Jones telled me. More wages, a little,” he held his thumb and first finger apart just barely.

“I was hoping,” was as much as I could say.

“Ja, is what we wanted, hah? I hole up in Big Hole.”

“I’ll come see you sometimes,” I blurted.

He drew a breath through his teeth as if the next words hurt, and they did.

“Not a good eye-dea, Donny. There is trouble in that for us both. Your Gram and the nice lady might get too much curious about how I am here. And I can not have the Kate know my whereabouts.” He paused before making himself say the rest.

“So, Fritz Schneider of the Diamond Buckle and Wisdom town I am from now, someone you met on your travelings but must only remember, not come see. Savvy?”

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

“Many times have I said you are good boy. Never more than now.” He looked off past me. “I must make sorry to Highpockets about not going with them.”

“Yeah, you’d better go do that.” Still neither us moved, and to break the awkward silence, I asked, “Where’d you learn to milk like that?”

He grinned. “Telled you the cows lived downstairs in Weilheim.”

I laughed, a little. With neither of us finding anything more to say, Herman stirred himself. “Now I must see to chickens and hogs, big new responsibilities.”

“I’ll feed the horses for you,” I volunteered, wanting something to do besides letting our separation eat my guts out.
The barn was as quiet as it ever got, the workhorses standing idle in their stalls, straw on the floor absorbing the shifting of their hooves except for a whispery rustle. I was welcomed with some snorts and a neigh or two as I picked up the pitchfork, shiny as new from Herman’s sharpening of everything that would hold an edge, and climbed to the haymow to fork alfalfa into the manger in front of each horse. That chore done, I shinnied down and played favorites as I felt entitled with Queen and Brandy after the distances we had covered together, stacker path upon stacker path, and treated them to a half pan of oats apiece. As they munched there in the stall, I stroked the gray expanse of Queen’s neck and shoulder, reluctant to start yet another goodbye. Smartly the big mare flickered an ear. Laying my head against her in full confusion of emotions, I clung there with my cheek to the warm smooth hide, unable to do more than sob, “Queen, what am I gonna do?”

“I’m curious to hear how she answers that.”

I jerked away from Queen’s side, startled out of my wits by the tall figure shadowed in the doorway from the horse corral. At first I thought it must be Harv, at that size, but no. The unmistakable saunter and lanky presence told me even before the easygoing drawl. “Anything wrong we can fix with something besides spit and iodine?”

“Rags!” As he materialized out of the shadowed end of the barn, I saw he was in regular ranch wear except for the conspicuous belt buckle, the diamond buckle brand on him the same as on those of us in the crew with our hatbands. In everyday getup or not, though, he carried himself like a champion, and I had to gulp hard to speak up adequately as he moseyed toward me. “Sorry, I--I didn’t know you were here, didn’t see your car.”

“Aw, that weather last night will teach me about having a convertible,” he said ruefully while he came and joined me in the stall. ”It was raining like a cow taking a whizz on a flat rock when I pulled in from the Billings fair, so I stuck the
Caddy in the equipment shed.” He patted his way along Queen’s side softly
chntning, “Steady, hoss, stand still, old girl,” until he was alongside me and could
reach up and fondly tug at her mane. “A horse and a half, isn’t she. Seems like
she just naturally lives up to her name. Pretty good listener, too, I gather.” He
looked down at me with a long-jawed grin, but his eyes a lot more serious than
that. “Maybe I ought to lend an ear, too--Snag, do I remember you go by?”

“Uh-huh, when I’m not Scotty,” I broke out of being tongue-tied. “You
know how the ho--the crew does with names.”

“A little of that got on me ever since I dressed up to ride,” rodeo’s leading
fashion plate acknowledged the way of such things with an amused nod.
Horseman that Rags Rasmussen so famously was, he murmured something as he
scratched behind the mare’s ear that made her nicker and try to nudge him gently
with her nose, an intelligent blue eye seeing into us, I swear. Casual but to the
point, Rags glanced down at me standing at his side as if I was glued there.
“Better let it out. What’s got you talking to the Queen here?”

How many chances in a lifetime does a person have to bare his soul to a
Rags Rasmussen? If confession was good for the soul, mine was being reformed
with every word that tumbled out of me. “I’m sort of caught between things. See,
I’m supposed to go back to my grandmother, she’s better after her operation and
can be a cook again like she’s always been, except it’d be in dumb Glasgow, and
we’d live together with Letty, she’s a waitress but a lady, too, and you’d really like
her, everybody does, Harv especially, and I thought that’s what I wanted most in
the world. But I’m a handful for her, Gram I mean, she’d be the first to tell you,
and I haven’t exactly done what she thinks I was doing, all summer. She’ll think I
got too redheaded, as she calls it.”
I faltered, but had to put the next part together to my intent listener. “What happened was, I met up with, uh, Gramps I call him although he’s a sort of uncle.” I sent a despairing look out the line of barn windows to where Herman could be seen joining the horseshoe players, still receiving slaps on the back for his triumph over Waltzing Matilda. “And now I don’t want to leave him, he needs me too much.”

“The new choreboy, while Smiley follows other pursuits,” Rags made sure he was tracking the dramas of the ranch correctly. “What makes you think this gramps of yours needs you more than your granny does?”

There was a whole list of that all the way back to fingerspitzengehfulh in the Milwaukee bus depot, but I made myself stick to the simple sum. “Bad stuff happens to him when he’s on his own. And to me when I am, too. But when it’s both of us, we sort of think our way out of things.”

Not in a wiseguy way but just prodding me a little, he pursued that with, “That’s a pretty good trick. The two of you together amount to more than one and one, you figure? Like Queen and Brandy here?”

“Yeah, that’s it! Something like that.”

“And you need to stay on here for that to keep happening.”

“You got it.” My hopes rose to the rafters of the barn.

Only to be dashed again as he contemplated Herman out there jawing happily with the horseshoe players, and then me dippily telling my troubles to a horse. “Nothing against being redheaded, understand,” he began. “But we’re running a ranch, not a charitable institution, and Jones is a bearcat about everyone on the place pulling his own weight. I don’t see—”

The thunderouswhump of a car on the livestock crossing took care of whatever he was going to say. Even Queen sharpened her ears at the telltale sound.
"You damn fool," the sheriff raged against being defied, dropping his hand to his holster. "That can be arranged, too, according to this pistol."

The moment seared into me, I can feel it yet. Was this how shootouts happened in the old West? Some dumb pistoleer goes for his gun and next thing, there is bloodshed everywhere? Both of us tense as sentinels, Herman and I could see it happening, clear as a bang-bang page out of Karl May. Except that Herman in a swift move rewrote that ending, thrusting me aside to safety and crying out, "No need for shooting! I will go with sheriff!"

"No, you’re won’t," Highpocket’s voice cut into the scene, the other hoboes fanning out around him and us as he spoke. "Harv has his reason to be hauled off with this little jaybird, but you don’t need to.” His words were backed up by the pitchforks Skeeter had distributed upon his return from the blacksmith shop, tines gleaming fresh from the grindstone.

The sheriff stared in disbelief at the cordon of grim men holding pitchforks at the ready. "If that’s the way you want it," he unsteadily tried to bluster, "getting a helping of lead for obstructing justice--"

"Whoa."

The word soft as a coax in a horse’s ear came from Rags. "Let’s sort the situation out a little bit,” he ambled around to the far side of the confrontation. "Mallory, if I was you, I’d be looking the other direction during this."

"I was thinking that myself," the deputy sheriff said, moving off in the other direction.

"Jonesie, keep an eye on this with me," Rags resumed, still softly conversational. "Somebody’s got to to be witnesses if this buck fever sheriff cuts loose on innocent men on their way to pitch some hay, don’t you think?"
I faltered, but had to put the next part together to my intent listener. “What happened was, I met up with, uh, Gramps I call him although he’s a sort of uncle.” I sent a despairing look out the line of barn windows to where Herman could be seen joining the horseshoe players, still receiving slaps on the back for his triumph over Waltzing Matilda. “And now I don’t want to leave him, he needs me too much.”

“The new choreboy, while Smiley follows other pursuits,” Rags made sAs he materializ was in regular ranch wear except for the conspicuous belt buckle, the diamond buckle brand on him the same as on those of us in the crew with our hatbands. In everyday getup or not, though, he carried himself like a champion, and I had to gulp hard to speak up adequately as he moseyed toward me. “Sorry, I--I didn’t know you were here, didn’t see your car.”

“Aw, that weather last night will teach me about having a convertible,” he said ruefully while he came and joined me in the stall. ”It was raining like a cow taking a whizz on a flat rock when I pulled in from the Billings fair, so I stuck the
Caddy in the equipment shed.” He patted his way along Queen’s side softly chanting, “Steady, hoss, stand still, old girl,” until he was alongside me and could reach up and fondly tug at her mane. “A horse and a half, isn’t she. Seems like she just naturally lives up to her name. Pretty good listener, too, I gather.” He looked down at me with a long-jawed grin, but his eyes a lot more serious than that. “Maybe I ought to lend an ear, too—Snag, do I remember you go by?”

“Uh-huh, when I’m not Scotty,” I broke out of being tongue-tied. “You know how the ho—-the crew does with names.”

“A little of that got on me ever since I dressed up to ride,” rodeo’s leading fashion plate acknowledged the way of such things with an amused nod. Horseman that Rags Rasmussen so famously was, he murmured something as he scratched behind the mare’s ear that made her nicker and try to nudge him gently with her nose, an intelligent blue eye seeing into us, I swear. Casual but to the point, Rags glanced down at me standing at his side as if I was glued there. “Better let it out. What’s got you talking to the Queen here?”

How many chances in a lifetime does a person have to bare his soul to a Rags Rasmussen? If confession was good for the soul, mine was being reformed with every word that tumbled out of me. “I’m sort of caught between things. See, I’m supposed to go back to my grandmother, she’s better after her operation and can be a cook again like she’s always been, except it’d be in dumb Glasgow, and we’d live together with Letty, she’s a waitress but a lady, too, and you’d really like her, everybody does, Harv especially, and I thought that’s what I wanted most in the world. But I’m a handful for her, Gram I mean, she’d be the first to tell you, and I haven’t exactly done what she thinks I was doing, all summer. She’ll think I got too redheaded, as she calls it.”
I understood, all right, shocked speechless. She figured I had a wire down. Aghast at being classified as some kind of what Letty termed a mo-ron, I sucked air like a fish out of water, until my voice came back.

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

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

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

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

"When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it," she flared, giving him a dirty look. "A person should be able to dress the way she likes. And if Kate Smith happens to resemble me, that is her good luck, isn't it," a sentiment that made her draw herself up as if double-daring him to contradict it. I breathed slightly easier. If they were going to have a fight, at least that might put me on the sideline temporarily.

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

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

My modest admission, she rolled over like a bulldozer. "You mustn't let it run away with you," her voice not Kate Smith nice now. "You know why you're
“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.

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 mixed in with the new. Whatever the travels of his tongue, I was finding this big husky open-faced
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*--who 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?”

“Plenty of time to read on the ore boats,” he answered soberly. “*Badger Voyager* and the others gave me my learning, in manner of speaking.”

I didn’t doubt that, and let the matter go as I tried for some learning of my own, trying to figure out Manitowoc if I was going to be stuck there for the whole
Anyway, I answered up to Herta’s dig or whatever it was. “Naw, I’m the kind who can only play one instrument. The radio,” I fell back on the old joke, which did not go over as big as I’d hoped.

“Are we playing cards or musical chairs?” Gerda asked pointedly.

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

Not a good start. “Sure, I was just about to.”

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

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

“Oh, don’t, snickelfritz,” she killed that off after the first few times. “Just call me Gerda, please.” Making a discard that I had absolutely no use for as she
Things like that were exactly what I wanted to spend mad money on, and I tried to say so without saying so. "I can’t go through the whole summer just sitting around the house doing nothing."

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

Talking to me that way, who did she think I was, Biggie the budgie? But before I think up a better retort, she let out an alarming sigh as if the air was going out of her. I saw she was stricken, for sure, but not in an emergency way. Everything about her appeared normal enough except her eyes were not the road, her attention seized by something we were passing.

"I’m sorry, buttercup," she apologized in another expulsion of breath, "but the sight of it always almost does me in."

I jerked my head around to where she was looking, expecting a hospital or cemetery at the worst, some place ordinarily sad to see. But no, I saw why the sight so unnerved her, as it did me. The forbidding old building set back from the street was spookily familiar, even though I was positive I had never seen it before. The sprawling structure, rooms piled three stories high, each with a single narrow window, seemed leftover and rundown and yet clinging to life like the skinny little trees, maybe a failing orchard, that dotted its grounds like scarecrows.

"What is that place?" I heard my own voice go high.
the fervor of an eleven-year-old carrying an obsidian arrowhead in his pocket, 

[I certainly did turn my imagination loose on that, seeing myself riding the dog bus west sooner than later to a healthy and restored Gram, her with a job cooking on some ranch where the rancher was no Sparrowhead, me back at things I was good at like hunting magpies and following the ways of cowboys, poorfarm and orphanage out of our picture. In other words, in more luck than I was used to lately.

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

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

Just then, though, I heard a mysterious outburst where a woman was definitely roused, but not that way.

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

“Does not take any much brain to know you are talking crazy,” came Herman’s raised voice in return.
That didn’t sound bad, nothing like Omaha Beach. Disappointed at his evidently tame war, I said just to be asking, “What’s that mean, Ho-huh whatever you said?”

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

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

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

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

“The shovel is sometimes better friend than the rifle,” he said simply. “Learned to dig such foxholes, I did, could have given fox a lesson.” He paused to frame the rest of that story. “Here is a strange thing soldiers go through. The more of my comrades died on Hohe Toter Mann, the more it saved my life. My outfit, I think you call it?”--I nodded--“Second Company, lost so many men we was moved to rear guard duty. Behind the lines, we had chance to survive the war.” His face took on an odd expression, as if skipping past a lot to say: “And here you see me, in America.”

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

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

Summoning my courage before it left me entirely—this already was way risky, being in here at all in the middle of the night—I cautiously hobbled over to where the sewing machine was located. If I was right, a Singer model this fancy might have a small light beneath the arm of the machine to shine down on close work. My blind search ultimately fumbled onto a toggle that switched on a small bulb above the needle and router, perfect for my purpose. In its glow I could pick out objects shelved around the room, stacks and stacks of cloth and pattern books and such. But nothing like a jar holding the loose change of canasta winnings.

Doubt was eating away at my courage pretty fast—maybe I was loco to even try this and ought to sneak back upstairs to bed. Instead, Manitou or some similar spirit of the miraculous guided my hand into my pants pocket where I squeezed the arrowhead for all luck it might have. That steadied me enough to take another look around the room. My last hope, and it did not appear to be much of one, was a
“There’s the sort of thing I mean,” she emphasized. “You’re Dorie, all over again. Chatter, chatter, chatter,” she took a hand off the wheel to imitate with her arched fingers and thumb something like Biggie the budgie’s nonstop beak. “One uncalled-for remark after another.”

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

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

“Mm? Ten dollars.” She reached down to her purse between us on the seat and shook it so it jingled. “Music to the ears, isn’t it,” she said with a dimpled smile that would have done credit to Kate Smith.

“And how!” I couldn’t wait one more second to ask. “When do I get my share of the ten bucks?”

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

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

That accusation, for that’s what I meant it to be, only made her wedge herself more firmly behind the steering wheel of the DeSoto. “Now, now, don’t make such a fuss. If I were to give you your share, as you call it, what would you spend it on? Comic books, movies, things like that which are like throwing money away.”
standard low cabinet next to the sewing machine, designed to hold thread and attachments. Quietly as possible I pulled out drawer after drawer, encountering a world of spools of thread and gizmos for making buttonholes and ruffles and so on, until finally I reached a drawer that jingled when I opened it.

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

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

"Are you done, you little thief?"

She was practically filling the doorway, in a nightdress as tentlike as the muumuu and wearing those fuzzy slippers which were noiseless on the living room rug. At first my tongue did fail me as I stared at a greatly irate Aunt Kate and she at me, an outpouring of words no problem for her. "I was on my way to the bathroom when I noticed this funny little glow from in here. It's not like me to leave the sewing machine on like that, is it. And what do I find, Mister Smarty Pants, but you stealing for all you're worth."
I didn’t know anything to do but fight back. “Why is this stealing when I won the pot in the canasta game just as much as you did, remember? I bet Minnie Zettel got her share every time the two of you won. So why can’t I?”

“I went over that with you in the car--”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While I hadn't said a word to her as I mushed up puffed rice and sugar, she in turn kept her head down over the *Herald-Times*, to say as if my behavior was reported in the newspaper, "Donny, last night was very upsetting to me and I hope nothing like it happens again."
“I didn’t like it any either. You were futzing at me and Herman like we were criminals of some kind,” I responded, unable to resist giving her a dose of stink eye.

She sighed so strenuously it threatened to bulge her out of her robe. “That’s exactly the sort of thing I warned you about after the canasta game. Uncalled for remarks. You don’t seem to listen when I try to improve your manners a teensy bit. Sometimes,” she took a slurp of coffee for the chance to sight in on me over the cup, “I wonder what am I going to do with you?”

“Board me for the summer and send me home with new clothes on my back and money in my pocket like when I came, how about?” I shot back.

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

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

I found out disastrously soon when she cleared her throat and said:
“Donny, I have something to tell you. After breakfast, pack your things. I’m sending you home.”

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

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

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

Talk about a coward’s way out. She did the deed by letter instead of telephone so there could be no argument on Gram’s part. And to keep clear of that starchy nun Carma Jean asking where her sense of charity was. And ‘upset’? How about overturned and kicked while I was down?

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

She had the decency to flinch when I flung that charge at her, but she also dodged. “Donny, dear, it won’t be as bad as you think. We have to believe that your grandmother will recuperate just fine and be able to take care of you again, don’t we. But in the meantime, there are foster homes that take in children for a while.” I knew those to be little more than a bus drop stop on the way to the
orphanage. "To make sure, I went to the county welfare authorities here and got a list of such places in Great Falls. It's all there in the letter I sent. Your grandmother will only have to fill out a form, or two and you'll have a temporary home until she gets well."

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

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

I pushed aside my breakfast, too sick at heart to eat, and went for my suitcase for hundreds upon hundreds of miles of travel agony ahead.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It would take a lot to argue with that, but before I even had any chance she had her purse up and was diving a hand into it. “Oh, and take this.” She pressed some folded money into my hand. In amazement, I turned the corners of the bills back, counting. Three tens. The exact same sum as had been pinned inside my discarded shirt.

“What--how come--”

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

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

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

If she hadn’t cried, I would have given in to tears. As it was, I sat there trying to hunch up and take it, one more time. Two days and a night ahead on the dog bus, doom of some kind waiting at the Great Falls depot. Convinced that everything that could go wrong was going wrong, I sent a despairing look up the aisle of the bus. All the situation needed now was something like that bunch of hyena campers to torment me. But no, my fellow passengers mainly were men dressed up for business, a Manitowoc Herald-Times up in front of someone like a last mocking farewell reminder of Aunt Kate, and a few couples where the women were as broad-beamed as seemed to be ordinary in Wisconsin. Nothing to worry, I thought bitterly of Herman’s wording.

The bus growled into action, and was at the outskirts of Manitowoc, the radius of my summer failure, when I heard the sort of oof of someone dropping down next to me. Oh, swell. Exactly what I did not need, a gabby seat changer. With so much else on my mind, I’d forgotten to place my jacket in that spot and now it was too late. Two full hours ahead to Milwaukee yet, and I was in for an