

overfriendly visit from some stranger with nothing better to do than talk my ears off. Goddamn-it-^{all}~~aaa~~to 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

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 always? "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

I since have learned that what he was trying to describe with that jawbreaker word might best be called intuition in the fingertips, something like instinct or born genius or plain inspired guesswork tracing the best possible course up from map paper there at the end of the hand. A special [kind of] talent of touch and decision that came from who knows where.

He cocked that glass-eyed look at me as if I was something special. "You are some lucky boy, Donny, to got it."

Unconvinced and uncertain, I rubbed my thumbs against my fingertips, which felt the same as ever. "And wh-what if I do?"

"Easy. You find us where to go." In demonstration, he waggled his fingers as if warming up to play the piano and shifted his gaze to the map over our heads.

I did not want any part of this. "Herman, huh-uh. Even if I stand on a bench I can't reach anything but Florida, and that's way to hell and gone in the wrong direction."

"Tell you what," he breezed past my objection, "I get down, you get up." Then and there, he squatted low as he could go.

I realized he wanted me to straddle his shoulders. Skittish, I couldn't help glancing at people pouring past in as public a place as there was, a good many of them staring as if we already were a spectacle. "Hey, no, really, I don't think I'd better," I balked. "Won't we get arrested?"

"Pah," he dismissed that. "America don't know hill of beans about arresting people. You should see Germany. Come on, up the daisy," he finished impatiently, still down there on his heels. "Pony ride."

Feeling like a fool, I swung my legs onto his shoulders and he grunted and lifted me high.

“Donny, wait.” Herman was grinning nearly back to his ears. “One thing more. Put moccasins on, hah?”

Why hadn't I thought of that? Already outfitted in my purple rodeo shirt with the sky-blue yoke trimming and now my pearl-grey cowboy hat, the moccasins were the final needed touch. Swiftly I swapped out of my shoes, my feet grateful in the softness of the buckskin, and in an inspiration of my own, I tucked the autograph book under my belt like a hunter's pouch. And off Herman and I went, as if the beadwork fancy dancers on my feet were leading us to the real thing.

We still were on the same earth as Manitowoc, but the world changed as we headed for the fenced-in area of grandstand and corrals and chutes where the rodeo would be held. Tepees by the hundreds populated the encampment bordering the fairground, white cones sharp against the blue sky like a snowy mountain range, all the same precise height. Drummers and chanters there kept up the “Hey-ya-ya-ya, hey-ya-ya-ya” beat as if it was the pulse of the seasons of the strawberry moon and the buck moon. Herman and I tried not to rubberneck amidst it all, but failed laughably. Fully half of the rodeo-going crowd around us was Indian families, the fathers wearing braids and the mothers maybe not, excited children dribbling after in colorful shirts while trying to look as swayve and debonure as I felt, and we couldn't help getting an eyeful. Herman was like a keyed-up kid too, asking this person and that if they happened to be Apaches and not discouraged by the steady answer, “They're not from around here.”

Then we were funneled into the rodeo grounds--surrounded by a horse-high hog-tight woven wire fence with the gate conspicuously manned by sharp-eyed tribal police; rodeo crowds are not exactly church congregations, and the Crows were taking no chances on drunks and other unwelcome sorts sneaking in--and the pair of us virtally walking on air filled with the aromas of fry bread and sizzling

Coming out of my trance as everyone but us was flocking to the grandstand on the far side of the arena, I had the presence of mind to say the next magic word to Herman.

“Cowboys.”

“Ja? Whereabouts?”

He gawked all around, as if expecting pistoleer angels wearing Stetsons and boots to materialize. Here I was on familiar ground, steering us to the area behind the bucking chutes, knowing that was where anything interesting happened until events in the arena got underway.

Back there in the gathering place between where horse trailers and other vehicles were parked and the pole corral of the arena, it was as busy as could be wished, big-hatted Indian contestants and those from the professional rodeo circuit clustered behind the chutes working on their riding rigging, fastening their chaps on, joshing one another about how high the bronc they'd drawn would make them fly. Calf ropers were building their loops and making little tosses at nothing. Teenage girl barrel racers exercised their horses, leaving behind increasing islands of [horse] manure. In the background, Brahma bulls bawled in the holding pens and saddle broncs snorted and whinnied as they were hazed into the bucking chutes. ✓

Herman and I meandered through taking in the whole scene as if we were old hands at this, our hats blending with the cloud of Stetsons. This was the best yet, hanging around the “choots,” as Herman called the chutes. I didn't bother to correct him, but a minute later figured he needed it when he poked up his hat and stage-whispered to me in best Karl May style, “Too bad we don't got chaps for our legs like rest of cowboys.”

“Guess what. It's *shaps*.”

“*Ch* is *sh*?” he crinkled up in mystification at that. “How is this possible?”

seemed to me sort of a preachy inscription and didn't even rhyme, but what else could I expect, I figured.

"I see you wondering about the last name," he provided next, noticing Herman's puzzlement as he studied the inscription over my shoulder. No wonder the man went by Reverend Mac, was my own reaction to what looked like a line from an eyechart.

"A touch of Poland in the family, way back," he smiled as if we all knew what a tangle the family could be. "Mankind is such a mixture sometimes."

Herman could readily agree to that, yawning prodigiously some more as he had made sure to do while the reverend wrote.

Yawns are of course catching, and following his, mine were absolutely epidemic, according to my plan. "You know what," I stretched drowsily, which did not take much pretending, "I'm all in but my shoelaces."

"Ja, we are feeling it," Herman did his part, patting away another yawn as if doing a war whoop. "South Dakota is a long ride," he borrowed the jackrabbit territory of the day before.

If the Reverend Mac was disappointed in not pinning us down about whether we were with the Lord, he did not show it. "By all means, go to your rest," he could not have been more gracious about excusing us to slumber. "Bus travel takes it out of a person."

He said a mouthful there. Naturally Herman was asleep almost the instant he shut his eyelids, and I was more than ready to doze off as well, with the bus heading due west through the Yellowstone valley into a sunset of colored clouds and shafts of sunlight that had the driver pulling his windshield visor all the way down. The dainty minister sat back, smiling to himself, one more Bible inflicted on potential sinners or proven ones, to his evident satisfaction. The last thing I

his pitchfork. Without Queen's steady horse sense, in the true meaning of that, I would have been sunk those first few days of trudging that same line of march over and over with the sun beating down and no rest for the weary, in Jones's unrelenting way of putting up hay.

All in but my toenails by quitting time, I was anxiously asked by Herman one of those times when I dragged myself into the bunkhouse to wash up for supper, "Tell the Jones it is too much for you, can I? He can put Fingy on stacker team and you on dumping rake, you can sit at your work like me."

"Don't you dare," I found the strength to sound offended. "I'll toughen in." Which I did, day by day, that path worn into the earth beside the haystacks leading me into the gritty line of Camerons and Blegens who had hunched up and taken it since time immemorial.

And see, by the end of the first week of Big Hole haying I held a triumphant mental conversation with Gram, I wasn't too young to live in a bunkhouse like a regular ranch hand.

The cast of characters Herman and I joined were proof that the Johnson family tree had branches of all kinds. Midnight Frankie was from what he called Lousy Anna, and spoke with the *dem*s and *dosess* of a Creole accent. Shakespeare's tale was one of youthful indiscretions, when he became adept at what he called dialing the treasury, which mounted to safecracking, and it drew him an education written on jailhouse walls and in prison libraries. Peerless had hit the road during the Depression, starved out of an Oklahoma Dust Bowl farm to the California orchards, where the miserable Okie migrant camps turned him into an agitator and bunkhouse lawyer, and aggravating as his mouthing off on practically anything could be, he was not often wrong. Skeeter went farther back in the workingman's struggle against the crapitalists, as he called them, when he

“Sure, I’m kind of interested,” I encouraged Smiley. “What’s that flute business mean?”

This brought about rare hesitation in the ladykiller shoreboy as he studied me there propped on my bunk, rough-clad in a thousand-miler shirt like the rest of the crew but still plainly a youngster, although a husky one. Whatever other changes the summer may have produced in me, I had grown considerably, right past any semblance of eleven going on twelve. Even so, young, young, young was still written all over me from freckles to boyish oversize feet despite my efforts to camouflage it.

“Come on, everybody, it ain’t nothing but the facts of life,” Smiley defended his position to the bunkhouse generally but Highpockets in particular. “When I was his age, I knew plenty. Ain’t it about time he learned about sailing around the world?” By now I felt like Herman when he’d listened to the hoboes rattling on in their lingo and asked me, “How many languages does English come in?” It was years down the line before I fully understood that Smiley’s lip-smacking phrase meant something like learning the encyclopedia of sex by hand.

“It’s up to One Eye,” Highpockets ruled, sharp again. “None of your concern, so can that kind of mouthing off and--”

“The Pockets is right.” Herman loomed into the room, there is no other word for it, knuckles clenched white on his straight razor as he fixed a snake-killing look on Smiley. “Scotty is good boy. I will take care of his educating.”

“Don’t get your dander up,” Smiley backed down at the sight of Herman and that razor. “I was only funnin’ with the boy, no harm in that, huh?”

“Do your funning on somebody else,” Herman’s warning hit home on the now wordless Smiley, most of the rest of the crew sitting up and watching, with Highpockets and Harv half onto their feet to head matters off if that razor came into play. But Herman with a contemptuous “Puh” at Smiley crossed the room to his



fought the cops in the Seattle general strike of 1919 that got beaten down . Fingy never brought his background out except once when Smiley, obnoxious as usual, asked, "How'd you lose them fingers anyway? She close her legs on you too quick?" Fingy gave him a look as if about to squash a bug and only said, "Two Jima."

Then there was Pooch, who seemed to be the sad sack of the crew, his contribution to conversation almost entirely "Damn straight" and "You said it" as he plodded through life. At first I wondered at the lack of teasing him by these often rough-mouthed men, because in a schoolyard anyone with a slow mind was in for it. But I overheard Highpockets take Jones aside in the barn and explain that Pooch had been seriously worked over by a sap-wielding railroad bull in the Pocatello yards, notorious as the toughest anywhere, and been a little off in the head ever since. Jones, to his credit, said nobody needed to be a mental giant to drive a scatter rake, and he'd make sure Pooch was given the tamest team of horses, after my own.

The one among them who did not share much about what turned him into a hobo was Highpockets himself. He did not need to, so obvious was he as a "profesh" who could make things happen in a collection of men otherwise as stray as cats.

And of course, Harv was Harv.

So, life in the bunkhouse was much like an extended version of that last bus from Wisdom, crowded and crude and somehow companionable almost in spite of itself. But also, with that many of us rubbing elbows in so small a space, an existence in which some friction was bound to occur.

Reading material in the bunkhouse never approached the Condensed Books level, and I was propped in my bunk after supper spending time with one of the

Behind his glasses he was blinking hard, and I realized his eyes were moist. "I am doing poor job at being grandpa. You are living with men who have no home except the boxedcars, and are always after by sheriffs, and speak I don't know what language, and the Smiley who is all dirty mouth. It can not be good for you, in bunkhouse. And I can not do anything about it except put the Smiley in his place once in blue moon."

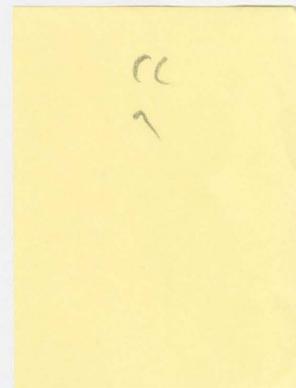
"Skip it. I'm not leaving."

That stopped him cold. "Not yet anyhow," I rushed on to keep him that way. "Not until after haying and then we can figure out what we're gonna do. Each." I was not far from tears, either, at the thought of going our separate ways. But that was not going to happen for as long as I could put it off. "Don't let the bunkhouse stuff throw you, okay? I won't listen any too much, I promise," I tried a ridiculous grin to help both our moods.

Herman wiped the corners of his eyes, blew his nose, sighed a deep surrender. "You are loyal. What can I do but try be same." He reached over and gripped my shoulder in a way that said more than words could. Both of us were one snuffle from breaking down.

He managed to be first at swallowing away the emotion, saying huskily, "Donny, if you are not going to your Gram, very least you must call her, ja? Like when we were on bus trip. If she does not hear from you once in while, she will worry too much and call Manitowoc, and there the Kate is and you are not. And then we are--"

"I know, I know. Kaput." Did I ever have that terribly in mind. Nun, Gram, Jones, they lined up like poles of the telephone line and all scared me. One wrong word to any of them could do us in. Put yourself in my place: Gram was not even supposed to exist, according to what I had told Jones about me and Herman being all each other had, and any slipup on my part that let on to Gram



“Donny! I was starting wonder if the phone line between here and Wisconsin is down.”

“I’m real sorry, but I’ve been awful busy, we’re putting up so much--” I barely caught myself in time--“jam. Strawberry. Jars and jars of it. Aunt Kate has a sweet tooth, you know.”

“I never knew Kitty could find her way around a kitchen. Tell her for me I just knew cooking runs in the family.”

“Oh yeah, I sure will.”

“It’s getting awful late in Manitowoc, isn’t it?”

“We’re just back from the show,” I scrambled to account for the two-hour time difference that had slipped my mind.

“I hope it was a good one,” Gram sounded pretty much like her old self. To check on that, I asked, “Are you out of that wheelchair yet?”

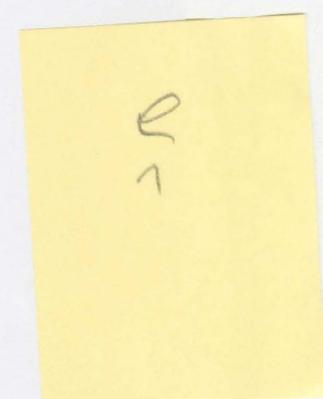
“Oh, not just yet. Around here, they call me Helen Wheels.”

I was trying to digest that when Gram was right back at me, laughing and letting me know, “That’s a joke, boy. Has your sense of humor dried up and blown away?”

“Oh, yeah, now I get it. Heck on wheels, that’s you for sure, Gram.” I wasn’t going to let her joke me off what I rally wanted to know. “But when are you gonna be up and around?”

She groaned a little, at me rather than her condition. “All right, you with the one-track mind. The sawbones has to check me over some more before he’ll let me up. They’re slower than the dickens about it after this kind of operation.” I felt a kind of guilty relief. It distracted me enough that I missed her next topic of conversation.

“I said,” she repeated and as ever she was not one who liked having to repeat, “how are you and Laddie doing?”



buckaroo lord of the Diamond Buckle, world champion in more than bronc riding, as far as I was concerned.

On way into the house, Rags limped more than a little, which alarmed me no end. Manners flung to hell, I outright asked the worst: "Did a bronc bust you up, there in Helena?"

"Naw, I drew a sidewinder hoss called Snow Snake that gave me a bad time and sort of banged my knee against the chute gate coming out, is all." He grimaced a way that nothing to do with the knee. "What's worse, I rode the crowbait, but only placed." He raised his eyebrows to indicate upstairs where a certain somebody was getting herself comfortable. "Luckily a consolation prize was waiting."

Noticing my open-mouthed worship of his every word and move, he then and there gave me a pearl of wisdom. "Putting yourself on dodgy horses all the time is a tough go, amigo. I hope you don't have your heart set on being a bronc rider."

"Never. I mean, you're awful good at it and all, but I don't think I could be." His long legs and rider's body next to my chunky build pretty well confirmed that at a glance. "Can I tell you something, though? What I most in the world want to be is a rodeo announcer." I sent my voice as deep as it would go. "Coming out of chute four, it's Rags Rasmussen, champion of the world, on a bundle of trouble called Snow Snake. Like that."

Then the most wonderful thing. The greatest rodeo cowboy on earth, who had heard announcers all the way from rickety roping club arenas to Madison Square Garden, paused at the screen door and offered his hand. His grave experienced eyes met mine. "Let's shake on you making it to the top, son. I think you have the gift." He grinned as I hypnotically shook his hand. "I'm sure not gonna bet against you."

In the magic of that moment, the dream began to turn real. With his spirit in the world of rodeo as great as that of Manitou in the ghostland of the past, the vision never left me. I could foretell it clear as a mirror, the fancily painted broadcast crew bus with the bright red lettering emblazoned on its side where the silver dog used to run.

THE VOICE OF THE ARENA

SCOTTY CAMERON

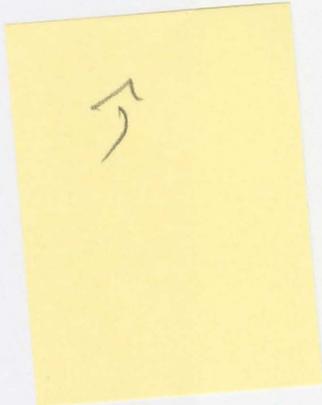
BRINGS YOU THE WORLD OF RODEO

Fame and wealth, along with the cartoon tribute in Believe It Or Not! for the hundreds upon hundreds of rodeos witnessed at the announcing microphone, those all were within reach with that extended hand of Rags Rasmussen. I had but to live up to what he called the gift.

Way ahead of that, I had to deal with a phone call I did not want to make, hiding my whereabouts and Herman's very existence from Gram.

No sooner were we in the house than a gale in woman form swept down the hallway to us. Not, unfortunately, the trick performer but the cook, Mrs. Costello, who liked to have her nose in everything.

"Oh, Mrs. Rasmussen, you're home! What a relief, I always worry about you." A rawboned woman who looked like she could fight a bear with a switch, she normally ran a backyard laundry in Wisdom, but was a last-minute desperation hire by Jones. When Highpockets on behalf of the crew took the foreman aside after one too many servings of the cooked liver the hoboies called gator bait and asked if there wasn't better food to be had somehow, Jones threw up his hands and said he had scoured all the way to Butte for a haying season cook, with no luck. Which left us with Mrs. Costello, as addicted to radio soap operas as Aunt Kate,



chronically resorting to dishes featuring canned tomatoes, and making a racket in the kitchen as if the pots and pans were taking a beating while she hashed meals together. Milking time brought another uproar almost daily. She and Smiley hated each other, with her regularly complaining loudly about the splatters of manure on the milk buckets the choreboy would bring in after milking Waltzing Matilda. I have read that the finest Persian carpets would have one strand deliberately left astray, to avoid the sin of pride that perfection might bring. Mrs. Costello was something like that loose thread in the pattern of the Double Buckle, and of course I regarded her as poor material compared to Gram. But that was neither here nor there; Mrs. Costello obviously had to be put up with, as I could read in Rags's face as she butted in on us before we could reach his office.

"Can I get you and your guest"--she didn't mean me--"some rhubarb pie with whipped cream and coffee?"

"No thanks, we'll save our appetites," Rags said politely. "Excuse us, we've got business in the office."

With a final lingering curious look at me, off she went down the hall, next making an anvil chorus of pots and pans as she started doing the dishes.

Rags wagged his head and said something under his breath which sounded like, "It takes all kinds." He ushered me on into the office and said to make myself at home, which was like telling me I had come a long way from a hobo kip in the willows. I wished Herman were in there with me to share the giddy experience.

Turning to go, Rags thought to add: "Just so we're straight on this phone business. You can check on Granny every so often even if I'm not here. I'll tell Jones and Mrs. Costello it's okay." Somewhere upstairs a radio was going, nice and soft. He winked at me and headed for the stairs, calling, "I'm coming, Delilah."

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I sat down at the desk big as a dining room table, trying to take in the whole office. Around on all the walls were framed photographs of Rags riding twisty broncs and championship awards, the kind of marks of fame I had hoped to see on Aunt Kate's walls when I was under the impression she was Kate Smith. This was worlds better, leaving me open-mouthed as I gazed around at the collection. Wowie. Also, from right there at the seat of Rags Rasmussen's ranch empire, I could see the daybooks arranged as neatly as you would expect from the most scrupulous bronc rider in the world, and fine old furniture which put the Double W's to shame. One item was what I recognized from reading about the Pilgrims as a sinner's bench, a straightbacked hardwood church pew which must have been a rare antique. On it sat one of those hand-carved signs sold at the craft booths outside rodeo arenas, with the wording WHY IS TEMPTATION ALWAYS THE TASTIEST THING ON THE MENU? Well, nobody said Rags lacked a sense of humor.

I knew I had to get down to business and across the summerful of distances make the phone call to Gram, putting on miles in her wheelchair, reading my weekly letters supposedly chronicling the good times I was having in Manitowoc with Aunt Kate. I absolutely had to pick up the phone and do it, but was afraid to. What if she had decided to make up with her stuckup sister, found out I was no longer in Wisconsin, and demanded to know where in tarnation I was and what I was up to?

I'd have to face that if and when it came. Meanwhile, I dialed.

The phone line hummed, Sister Carma Jean answered and for once did not give me a bad time about asking to talk to Gram, instead springing on me the equivalent of, "Here she is."

and dug out a tenspot from my wages and secured another from Herman's change laying on the bar without him noticing. Nor was I the only one rushing to follow Midnight Frankie's lead, Highpockets thumbing the sum out of his wages with the declaration, "I'm in for a double sawbuck, too," and Harv thinking it over for a moment and then silently doing the same, followed in quick succession by Peerless, Shakrespeare, Fingy and Pooch.

"There's our chunk of the jackpot, Deacon," Skeeter crowed in challenge, "decorate the mahogany or say uncle."

Faced with our crew's total backing of Herman, the Tumbling T outfit looked uneasily at one another, but when Deacon demanded, "C'mon, don't let this gang of broken-down blanket stiffs buffalo us," they all matched our bets. Just like that, a couple hundred dollars lay in a green pile on the bar.

"All right, One Eye, hoist 'em and name 'em off," Skeeter led the roof-raising chorus of encouragement from our side. But before Babs could move to the taps to repeat the beers, Deacon stopped her and everything else with a shrill two-fingered whistle, evidently a hobo signal for something like stop, look, and listen.

In the immediate silence, the Tumbling T chieftain swelled up with the full attention he had drawn, and sprung his demand. "Nothing against PeeWee here"--that again! I could have been put on trial for the murderous look I gave him--"but I want to handle them shot glasses and slips of paper myself, starting behind there at the taps. Just so there's no wrong impression of anything funny taking place along the way. You mind, Babs?"

The bartender backed away to lean against her cash register. "Since whichever bunch of you wins that jackpot is going to pay full price for shot glasses of beer, you can keep on all night for all I care."

Highpockets checked with Herman, who replied that as far he was concerned any fool who wanted to could pour the beer. Establishing himself at the

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upright. Now that I had his attention, I cut a significant look toward Smiley's empty chair. He followed my gaze and after a squint or two, my thinking.

Clearing his throat as if he had been saving up for this announcement, Herman spoke out. "Nothing to worry. I am champ milker. Famous in old country."

"You are? I mean, are you." Jones turned to me, as he so often did when it came to figuring out Herman.

"Yeah, well, if Gramps says he can do a thing," I put the best face on it I could, "he generally pretty much can."

Jones took one more look at Herman, sitting there with a grin skewed up toward his glass eye. "Okay," he dragged the word out, "let's see how they do it in the old country. He can even yodel if he wants. Snag, go get the milk pails for him."

Need I say, the breakfast table was abandoned in a hurry and the barn gained a full audience to watch Herman take on *Waltzing Matilda*.

Dairy cows normally plod willingly to their stanchions, ready to stick their necks into captivity in exchange for being relieved of their milk. The other two cows did so, nice and docile, when Herman and I herded them in to the milking area, while the angular brown and white Guernsey lived up to her name by sort of dancing sideways and snorting a shot of snot toward us and the stanchion. Bawling like she was being butchered, *Waltzing Matilda* then backed into a corner and rubbed a stub of horn on the barn wall as if trying to sharpen it.

"So-o-o, bossy," Herman approached her using the handle of a pitchfork to prod her out of the corner. I crept along right behind him, wishing he had used the sharp end of the pitchfork as the cow eyed us malevolently. Giving another snort,

So it went, man by man, around the long table, no one willing to risk limb if not life in taking on the treacherous dairy cow. "Damn it," Jones seethed, "all in hell I'm asking is for some one of you to pitch a little hay to the horses, slop the hogs, gather the eggs--"

"--and milk an animal you won't go anywhere near yourself," Peerless inserted with a smirk.

"Now listen here," Jones tried to shift ground from that accusation, "it's only for a couple of days. It won't hurt--embarrass any of you to do it that long." A foreman is not supposed to be vulnerable to anything, even the truth he was trying to sneak past. I felt some sympathy for him as one by one, the crew shook off his appeals for someone, anyone, to do the chores, roadblocked from the start by *Waltzing Matilda*.

Actually, I had a bit of experience at milking under my mother's tutelage during one of our holed-up-to-get-by seasons while my father was out looking for bulldozer work, and might have been moron enough to tackle this cow situation to show off my prowess, but some inner angel of good sense told me to sit there with my mouth closed.

Finally Jones looked pleadingly at the one last figure that gave him any hope. "Pockets, can't you talk them into--?"

Highpockets was as firm as the others, in shrugging off the suggestion he wield his influence. "The boys are in their rights. We hired on to put up hay. Nothing else."

Whether it was that or inspiration circling until I could catch up with it, I suddenly realized: Wide open for the taking, the job of choreboy would not end with haying. Before the chance was lost, I crept my foot over to Herman's nearest one and pressed down hard on the toe of his shoe, causing him to jerk straight

Despite the aftereffects, the triumphant night in Wisdom cast a good mood felt by everyone but Jones, grumpy over being rained out of haying. "Looks like the bunch of you have the day off," he conceded with a sniff at the weather, "mostly."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Highpockets was on the case at once.

Jones jerked a thumb at the empty chair next to his. "Smiley is no longer employed at the Diamond Buckle." That sank in to me as almost too good to be true, my jubilant reaction helped along by Herman's turning toward me and silently mouthing, "*Good riddance, hah?*" Versions of that were on the faces around the table.

"Hee hee," Skeeter uncorked, "he can try for pimp with them sheepwagon lovelies."

"So," Jones ignored the interruption, "I need a volunteer to be choreboy until I can drive into Dillon and find a new one. The rest of you, sure, you can pitch horseshoes or lay around and scratch your nuts or whatever you want to do with the day, but somebody's got to step up and do the chores."

Peerless lawyered that immediately. "That would include getting a milk pail under Waltzing Matilda?"

"She's a cow," Jones tried to circle past that, "so she needs tending to like the others."

"I'm not milking any crazy cow," Peerless stated his principle.

Grinning, Fingy waved a hand lacking enough fingers to squeeze a teat.

"I'm out."

Harv silently shook his head an inch or so.

"I'm allergic to titted critters," Skeeter announced, drawing a volley of hooty speculations about how far that allergy extended and when it had set in.

Butt
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In the Big Hole, there was something to the saying that when it rains, it pours, because sometime later that night, the heavens opened up, one of those sudden summer storms that flash through with crackles of lightning and rolls of thunder half drowned out by the downpour drumming on the roof. And the next morning came the deluge of the other sort, events cascading on the Diamond Buckle ranch as if the clouds had brought in every reckoning waiting to happen.

It began at breakfast, where black coffee was the main course as hangovers were nursed. I was groggy myself from the restless night of rainbursts and so much on my mind. Along the table, Skeeter had the shakes so bad he used both hands to lift his coffee cup, but still was grinning like the wisest monkey in the tree. Highpockets managed to look as capable as ever except for bloodshot eyes. The rest of the crew was in states of morning-after between those extremes. Except, that is, for Herman, appearing not much the worse for wear, an advantage he had by always looking somewhat hard used. Meanwhile Mrs. Costello made a nuisance of herself by nagging about the lack of enthusiasm for the runny fried eggs and undercooked sidepork, until Jones told her appetites had too much to put up with this morning, and she stomped back to the kitchen.

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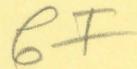
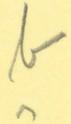
product. It had been nearly thirty years since Herman was testing steins of beer in Munich; did his sense of taste have that much memory of the Germanic tricks of the trade, such as they were?

We were about to find out, because Deacon and his side grudgingly gave in, and Babs the bartender, smiling to herself at all the fresh commerce, set up half a dozen shot glasses. As she named off each beer, I as our chosen representative in this--Highpockets firm that Herman savvied me better than anyone else and we wanted no monkey business in making the individual beers known to him--wrote each on a cash register slip and put it face down under the respective brew. Highlander, out of Missoula. Kessler from Helena. Great Falls Select. The beer from Butte, baldly named Butte Beer. Billings Yellowstone Brew. Anaconda Avalanche Ale.

Unsteady but unconcerned, Herman winked at me with his glass eye, wrapped a hand around the first shotglass, for some reason unleashed the toast, "To the health of all lovers!" and lifted the Goat Mountain Brew to his lips.

Eyes half-shut in concentration as I called out the name of each one, he sipped his way through the preliminary beers. When he was done and jovially declared that Montana beer at least was better than the product of any horse, as quick as the laughter died down Skeeter flapped some money under Deacon's nose and flopped it down on the bar as the start of the pot. "Now about them bets, if ye haven't lost your nerve."

Experience sometimes lives up to its reputation as a teacher. From my time of hanging around the Double W bunkhouse and its card sharks, I was keeping an eye on Midnight Frankie. When he stayed perfectly poker-faced but flipped a nice fresh twenty-dollar bill into the pot--a lot of money, on our wages--saying, "Let's get some skin in the game," I tremblingly stroked of the arrowhead pouch for luck



The driver opened and considerately asked, "Forget something, boys?"

Without answering, I lunged up the steps and into the aisle, Herman right behind, both of us furiously searching for a distinctive gray head and silvery mustache.

Neither of which was in evidence on any of the remaining passengers, from front of the bus to the back as I careened up the aisle in search, Herman blocking the way in back of me in case the little Bible-spouting weasel tried to make a break for it. "Where'd that goddamned preacher go?" I demanded at the top of my voice, glaring at the rows of startled faces, none of them the right one.

"Who, the nice little minister?" the driver called down the aisle to us, perplexed by our invasion. "He got off at Livingston, a ways back. Said he had a train to catch."

"Sunked, we are," Herman said huskily, putting a hand on my shoulder to steady me, or maybe himself.

Retreating to the front of the bus, we laid out our situation to the driver, who could only shake his head as if now he had heard everything and offer the commiseration, "Tough break, boys, better report it at park headquarters and they'll get the sheriff in on it."

old, without glasses or for that matter a glass eye, back when he was a Great Lakes seaman, but the similarity to the Herman stunned motionless at my side popped out all too clearly.

A soft strangled sound, which I suspected must be the German cussword of all cusswords, escaped from his lips. Recovering before I did, he glanced around and around, pulling me close as he did so. Whispering, "What we must do, quick, quick," he rapidly told me how to proceed, and I followed his instructions as blankly as a sleepwalker, edging along the bulletin board as though every piece of paper was of surpassing interest, with him leaning over my shoulder. Reaching the MOST WANTED lineup, he shielded me with his body, checked around again to make sure no one was looking, and when he whispered, "Now!" I ripped down the poster with the awful words ENEMY ALIEN and VIOLATION OF and CONTACT YOUR NEAREST FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION OFFICE AT ONCE IF YOU SPOT THIS SUSPECT and stuffed it inside my jacket.

Deed done, we grabbed up our luggage and retreated to the deck of the Inn yet again, depositng ourselves in a corner farthest from the latest batch of sitters waiting for Old Faithful to live up to its name, which I could have told them it relentlessly would. With a ragged sigh, Herman held out his hand for the poster. Both of us studied the slightly crumpled likeness of the sailor Dutch, as he was then, and the paragraph of official language fully describing him and his offense. He shook his head in despair at the MOST WANTED treatment, definitely the wrong kind of being famous. "You would think I am Killer Boy Dillinger, Public Enemy Number Ein."

"One," I automatically corrected.

"Turned me in, she did," he said almost inaudibly.

It took me a moment to gather that in. "Aunt Kate? Aw, she couldn't, could she? I mean, isn't there a law or something? Holy smokes, Herman, she's your *wife*."

He stared at the WANTED poster in his big hands as if asking the same of it, then looked away from the photo of his younger self, from me, from anything except the real question that invaded the beautiful park, taking over his voice.

"Who said we are married?"

You could have knocked me over with the blink of an eye. Speechless at first, I tried to get my mind around the pair of them living under the same roof, sleeping in the same bed, fighting the same battle every breakfast, all these years without ever--as the saying was--visiting the preacher.

Thickly I managed to stammer, "But she's a Brinker, like you. You've got to be married for that, don't you?"

He shook his head. "She took the name, is all. Easier that way. Keep people from thinking we are living"--he really gave his head a shake now, as if trying to clear it--"in sin, hah. More like, in duty. Drafted soldiers, both of us, if you would imagine," he put it in starkest terms. "From time of Witch of November when--"

The story was, when Fritz Schmidt was lost in the storm that sent the *Badger Voyager* to the bottom of Lake Michigan and Herman survived but with an eye gone, the new widow Kate, stranded now in her waterfront waitress job, came to see him in the hospital. "All broke up, crying like cloudburst. Tells me she knows what friends Fritz and I was, how hard it is for me, like her. And this"--he tapped alongside the substitute eye--"meant I was without job." You can about hear her, he mused, declaring this was too much on both of them, it wouldn't hurt them one time in their lives to do something out of the ordinary. "Said if I wanted place

stay,” he drew the tale to an end, “I could come to the house.” Gazing off, maybe looking back, he shrugged. “Never left.”

Bewildered anew, I blurted, “But all the time I was there, the two of you fought like--”

--alley cats at table scraps, ja. Not at first,” he tempered that, his look at me a plea for understanding. “But you think about it, the Kate was used to Fritz away most of time, on boat. I was not away, ever, and it got on the nerves. Me on hers, her on mine, fair to say.” He spread his hands, as if balancing choices. “Not good way to live together, but both too stubborn to give in to situation. Until--”

He did not have to say the rest. Until I showed up, a stranger off the dog bus, bringing with me old baggage in more ways than one for Gram’s sister and a jolt of imagination for the man going through life not being Dutch, not being an actual husband, not really grounded in much of anything but dreams of adventure in the Promised Land, out west.

Feeling responsible, guilty, full of blame, all while trying strenuously to deny it to myself, I started to throw a fit. “Goddamn-it-all-to-hell-anyay, why didn’t you and her get married in the first place like you were supposed to and we wouldn’t any of us be in this fix and, and--”

My tantrum dwindled as the answer caught up with me. “The alien thinger?”

“Ja,” he acknowledged wearily. “Marriage license could not be got without naturalization paper. Not worth the risk to go and say, after all the years, here I am, how do I make myself American?” With a last blink at the WANTED poster, he creased it to put in his pocket, still speaking softly. “The Kate believed same as I did, more so, even. As much her eye-dea as mine, pretend we’re married. Worth it to have a man around, she telled me, somebody she can boss like she is used to with Fritz. Joke at the time,” he sighed, “but she meant it, you maybe noticed.”



I was listening for all I was worth, but Aunt Kate's bossy tendency that had driven both of us batty shrank to nothing compared to picking up the phone and turning in her imitation husband to the FBI. That truth rattled through me--the clank of a jail door closing behind Herman--shaking me to the core. The hard knocks of history were not done with him yet. Or for that matter, with me. Eleven going on twelve abruptly seemed way too young to be the seasoned accomplice of a fugitive, or when you came right down to it, a criminal whom the FBI put up there with the bank robbers and murderers as some breed of desperado. But what else was I?

The one thing clear was that the face of Herman the German, enemy alien, was plastered here, there, and everywhere on bulletin boards throughout Yellowstone National Park, as public as the sun. "Now we really need to get out of here," my voice broke, Herman chiming "Ja, ja, ja," as I scrambled to my suitcase and he to his duffel. That was as far ahead as either of us could think. That and the FLEET WAY map back at the bulletin board.

Skirting the tour bus lines and trying not to notice the bare spot among the MOST WANTED posters which itself seemed to gape with guilt pointing our direction, we edged up to the Greyhound map in search of inspiration as much as destination. We needed a fortunate break in some direction, north, south, east, west, it didn't matter. Somewhere to hole up, until people's possible memories of a horse-faced man with a German accent waned with the passage of time and the fading away of FBI posters. But where? Make a run for the coast, to Portland or Seattle or Frisco? Hide out in some Palookaville? Hightail to Canada, on the chance they wouldn't know an enemy alien when they saw one up there?



immediate matter of Herman and me being the next thing to hoboes and maybe even having crossed that line.

As if to rub it in, the tourist world was comfortably coming to ^Pllife, people moseying out onto the deck from breakfast, while my stomach was gnawing my backbone, and tour busses were pulling up in front of the Inn with baggage wranglers busily piling suitcases into luggage compartments. I watched the busses with envy, another gnawing sensation, longing for a Greyhound to take us somewhere, anywhere.

Herman read my mind. "Better look for a safe harbor, hah?"

"Right," I said crankily, "let's go see where we could go if we only could."

Trying to appear like travelers actually able to buy tickets, we hefted our baggage over to the loading area, skirting a line of chattering tourists boarding to see mud volcanoes and other sights, as we made our way to the extensive bulletin board where in routes of red sheeted over with weatherproof plastic, THE FLEET WAY once again was promised

"Guess what, Donny," Herman began as we approached the map, wagging his fingers piano-player fashion to encourage mine, "time for you to--"

"Huh-Huh-Herman!" I gasped. Unable to get out the actual word "*Look!*" I pointed an unsteady finger, not at the map but toward the opposite end of the bulletin board.

Like me, he stared in disbelief, then shock. There, past the park's announcements of the day's activities and its lists of don'ts and tacked-up tourist messages to other tourists, was a lineup of FBI MOST WANTED posters of the kind that kept a gallery of hardfaced criminals scowling from the wall of every post office in the land. Prominent in its glossy newness was the one featuring HERMAN "DUTCH" BRINKER in bold black letters, full face on. The photo was many years

along the balcony for lobby-watching. Grunting and straining, between us we wrestled two of those into our corner and tucked the duffel and suitcase in behind. Ourselves we tried to fit into the rigid wooden seats in some semblance of bedtime positions. "Beds a little hard tonight," Herman tried to joke, patting the tree limbs under the not very thick cushions.

"About like sleeping on a lumber pile, yeah," I muttered, squirming in vain to get comfortable at all, missing the upholstered seats of the dog bus as if they were the lap of luxury. For that matter, the screeching springs of the attic bed Aunt Kate consigned me to would have sounded like the best of Kate Smith music just then. But I had to admit, we were in for the night, flat broke though we were.

Herman shook me awake when the first hints of dawn shown in the upmost windows of the timbered lobby, whispering, "Up and at. Outside we must get before hotel people come around."

After peering cautiously into the canyon of lobby to make sure a different desk clerk had come on duty, we headed down, with Herman saying, "Leave to me. We must go out like kings."

Or freeloaders to be arrested on sight, I thought to myself.

As we approached the obstacle of the front desk again, I tried to appear as prosperous as royalty who went around in Blackfoot moccasins, meanwhile hoping the clerk would be impressed by a suitcase woven out of willows or something

Striding as if he genuinely did own the place, erect as the timber of the lobby and his nose in the air, Herman gave the clerk the barest of nods and a guttural "Guten morgen."

"Ah, good morning to you, too. May I help--"

D

“Checked out, we already are,” Herman growled impatiently, throwing in some more gravelly German. “How you say, grabbing early bus.” In the tone of a grouchy weary parent, he indicated me with a swat of his hand as we kept on going, past the desk. “Liebchen too excited to sleep. Pah. Park not made for night’s rest.”

“Wait, your room number is--?”

Herman threw over his shoulder some rapid incomprehensible number in German and a farewell wave. “Auf weidersehn.”

With that, we were outside in the fresh Yellowstone morning, fresh enough to make my teeth chatter.

“Lived through the night, hah, Donny?” I could see Herman’s breath as he made this pronouncement.

I simply looked the real question to him: Now what?

A *whoosh* growing louder and louder in the still air, Old Faithful percolating out of the mound again, spared him from answering that. “Notcheral wonders we are not short of, anyways,” he stuck with, gazing at the plumes of hot water shooting skyward.

Yeah, right. Stranded and broke in a natural wonderland was still stranded and broke. Stiff and sore and tired of Old Faithful butting in every time I pressed Herman for some way out of the hot water we were in, I was feeling out of sorts. Doubly so, actually. Because along with our predicament, something about Yellowstone itself kept tickling my mind, to put it in Herman’s terms. One of those itches in the head that a person can’t quite scratch. Some out-of-this-world fact from Believe It Or Not? Something digested way too deep from a Condensed Book? But whatever the teaser was, it kept refusing to come out from behind the

“She thinks the world of you, anyway. Said you were real good company riding together.” My pride started to swell at that, but Gram was not nearly done spilling the surprise. “She’s working at the Highlander Supper Club now. Here’s even better news. She can get me on as night cook.”

“In *Glasgow*?” I asked dumbly. “Just like that?”

“Didn’t I just say so, silly?” she retorted as if I’d better wash out my ears. More of me than that needed clearing to hold what she said next.

“We have it all worked out, there’s an apartment right by hers. When you get home from Aunt Kate’s for school, we’ll be together under one roof. Doesn’t that beat all?”

Yes, no, and maybe fought over that in me. There it was, imagination more or less come true, Letty embossed into our patchy family as niftily as her name on her blouse. And even better yet, maybe Harv too, except he was a wanted man there in the jurisdiction of that snotty little sheriff. By and large, Gram’s report was the jackpot of my wishes, but also a king hell dilemma. The best I could manage into the receiver was, “That’s--that’s really some news.”

“You sound like the air has been knocked out of you,” Gram said, perfectly pleased. “I can’t wait to see you again--you’ll have so much to tell me about your adventures back east there, won’t you.” Not if I could help it. “Donny? I think it’d be only fair if I let your Aunt Kate know how peachy the summer is working out, thanks to you being there with her and Dutch, don’t you? Call her to the phone, pretty please. Tell her I said what’s past is past, I’d like to talk to her, sister to sister.”

“You know what,” panic spoke for me, “that’s not a good idea right now. Any time I bring you up, see, she snorts like a hippo--”

“I didn’t quite catch that, the connection must have gone bad. Like a what?”

“--uh, a gyppo, you know, those chainsaws gyppo loggers use that start up *hnnngk hnnngk*,” my nose came to my rescue, I had to hope. “Anyhow, she’s awful

touchy about you, and I wouldn't want her saying something that would hurt your feelings and make the situation worse and all on account of me." I made a shameless play for sympathy. "I'd feel real bad about that."

"I guess you're the best judge of the situation in *Wiss-con-sun*," she gently mocked my butchering of the destination which she thought had worked out so peachy. "When the doctor turns me loose for good any day now and Letty helps me get established in that apartment, though, and you can come home whenever you want, I'd like the great Kate to know how much your stay there has meant."

"Oh yeah, she'll know."

I paid up to the merc clerk for the phone call and traipsed the darkened street of Wisdom back to the Watering Hole, weighed down with feelings that did not match up. Unspeakably relieved and glad that Gram was herself again, nonetheless that emotion was shot through with remorse, already halfway to longing, for all I would be abandoning at the Diamond Buckle ranch and the Big Hole. The honest-to-goodness genuine job as haystack teamster. The bunkhouse hoboes who in their coarse generous way had taken me into the Johnson family right there on the last bus to Wisdom and ever since. The prestige of being a ranch hand for Rags Rasmussen, a source of pride I knew I would carry with me all my life.

Against those hard-won rewards, I now was free almost any time to go and be with Gram and Letty as well, a dream ready to come true, but only if I paid up with either deceit or confession about my time on the loose. Did I dare to simply show up in Glasgow, shiny as the silver greyhound forever fleet on the side of the bus, and start spinning extravagant tales about how terrific my summer in Manitowoc had been? That felt treacherous. The truth had a nasty habit of coming out. At least sometimes.

Before any of that, however, dead ahead through the swinging doors of Wisdom's sole saloon was the matter of Herman. It was only fair to let him know I'd have to leave him sooner than later, wasn't it? Hadn't he brought it up himself, back there in the bunkhouse? So why was part of me wrestling so hard against telling him, at least yet?

The atmosphere in the Watering Hole had turned very beery in my absence, the crew doing its best to drink the place dry in record time. Babs was behind in clearing away empty glasses as she filled fresh ones and scooted them along the bar to the hobo lineup laughing uproariously at some limerick Shakespeare had just composed. I was surprised to see two empties in front of Herman already, plus the one becoming that way in a hurry as he drank with lip-smacking gusto. Elbow to elbow with him there at the quieter end of the bar, Pooch was working on his latest golden schoonerful in his dim deliberate way.

"Scotty!" Herman let out as if we hadn't seen each other for ages.

"Welcome back to Watering Hole, such a place. How is the grossmutter?"

"Up and around," I hedged.

"Good, good. What a woman she is. Time for Crushed Orange, hah, to celebrate her recuperation."

At his arm-waving signal, Babs worked her way along the bar to us and produced a bottle of Orange Crush for me, with the remark to treasure it, it'd be the only drink she'd sell all night that a person didn't get a beer mustache from.

Herman chortled almost into hiccups at that and clinked his schooner gaily against my bottle and then Pooch's schooner with the toast, "The devil's eyedrops cure sorrow," wherever he picked that up. I gulped on more than the orange pop, unsteadied about cutting into Herman's happy night off from MOST WANTED

notoriety and other concerns. Still trying to brace myself up to tell him Gram's news, I was overridden by Babs announcing as if she was directing traffic:

"Make way, boys, you got company. Here comes the Tumbling T crew."

Just as rowdy and ready for moonhowling as our bunch, the newcomers swarmed in and established themselves along the other end of the bar brandishing their paychecks. There was no mistaking who was the Big Ole of this contingent of hoboos turned haymakers. The Tumbling T's leader was nearly Highpockets' height, but could not have been built more differently, with what's called a cracker butt, nothing back there as if that share of the anatomy had gone onto the front in his hanging belly. He turned out to be a boxcar acquaintance of the Jersey Mosquito, who called out, palsy-walsy as could be, to the Tumbling T's main man, "Deacon! You old sidewinder, c'mon over here and pretend you're social."

"Still pestering the world same as ever, are you, Skeeter," Deacon barked a laugh as he joined him. Quick as anything, he spotted the Diamond Buckle hatband on Skeeter's battered headgear. "But what's this?" His laugh became nastier. "You let the rancher slap his brand on you these days? What's next, holding hands and singalongs on the old rancheria?"

Overhearing, Highpockets said with cold control, "Rasmussen just likes to show off that world championship he won the hard way. I'd say he's entitled."

"If it don't bother you to have the boss's loop around your brain," Deacon responded with a slick smile, "it's no nevermind to me. Where's your hospitality, Skeeter, I could use a drink."

While that touchy reunion of sorts was going on, I sipped at my pop, pretty much matching Herman's and Pooch's downings of beer, while conscience worked me over from one direction and then another. I felt I couldn't hold Gram's news to myself, even though I hated to let it out, either. But driven to it at a more or less

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

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

Finishing dealing with a flourish, Aunt Kate slapped the deck down

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

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

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

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

"Don-ny."

It is never good when an adult breaks your name in two. The doll-like eyes were fixed on me a certain way as she leaned across the table and enunciated further, "It won't hurt you to do it one time in your life."

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

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

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

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

✓ to bot. 174

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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I'd sprung up out of the floor and ask "Sleep well, honeykins?" and I'd lie and reply "Like a charm" and that was pretty much the level of conversation between us.

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

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

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

Actually not a bad question, because the one thing I was sure of was what a mystifying place Manitowoc was, from toast fights to smoky portrait sitters inhabiting greenhouse windows to Manitou walking around dead to the strange nature of the neighborhood. I mean, I seemed to be the only kid anywhere. As

man and woman in the photographic plates overhead, catching them on the back of my hand thanks to a sunbeam, and daydream about who they might have been, what their story was, the digest version of their lives. It made the time pass until lunch, when I'd snap out of my trance at Herman's announcement, "The Kate will eat it all if we don't get ourselves in there."

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

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

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

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

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

I gave something between a nod and a shrug.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, no, no! Wake up, child. You can't take that without a natural pair."

"Huh? Why not?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All right,” she swallowed hard, then again, “all righty right. Let's settle down.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

used as I was to being in grownup company at the Double W, now I apparently was sentenced to it like solitary confinement, with the street deadly quiet, no cries of Annie-I-over or hide-and-peek or boys playing catch or girls jumping rope, nobody much making an appearance except a grayhaired man or woman here and there shuffling out to pick up the morning paper or position a lawn sprinkler. It made a person wonder, did every youngster in Wisconsin get shipped off to some dumb camp to hunt frogs?

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

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

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

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

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

Under the circumstances, with no other choice except Aunt Kate, hanging around with Herman in the greenhouse suited me well enough. Whenever he wasn't pumping me about ranch life or telling me some tale out of Karl May's squarehead version of the West, I was free to sit back and single out some family or

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

strategic spot. Mingled with the Manitowocers' shadow pictures from the photographic panes overhead, the frolicsome set seemed to be teasing the portrait sitters into what a good time could be had if they simply took all those clothes off and jumped into bathtubs and swimming pools bare naked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My ears must have stood straight out at that. Hearing one of Gram's almost cusswords come from high-toned Aunt Kate shocked me all the way through.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s, it’s really something.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I just remembered, sweetums," she exclaimed as if reminding me, too.

"You have your wonderful rodeo shirt to wear, don't you." She smile victoriously.

"We'll put on a fashion show for the girls, mmm?"

A handwritten mark consisting of a stylized symbol resembling a hash or a cross, followed by a horizontal line.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

help the case of cabin fever I was coming down with from my shabby attic room and the allures of Bali and other boundless places shown in the *National 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 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 pattered us through the downtown traffic a fraction as fast as the van driver tore through the Twin Cities, I passed the time noting more of those 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. Schliesleder 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 in English?"

"Calves? You mean the schnitz stuff is a way of saying calf meat? 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 potted across the drawbridge of the weedy river and on past the coal sheds and boiler works. This doctor's office was in an odd part of town and I tried to think what kind of ailment Herman needed to be treated for in a rundown neighborhood. Firmly built right up to the gray summit of his head, he looked healthy enough to me. "Uhm, this medicine of yours, what exactly is it?"

"Neck oil."

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

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

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

sniff the sea air. To me, the place was perfect from the first instant, and I could tell Herman felt at home simply entering its briny atmosphere.

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

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

There. My full pedigree. Stuff that in your pink telephone, why don't you, Aunt Kate.

I grew an inch or two and swaggered after Herman to a bar stool just like I belonged. As I scooted on, Gus met me with a belly laugh--he had the full makings for it--while saying he didn't get many cowboys in the Schooner and warning me not get drunk and tear up the place. Just then the building shook, and I started to bolt for dry land.

"Sit tight, happens all the time," Herman was chuckling now as he caught my arm before I could hit the floor running. Gus informed me it was only the ferry to Michigan going out and the joint had never floated away yet, although it kept swaying thrillingly as I gawked at the gray steel side of a ship sweeping by the porthole windows facing the harbor and lake. Oh man, I loved this, almost the sense of sailing on the Great Lakes as Herman had so heroically done.

As the slosh of the ferry's wake died down and the building quit quivering, Gus snapped his towel playfully in Herman's direction. "Ready to take your medicine? Gonna beat you this time."

"Always ready for that, and it will be first miracle ever if you beat me," Herman replied breezily. Laughing up a belly storm, the bartender moved off along the line of beer spigot handles extending half the length of the bar, running a hand along them the way you do a stick in a picket fence. The assortment made me stare, 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 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.”

"Are you telling me," his tone turned as starchy as his medical coat, "you came in here to ask for--"

"Eleven dollars and forty cents, is all," I made it sound as reasonable as possible.

That brought me a stare nearly strong enough in itself to throw me out of the office. "Starting kind of young, aren't you?" he said along with it, more sternly yet. "At bumming?"

"No, no, this isn't that!" I protested, my voice taking off toward the high country. Prepared as I thought I was in asking for the money as nicely as I could, I fell apart at being thought some kind of a moocher.

"What it is," I sort of whimpered out, "I know Mae and Joe." Shakily I pointed to the name plate on his desk identifying him as PAUL SCHNEIDER, M.D., his gaze following my gesture uncomprehendingly. "Your mom and dad?" I provided as if he needed reminding of the fact.

He still looked so baffled that I yanked out the Bible in desperation. "See, I'll swear on it," I clapped a hand over the chintzy paper cover, "we were friends right away fast. They were awful good to me, took my side against the dumb bus driver and everything, so I thought maybe you would be, too, at least a little bit, and really, all I need is eleven dollars and--"

"Whoa, slow down." A strapping guy as big as both of his parents put together, Dr. Schneider bent way down with his hands on his knees as if I needed closer examination. "The folks? Where do they come into this?"

"On the dog bus. Just before the rolycoaster." Herman's lucky mention of the Greyhound driver community and seeing the sights, tra la la, popped the happily traveling Schneiders from that itch spot in my mind, along with their vital mention of a son who fixes up people who fall into hot pools or get mauled by grizzlies in Yellowstone. None of what I'd try to say so far enlightened the doctor

"And they're brothers!" I could not hold that in any longer. "I heard them both say so, and I've got their names in my autograph book as proof!"

"*Step*-brothers, damn it, don't make it worse than it is," Sheriff Kinnick snapped, glowering at me. "But that don't matter," he plodded on, glaring around at the derisive audience as Highpockets coldly mocked, "Of course not. You just didn't have anything better to do than track your own kin down across half the state."

"Like I was saying," Harv put the rest of his proposition, "I serve my sentence, but in your jail there in Glasgow. That way," he said as if it made all the sense in the world, and to me it did, "Letty can visit me when she gets off work at the supper club and I won't need to bust out all the time."

"Nothing doing," the sheriff turned the proposition down flat, still a stickler or worse. "The foreign geezer and the loose kid ought to be hauled in for investigation, they're suspicious characters if I ever saw any, and that's that." He brushed his hands together as if we did not count for much, his real ire directed at Harv's other stipulation. "Wolf Point is where you broke jail, that's where you're going back in, period and end of sentence."

Harv shook his head that minimal way of his, enough and no more. "Carl, I'm sick of you yanking me around just to prove you can, and you shouldn't be arresting these other two for no good cause, either." He looked unflinchingly at the smaller man, the doll-like face turning red under his gaze. "As to packing me back to Wolf Point, they'd be happy not to have me back in that two-bit slammer of theirs, it'd save them them a lot of trouble. Juggling me in Glasgow instead of booting me to the far end of the state isn't that much to ask, and you know it."

In my eyes and Herman's fully as stalwart as any hero who ever faced a six-shooter, Harv stayed set as stone in front of his step-brother lawman. "If you won't do that for me, Carl, you'll have to shoot me to take me."

might be some natural curiosity about this crowd's propensity for law abiding or not."

Harv followed that with a warning hand to the angry circle of men. "It's my tough luck, Pockets, Skeets, the whole bunch of you, thanks anyway."

Jones still was stomping mad at the intrusion, arguing to the deputy sheriff from town, "Goddamn it, Mallory, can't this wait until we're done haying in a few weeks? Harv's the best stack man I'll ever have." Looking sheepish, the local lawman replied that his colleague from up north seemed to be in more of a hurry than that.

By then Rags had strolled up. Mild as the day is long, he drawled, "What seems to be the diffewculty?"

Mallory looked like he wanted to go someplace and hide rather than get into the difficulty, but he did his duty, introducing Rags to the strutting little visitor who barely came up to the shoulder of anyone in the gathering around him except me.

"Thanks for nothing, Mallory," the Glasgow sheriff huffed out. "You didn't tell me this is his spread." He rocked back on his pointy heels, impressed in spite of himself as he took in the most famous cowboy conceivable. "Saw you ride at the Calgary Stampede," he told Rags as if that amounted to a private audience. "You do know how to stick on a horse."

"It's an honest living," Rags replied, glancing at the tin star on Kinnick's narrow chest as if comparing not that favorably. He turned to the other lawman. "What is this, a badge toters' convention? Should I be charging rent?"

"Sheriff Kinnick says your man here broke out of jail, more than once," came the reluctant answer.

"We could have told you he's a hard worker," Rags said. "Harv, what were you in for?"

"Fighting in a bar."

Now Herman and I adjourned to the crapper. He put a steadying hand on the sink and studied his somewhat haggard reflection in the mirror, my drained one alongside his.

"Donny, it is for best if I go with them. When haying is over, no more sickles, and I am *pttht* here."

"I know."

"Will miss you like everything."

"Me, too. I mean, I-I'll miss you, too." It took all I could do to stay dry-eyed and keep my voice from breaking. "Walk tall, podner."

"Ja, you do same," he managed. Tall over me, he looked down at me, the miraculous glass eye and the good one blinking with the same emotion as mine.

"We were good pair on the loose, Red Chief."

Amid the settled snores and nose-whistlings of the sleeping crew, I lay sleepless for a long, long time, as haunted as I'd been by the damnable wall plaque of the praying boy in Aunt Kate's attic. This time by life, not death. For the first time since the Double W cookhouse I whined, only to myself, but the silent kind is as mournful as the other. The miles upon miles of my summer, the immense Greyhound journey right down to the last bus to Wisdom, were simply leaving me torn in two, between Herman and Gram. She and Letty seemed like, what, mirages, distant and beckoning, but Herman was my indispensable partner from the depths of the Manitowoc stay to the ups and downs of the open road.

My imagination failed me as I tried to conceive of life without him, or his without me. How can you ever forget someone you will think of every time you eat a piece of toast? Or whenever you touch a map, your fingers bringing memory of red routes once followed to adventure of whatever kind? Or even catching the wink of an eye, sparkling as glass, from someone you are devoted to?

product. It had been nearly thirty years since Herman was testing steins of beer in Munich; did his sense of taste have that much memory of the Germanic tricks of the trade, such as they were?

We were about to find out, because Deacon and his side grudgingly gave in, and Babs the bartender, smiling to herself at all the fresh commerce, set up half a dozen shot glasses. As she named off each beer, I as our chosen representative in this--Highpockets firm that Herman savvied me better than anyone else and we wanted no monkey business in making the individual beers known to him--wrote each on a cash register slip and put it face down under the respective brew. Highlander, out of Missoula. Kessler from Helena. Great Falls Select. The beer from Butte, baldly named Butte Beer. Billings Yellowstone Brew. Anaconda Avalanche Ale.

Unsteady but unconcerned, Herman winked at me with his glass eye, wrapped a hand around the first shotglass, for some reason unleashed the toast, "To the health of all lovers!" and lifted the Great Fall Select to his lips.

Eyes half-shut in concentration as I called out the name of each one, he sipped his way through the preliminary beers. When he was done and jovially declared that Montana beer at least was better than the product of any horse, as quick as the laughter died down Skeeter flapped some money under Deacon's nose and flopped it down on the bar as the start of the pot. "Now about them bets, if ye haven't lost your nerve."

Experience sometimes lives up to its reputation as a teacher. From my time of hanging around the Double W bunkhouse and its card sharks, I was keeping an eye on Midnight Frankie. When he stayed perfectly poker-faced but flipped a nice fresh twenty-dollar bill into the pot--a lot of money, on our wages--saying, "Let's get some skin in the game," I tremblingly stroked of the arrowhead pouch for luck

where a wall phone was available along with an egg timer so you could pay for the length of your call on your way out.

The familiar hum of distance, the suppressed ring at the other end which always went on for a long time at the Columbus Hospital pavilion ward, until some busy nun set aside a bedpan or some other ministrations for the nuisance of the phone, as I imagined it. Then Sister Carma Jean, who by now was getting used to my calls briskly told me Gram would be there in a minute, no mention of fetching her in a wheelchair.

When Gram promptly came on and sounded like her old self in declaring she'd been waiting for me to call so she could share the nicest conceivable surprise with me, I skipped hello to go right to what I believed it was. "You're not in that two-wheel contraption any more, I bet."

"Oh, that," she dismissed those scary weeks of being so bad off she had to be loaded up and pushed anywhere. "I'm up and around and helping in the kitchen. Between you and me, nuns are terrible cooks."

"Jeez, Gram," my voice topped out in relief, "that's really terrific--"

"That's not the surprise, though," she busted right in as if the other news wouldn't keep. "You'll never guess who I've heard from." She could not have been more right about that. "Letty. She called me from Glasgow in her new job there."

I was boggled by that, the entire picture of the lipstick-implanted bus encounter scrambled in my head. "What happened to Havre?"

"A boss who pinched her bottom one time too many. Like once. Donny, why in heaven's name didn't you tell me in one of your letters you met up with her on the dog bus?"

"Uhm, I had a lot I was trying to get in the letters," utterly true, "and must have missed out on that somehow."

"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 fingerspitzengefühl 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 thunderous [#]*whump* 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. Rags and I watched wordlessly as the Wisdom deputy sheriff's car, the star on the door a blaze of white, pulled into the yard.

My mouth went dry and Rags whistled silently through his teeth as the arriving car drew us out of the barn toward what could amount to trouble. "You happen to know anything about why we're being honored by this visit?"

Reluctantly I enlightened him that the crew had been in a little bit of a fight at the Watering Hole with the Tumbling T outfit. He frowned, saying that was simply Saturday night behavior and for as long as he had known her, Babs always wrote off fights as the cost of doing business. "This must be some other kind of problem."

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can of worms

Right. "Excuse me," I threw over my shoulder, already on the run, "I have to get over there."

By the time I dashed across the yard to where Herman stood unmoving beside the horseshoe players, the deputy sheriff from Wisdom was climbing out of the patrol car and giving a sickly smile all around. "Sorry to disturb you, gents." Which every one of us there knew meant disturbance of some sort was about to reach into our number. But I in particular should have seen what was coming when, on the passenger side, a big crow-black hat barely appeared above the top of the car.

His first step out of the patrol car, the mean little sheriff from the first dog bus of all, back at the start of summer, spotted Harv taking life easy in the shade of the bunkhouse.

"Well, if it isn't the object of my affection," Sheriff Kinnick, as I couldn't help but remember his name was, made a mock simper. "Harv the Houdini of the stony lonesome. Took me a while to run you down, but here we both are, just like old times."

"Howdy, Carl. You out seeing the country?" Casual as anything, Harv unfolded out of his chair and came toward the lawmen, although not too close. Veterans at knowing trouble when they saw it, the rest of the crew guardedly drifted near enough to follow what was happening, with me doing all I could to steer Herman--looking guilty as sin the way he did in the Butte depot--to the rear of them in the hope we wouldn't stand out. In the meantime, Skeeter set the tone for hobo attitude toward visits from the constabulary by piping up, "Shouldn't ye be tracking down horse thieves or somethin' instead of botherin' honest citizens?" He was more or less backed in that by Jones arriving at a high trot and caterwauling, "What the hell's this about?"

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“If you have to know, I been on the track of this character”--the sheriff from Glasgow pointed an accusing finger at Harv, standing quietly there looking like the least troublesome man on earth--“every chance I got all summer. Talked to bus drivers until they was running out my ears, but I lost his trail in Butte. Then I got smart and asked myself who else makes regular runs to burgs off the beaten path. Beer truck drivers.” He let out his mean little laugh. “You make sort of a conspicuous hitchhiker, Harv.”

“You’re barking up the wrong gum tree, big hat,” Highpockets took that on, bringing no small challenge with his height as he stepped forward and confronted the much shorter wearer of the badge. “Got the wrong man. I’ll testify Harv’s been with us following the harvests, California fruit to this here hay.”

Hand it to Sheriff Kinnick, he didn’t give ground, only chuckled that chilly way. “Nice try,” he said up into Highpockets’ face, “but no hearing judge in his right mind is gonna take the testimony of a hobo over the Wolf Point jailers who had Harv for company days on end, when the fool wasn’t busting out. Besides,” he looked over the rest of the crew scornfully, with me half tucking out of sight behind Herman, standing so still he barely breathed, “you get in court, and there might be some natural curiosity about this crowd’s propensity for law abiding or not.”

Harv followed that with a warning hand to the angry circle of men. “It’s my tough luck, Pockets, Skeets, the whole bunch of you, thanks anyway.”

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"We could have told you he's a hard worker," Rags said mildly. "Harv, what were you in for?"

"Fighting in a bar."

Harv aside, every man there gave Sheriff Kinnick a sideways look. Rags scratched his head and spoke the common thought. "Something like that means you could arrest just about everybody on the place, starting with me."

"That's as may be," the little sheriff muttered, glancing around the hostile ring of faces, "but none of you acted up any in my jurisdiction. I'm only interested in this knothead. Or am I."

It happened then. He peeked past the men in front, spotting me as I tried to fade behind Herman without appearing to. Parting the onlookers, the sheriff headed straight for me, prissing out, "Who's this I see over here?" with all too

much recognition registering in the apple-doll face. "Huh, I thought you was going to visit relatives, punkin. Back east someplace. Doesn't look like that proved out, does it." He stopped short as Herman put a protective arm around me. "And just where do you fit into this, Horseface?" he asked suspiciously.

I knew it. The arrest-happy little meanie was out to get us, was going to get us. Our life together, our lives separately, was going to fizzle into separation and incarceration, nightmare coming true.

Herman did his best to face down the challenge, looking squarely at the sheriff with his good eye. "Fritz, is the right name. Scotty's grandpa, I am."

"You sure sound like it, Scotch as all get out," the sheriff said cynically. "Rasmussen, I'd bet my boots you're harboring a runaway," he crowed to Rags, who took that in mutely. "And maybe worse. Seems to me I've laid eyes on this mug before--how about you, Mallory?" the preening lawman spoke over his shoulder to the local deputy. "Got the latest WANTED posters in my bag, brought 'em for us to go through, just on the chance."

"Hey, no, you don't want to do that," I tried desperately as Herman's clasp of me held firmer than ever. "He didn't use to look anything like this, but now he has a glass eye, see, and usually his face is all scrunched up and everything, and you'd hardly recognize--"

Harv had started forward to our aid, but Highpockets stopped him. "You better think twice about this, Johnny Law," he warned, stepping in beside Herman and me. The scar at the corner of his mouth was white with anger. "These fellas are with us, they're not causing you any trouble. You can't breeze in here and start picking us off just because you feel like it." Behind him, Skeeter and Peerless and Fingy and Midnight Frankie and Shakespeare and Pooch ranged around us in support.

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“Oh, can't I?” The sheriff smirked and fingered his star as a pointed reminder. “Who's wearing the badge around here?”

That was the wrong thing to do. Something like a spell came over the hoboos, if a general sense of fury can be called that. I could see it in their eyes, the pent-up rage and hate from years of railyard bulls and Palookaville hick dicks beating them and throwing them into jail and kicking them out of town, the badge of authority the mark adversity in their lives, Pooch a living reminder among them of the billyclubs of the law. As the sheriff turned and strutted toward Harv, after warning Herman and me not to move, Highpockets murmured without moving his lips, “Skeeter, pass the toothpicks.” Discreetly the old hobo drifted off to the shop where Herman sharpened things.

“C'mon, Harv, let's arrange some free board and room in lovely Wolf Point for you,” the sheriff busied up. “Get in the patrol car. Front seat. Leave room in the back for other customers,” he glanced back to check on Herman and me. I kept looking to Rags, still standing easy to one side, keeping Jones under control. Wasn't it also time to rein in this busybody lawman who was about to cart Herman and me off to our doom?

Meanwhile Harv folded his arms on his chest. “No.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” The sheriff cocked a look up at the much taller man.

“Just what it sounds like. No.”

“God damn it,” the sheriff erupted, “if you do the crime, you're supposed to do the time! That's practically in the Bible! Now get in the patrol car!”

“Still no,” Harv declared, not budging. “Not until we work this out. That jurisdiction you talk about so much--it maybe's slipped your mind I busted out of jail in Wolf Point, and that's not in your county, the way I see it.”

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The Glasgow sheriff scowled. "You're turning into a regular jailhouse lawyer, are you, all the experience you're building up behind bars." He poked his hat higher on his head to try to look taller as he faced Harv. "All right, let's get down to the pussy purr here. I'm taking you in for violating my custody, not once but twice when I packed you over there to the Wolf Point stony lonesome. Like I'm gonna do again, damn it."

Listening hard, the deputy sheriff from Wisdom appeared uneasy but didn't say anything. Harv did, though.

"Carl, I'll go with you, on a couple of conditions. First one is, you leave these other two fellows alone. You don't have to play bloodhound where you don't belong." The sheriff started to shake his head, but Harv lifted a warning hand. "Hear me out on the rest of this. I serve my sentence, how much was that again--?"

"Forty-five days," the sheriff answered peevishly.

"That's way to hell and gone too much for fightin' in a bar," Peerless objected, while others in the hobo circle whistled in disbelief.

"And they're brothers!" I could not hold that in any longer. "I heard them both say so, and I've got their names in my autograph book as proof!"

"*Step*-brothers, damn it, don't make it worse than it is," Sheriff Kinnick snapped, glowering at me. "But that don't matter," he plodded on, glaring around at the derisive audience as Highpockets coldly mocked, "Of course not. You just didn't have anything better to do than track your own kin down across half the state."

"Like I was saying," Harv put the rest of his proposition, "I serve my sentence, but in your jail there in Glasgow. That way," he said as if it made all the sense in the world, and to me it did, "Letty can visit me when she gets off work at the supper club and I won't need to bust out all the time."

“Nothing doing,” the sheriff turned the proposition down flat, still a stickler or worse. “The foreign geezer and the loose kid ought to be hauled in for investigation, they’re suspicious characters if I ever saw any, and that’s that.” He brushed his hands together as if we did not count for much, his real ire directed at Harv’s other stipulation. “Wolf Point is where you broke jail, that’s where you’re going back in, period and end of sentence.”

Harv shook his head that minimal way of his, enough and no more. “Carl, I’m sick of you yanking me around just to prove you can, and you shouldn’t be arresting these other two for no good cause, either.” He looked unflinchingly at the smaller man, the doll-like face turning red under his gaze. “As to packing me back to Wolf Point, they’d be happy not to have me back in that two-bit slammer of theirs, it’d save them them a lot of trouble. Juggling me in Glasgow instead of booting me to the far end of the state isn’t that much to ask, and you know it.”

In my eyes and Herman’s fully as stalwart as any hero who ever faced a six-shooter, Harv stayed set as stone in front of his step-brother lawman. “If you won’t do that for me, Carl, you’ll have to shoot me to take me.”

“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 hoboos 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." The mention of a smoke wagon had the hoboes ready to defend themselves or fight back, depending on how the matter was viewed. What was certain was that Skeeter upon his return from the blacksmith shop had distributed pitchforks, tines gleaming fresh from the grindstone.

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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 be witnesses if this buck fever sheriff cuts loose on innocent men on their way to pitch some hay, don't you think?"

"I'm seeing the same thing ahead you are," the foreman agreed, sending the sheriff a look that meant it, "manslaughter, if not murder, way beyond the performance of duty."

"Doesn't look good, does it," Rags suggested at large. Then said to the outfoxed sheriff as if calming him, "Maybe you ought to consider Harv's offer a little more. Sounds like a fair deal to me."

Scanning around furiously at man after man with a tool that could stab hay but more than that, too, Sheriff Kinnick still held his pose, his hand twitching over his gun butt.

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earlier*

"Carl, none of us are any use to you dead," Harv put in on him with surprising gentleness. The frustrated lawman cast one last glance around at the united bunch of us, then slowly let his hand fall to his side.

Breathing hard, he faced Harv, who still was standing there waiting him out. "All right, you win. Glasgow and Letty it is, loverboy. I've got to put up with you under the same roof just like when we was kids, do I," he complained as if he'd been sentenced to his own jail. Trying to fluff himself up, he turned to the waiting deputy sheriff and made another swipe of the hand at Herman and me. "On second thought, these other two yahoos aren't my worry. Harv, grab your stuff and we'll head for Glasgow," he said as if it had been his own idea all along.

First shaking hands all around with the crew, Harv went to fetch his bedroll from the bunkhouse while Skeeter collected the pitchforks and Highpockets kept an eye on things, and in a daze I realized Herman and I were free again.

Almost. Behind us, Rags proved that he had a boss voice when he wanted to. "Now let's sort you two out. Find out what kind of desperadoes I've let on the place. Come on up to the house."

Leading us into the office, Rags seated himself at the rolltop desk as if he'd rather be in a saddle somewhere and pointed us to the pew bench used for sinners, not the most comfortable spot for us to be on, either. He turned first to Herman. "Fritz, as I guess I better get used to calling you until further notice," he said as if grading his behavior in the presence of a pistoleer, "you could have got your cozies shot off, you know, making that move when that peewee sheriff was itching for his gun."

"I did not think of myself," Herman answered simply. "I taked a leap of fate."

Rags digested that, long enough that the sinner's bench was growing pretty hard. Then he sat up a bit and sighed. "Better to be lucky than smart, I suppose. All right, tell me the rest of it, why fate had to plunk the two of you down on my ranch out of all the places in the Big Hole."

Between us, Herman and I owned up to everything, with Rags listening hard. When we finally ran out of confessions, he rubbed his jaw longer than usual before saying that sneaking into America to get away from Hitler probably was the kind of infraction that would die away with time, and any choreboy who made Jones happy was worth keeping. That took care of Herman, and that left the matter of me.

"A kid kicking around on a ranch is a tricky proposition," Rags came right to the point, looking at me the frank, open way he'd done when it was the two of us in the stall with Queen, the crucial listener this time Herman. "I know first-hand--I was one, and I could be a champion nuisance sometimes." That description gripped me so squarely I couldn't even swallow.

"But that comes with ranch life, I suppose," Rags looked around the office as if reminding himself he was sitting in the owner's seat of the Diamond Buckle, "sorting out which nuisances to put up with or not." He straightened up while I slumped to my fate. "What I started to tell you back there in the barn, before all the commotion," I heard him say as if we were taking this ride into the unknown together, "is I don't see why it wouldn't work for you to stay on here with Gramps, if he'll be responsible for you. If he can stand the nuisance, I suppose I can," he said half humorously, then studied me soberly. "That's if you make up your mind to stay on here."

Fate or not, my mind leaped, in one direction and then the other. My choice was wide open now, Herman or Gram, heart against conscience, if it is ever that evenly divided. I heard my decision the same instant the two of them did.

"I--I want to stay."

I shall see the two of them forever in that moment, Herman looking like he was trying to catch his breath, Rags awarding himself a little grin before turning serious again.

"Since you're gonna stick around with us," he started as if just making talk with me, "that opens up something else." He ^{clattering} winced at the racket of Mrs. Costello down the hallway hurling together the resemblance of a meal. "Cook, did you say your sainted granny is?"

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ones that seemed to count in the end. Overwhelmed with those bleak thoughts, I gradually drowsed off clinging to what I would possess forever, the time of dog bus enchantment when Herman the German pointed a finger west and said, "Thataway."

In the Big Hole, there was something to the saying that when it rains, it pours, because sometime later that night, the heavens opened up, one of those sudden summer storms that flash through with crackles of lightning and rolls of thunder half drowned out by the downpour drumming on the roof. And the next morning came the deluge of the other sort, events cascading on the Diamond Buckle ranch as if the clouds had brought in every reckoning waiting to happen.

It began at breakfast, where black coffee was the main course as hangovers were nursed. I was groggy myself from the restless night of rainbursts and so much on my mind. Along the table, Skeeter had the shakes so bad he used both hands to lift his coffee cup, but still was grinning like the wisest monkey in the tree. Highpockets managed to look as capable as ever except for bloodshot eyes. The rest of the crew was in states of morning-after between those extremes. Except, that is, for Herman, appearing not much the worse for wear, an advantage he had by always looking somewhat hard used. Despite the aftereffects, the triumphant night in Wisdom cast a good mood felt by everyone but Jones, grumpy over being rained out of haying. "Looks like the bunch of you have the day off," he conceded with a sniff at the weather, "mostly."

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“What’s that supposed to mean?” Highpockets was on the case at once.

Jones jerked a thumb at the empty chair next to his. “Smiley is no longer employed at the Diamond Buckle.” That sank in to me as almost too good to be true, my jubilant reaction helped along by Herman’s turning toward me and silently mouthing, “*Good riddance, hah?*” Versions of that were on the faces around the table.

“Hee hee,” Skeeter uncorked, “he can try for pimp with them sheepwagon lovelies.”

“So,” Jones ignored the interruption, “I need a volunteer to be choreboy until I can drive into Dillon and find a new one. The rest of you, sure, you can pitch horseshoes or lay around and scratch your nuts or whatever you want to do with the day, but somebody’s got to step up and do the chores.”

Peerless lawyered that immediately. “That would include getting a milk pail under *Waltzing Matilda*?”

“She’s a cow,” Jones tried to circle past that, “so she needs tending to like the others.”

“I’m not milking any crazy cow,” Peerless stated his principle.

Grinning, Fingy waved a hand lacking enough fingers to squeeze a teat.

“I’m out.”

Harv silently shook his head an inch or so.

“I’m allergic to titted critters,” Skeeter announced, drawing a volley of hooty speculations about how far that allergy extended and when it had set in.

So it went, man by man, around the long table, no one willing to risk limb if not life in taking on the treacherous dairy cow. “Damn it,” Jones seethed, “all in hell I’m asking is for some one of you to pitch a little hay to the horses, slop the hogs, gather the eggs--”

“--and milk an animal you won't go anywhere near yourself,” Peerless inserted with a smirk.

“Now listen here,” Jones tried to shift ground from that accusation, “it's only for a couple of days. It won't hurt--embarass any of you to do it that long.” A foreman is not supposed to be vulnerable to anything, even the truth he was trying to sneak past. I felt some sympathy for him as one by one, the crew shook off his appeals for someone, anyone, to do the chores, roadblocked from the start by Waltzing Matilda.

Actually, I had a bit of experience at milking under my mother's tutelage during one of our holed-up-to-get-by seasons while my father was out looking for bulldozer work, and might have been moron enough to tackle this cow situation to show off my prowess, but some inner angel of good sense told me to sit there with my mouth closed.

Finally Jones looked pleadingly at the one last figure that gave him any hope. “Pockets, can't you talk them into--?”

Highpockets was as firm as the others, in shrugging off the suggestion he wield his influence. “The boys are in their rights. We hired on to put up hay. Nothing else.”

Whether it was that or inspiration circling until I could catch up with it, I suddenly realized: Wide open for the taking, the job of choreboy would not end with haying. Before the chance was lost, I crept my foot over to Herman's nearest one and pressed down hard on the toe of his shoe, causing him to jerk straight upright. Now that I had his attention, I cut a significant look toward Smiley's empty chair. He followed my gaze and after a squint or two, my thinking.

Clearing his throat as if he had been saving up for this announcement, Herman spoke out. “Nothing to worry. I am champ milker. Famous in old country.”

"You are? I mean, are you." Jones turned to me, as he so often did when it came to figuring out Herman.

"Yeah, well, if Gramps says he can do a thing," I put the best face on it I could, "he generally pretty much can."

Jones took one more look at Herman, sitting there with a grin skewed up toward his glass eye. "Okay," he dragged the word out, "let's see how they do it in the old country. He can even yodel if he wants. Snag, go get the milk pails for him."

Need I say, the breakfast table was abandoned in a hurry and the barn gained a full audience to watch Herman take on *Waltzing Matilda*.

Dairy cows normally plod willingly to their stanchions, ready to stick their necks into captivity in exchange for being relieved of their milk. The other two cows did so, nice and docile, when Herman and I herded them in to the milking area, while the angular brown and white Guernsey lived up to her name by sort of dancing sideways and snorting a shot of snot toward us and the stanchion. Bawling like she was being butchered, *Waltzing Matilda* then backed into a corner and rubbed a stub of horn on the barn wall as if trying to sharpen it.

"So-o-o, bossy," Herman approached her using the handle of a pitchfork to prod her out of the corner. I crept along right behind him, wishing he had used the sharp end of the pitchfork as the cow eyed us malevolently. Giving another snort, *Waltzing Matilda* plowed past the two of us as we jumped back and, as if it was her own idea, plugged along to the waiting stanchion.

"There, see, that's half the battle!" Jones called from the safety of half the barn away, where he and the rest of the crew were clustered to watch.

"Stand away," Herman warned me as he sidled in to shut the stanchion on the cow's bowed neck. I thought I was, but still had to leap back when *Waltzing*

Matilda shifted hind feet, flashing a kick that would have taken out a person's kneecap.

"Jeezus," Peerless cried, "watch yourselves, fellas. That critter's a killer."

Herman and I would not have disagreed with that as we huddled to consider our next move. "Any eye-dea?" he started to ask, interrupted by Waltzing Matilda loudly breaking wind and then letting loose as if to empty her bowels to the last degree. In dismay, we both stared at the switching tail now coated with manure, perfectly capable of swatting a person hunched on a milking stool.

"Puh," said Herman. "Maybe Smiley was right, a dose of lead is best answer to this creature."

"We have to do something about that tail," I was thinking hard, warily watching the crap-covered pendulum swing back and forth. "How about if we--" I outlined the only scheme that had popped to mind.

"Worth every bit of try," Herman agreed, both of us aware of Jones prowling impatiently back and forth in front of the other spectators. "You go git the tool, I git the other. Bunny-quick."

I ran to the blacksmith shop and grabbed the longest tong off the forge, about two feet in length. Meanwhile Herman had ducked into the tack room of the barn where saddles and such were kept, and come back with a pigging string, such as was used to tie up the legs of calves during branding.

Our audience craned their necks in curiosity, their mutterings and whispers not exactly a full vote of confidence. "No betting," Highpockets decreed, to the evident disappointment of Skeeter.

Experimentally working the tongs that were usually used to pick up red-hot metal, I made sure with Herman: "Ready?"

"Betsa bootsies," he sounded like he was calling up confidence from wherever he could get it. "If sailors know anything, it is knots."

Standing carefully to one side, I grappled the tongs in and caught the hairy end of the cow's filthy tail, tugging the whole thing snug against the nearest rear leg. That brought out a fresh green splurt of manure as expected, but I was out of range. Herman moved in and swiftly tied the tail tight and firm to the joint of the leg. Waltzing Matilda did not know what to make of this and kicked. Which yanked her tail hard enough to make her bawl at top volume.

"Quick!" I cried, and Herman already was sliding the milking stool into place and in no time milk was streaming into the bucket like hail hitting. There is the old braggart joke about milking a cow so fast she would faint away, and while Waltzing Matilda showed no sign of swooning, Herman was working those teats at fantastic speed, his hands flying up and down as the level of milk in the bucket rose perceptibly. The angriest Guernsey on the planet attempted a few more tugs of leg and tail, only to bawl in frustration. Either out of confusion or an inkling of sense, she did not crap like Niagara any more.

While Herman was milking like fury, I took another pail and went out and filled it at the pump at the watering trough. When he had stripped the teats to the last drops and set the frothing and nearly full milk pail safely away, I recited, "Ready on the firing line?"

"Ja, shoot it to her," Herman sang out. I tossed the pail of water on the bovine rump and hind legs, washing at least the worst of the manure away to tidy 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.

incredible

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“One Eye, I want to see you after you get that milk up to the house,” he 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 hoboos had an enviable talent for how to take time off, and the crew was a hundred percent at leisure. Sunning themselves in chairs propped against the bunkhouse, Shakespeare 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 told 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

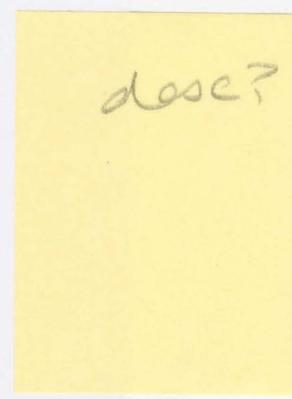
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Herman

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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.”

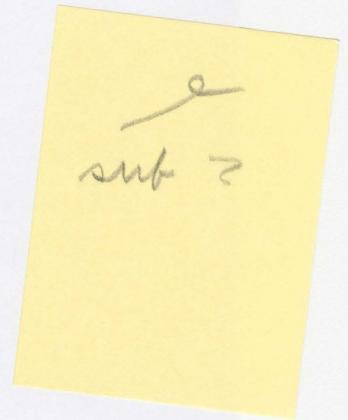
“Yeah, you’d better go do that.” Still neither us moved, and to break the awkward silence, I asked, “Where’d you learn to milk like that?”

A grin escaped despite his best effort. “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 Helena fair, so I stuck the Caddy in the equipment shed." He patted his way along Queen's side, crooning "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."

scotty,
chanting

To my alarm, he chugged it too much, more of it going down him than the other beers had. Not for long, because what was left in his mouth he spewed onto the bar, his face contorted. Gagging and trying to speak, he was making a *k-k-k* sound like a car trying to start on a cold morning, as our crew watched in horror, me most of all. Whatever was wrong with him was calamity enough, but I could also see a major portion of our wages about to vanish in front of our eyes.

“Told you,” Deacon crowed as he moved along the bar toward the pot. “Wore out his gullet after so many beers. Let’s have that money and we’ll even buy you a consolation round, Pockets,” he couldn’t hide his smirk.

“Herman, what is it?” I quavered in panic as he kept trying to work his throat. “What’s wrong?” Not knowing what else to do, I slammed him across the top of his back with my open hand as hard as I could.

The blow must have loosened up something somehow. “K-k-k-cough drop,” he spluttered, pointing shakily at the offending shotglass.

“Deacon, you cheating bastard,” Highpockets caught on to the dodge ahead of the rest of us, but not by much. “Grab him.” Harv already had accomplished that, locking the protesting Deacon to his chest from behind as casually as gathering an armful of hay. “Frisk him good,” Highpockets ordered, Midnight Frankie and Shakespeare quick on the job.

Into sight came an orange box bearing the words LUDEN’S MENTHOL COUGH DROPS LEMON FLAVOR.

“I’d say you just forfeited, Deacon,” Highpockets pronounced, while I did my best to attend to Herman as he stayed bent over the bar, wheezing and still trying to clear his voicebox.

“Can’t you take a joke?” Deacon squawked in Harv’s steely grip. “Let’s call it a draw and just scrap the bet.”

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“Draw, my rosy red butt,” that brought Peerless into it in full mode. “You can’t pull a fast one like that and crawl out of it like a snake on ice.”

His Tumbling T equivalent argued right back. “Hey, your fella tumbled to the cough drop, but he never did name the beer. So by rights, we win the bet.”

“Tell it in church, ye whistledick,” the Jersey Mosquito put a stop to this. “We’re claimin’ the pot fair and square,” he declared, whipping off his hat and scooping the pile of money into it. Then with surprising agility, he hoisted his bony old rump onto the bar, swung his legs over as the Tumbling T gang made futile grabs at him and Babs screeched a protest, and disappeared down among beer barrels and such, clutching the hatful of cash to him.

That set off general mayhem.

Each crew charged at the other, swearing and squaring off. Harv seemed to be in his element, flooring one Tumbling T opponent with a roundhouse punch and taking on the next without drawing a breath. Fingy and Pooch between them were fending with a burly member of the other crew. As befitted their leadership positions Highpockets and Deacon singled each other out, locked together in a revolving grapple along the length of the bar that sent beer glasses shattering and stools tumbling like dominoes. Peerless and Midnight Frankie and Shakespeare each were honorably engaged in tussles of their own with Tumbling T bettors yowling for their money back.

Meanwhile I saw that Babs the bartender, repeating “Hey, settle down! Pay up for those beers!” to no effect, had pulled out a pool stick sawed off to the right length to make a good club and was starting around the end of the bar to put it to use.

Taking that as a clear signal this was getting serious, I tugged at Herman for us to clear out of there. Blinking his good eye at the melee around him, he resisted

my pulling, saying thickly, "Wait, Donny. Oops, Scotty. You know who I mean. Let's don't go, I have to help fellas fight."

"Nothing doing. You've had your war," I gritted out and hauled at him with all my might, yanking him off the bar stool in the direction of the door. In my death grip on his arm, he stumbled after me as we skinned along the bar, ducking and dodging swinging fists and reeling bodies as much as we could, out into the street and to where the pickup was parked.

After manipulating him into sitting on the running board, still protesting that he wanted to join the battle that could be heard raging on in the Watering Hole, I said loudly and clearly: "Don't move. Sing a song, say poetry, do something."

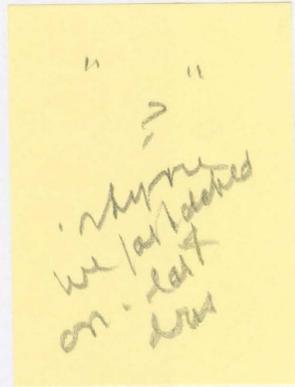
"Good eye-dea," he said dreamily, and began to recite:

*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.*

Leaving him deposited there, I raced off to the mercantile, on the chance Jones might be in there buying groceries. I couldn't help looking wildly this way and that along the moonlit street of Wisdom, hoping that deputy sheriff who had shown up out of the dark when we were in the hobo jungle would not choose now to pay another visit.

As I burst into the store, Jones glanced around in surprise from chucking an armload of loaves of bread onto the counter while the storekeeper kept tally. Before he could ask what my rush was, I stammered, "The fellas are ready to go back to the ranch."

"What, they drank the town dry already? Pretty close to a new record, I'd say." He turned away to grab boxes of macaroni off a shelf. "Tell them I'll be



there by the time they can piss the beer out of themselves. I'm not stopping every two minutes on the way to the ranch so somebody can take a leak."

"Uhm, if you could hurry. They're sort of in a fight. With the Tumbling T crew."

Jones swore blue sparks into the air, instructed the storekeeper to load the groceries in the pickup and put the bill on the Diamond Buckle tab, then took off at a high run for the bar, with me trying to keep up.

"STOP IT!" he roared before he was even half through the swinging doors. "Or I'll see to it that every one of you sonofabitches of both outfits is fired and your asses run out of town before morning!"

That put a halt to everything, except a belated "Yow!" from Peerless who had received a late whack from Babs's pool stick. Sitting on Deacon's chest where he had him pinned to the floor while they arm-grappled, Highpockets looked down at his adversary. "Your call."

Deacon squirmed as much as he could, very little, then managed to turn his head toward Jones. "Since you put it that way, we're peaceable."

"Us, too," Highpockets agreed, climbing off him. "You heard what the man said, boys. Let's take our winnings and evaporate out of here. Right, Skeeter?" He whirled around, looking in every corner. "SKEETER? Where the hell did he and that hatful of money go?"

The Jersey Mosquito popped up from behind the far end of the bar, grinning devilishly and holding the upside-down hat as if it were a pot of gold. "Just bein' our Fort Knox till you fellas got done socializin'. See you on the Ma and Pa sometime, Deacon," he called over his shoulder as he scampered out of the bar to jump in the back of the pickup.

Following his lead, laughing and hooting like schoolboys, the Diamond Buckle crew piled into the box of the pickup, Jones counting us with chops of a hand like you do sheep. He came up one short. "Who's missing?"

Skeeter giggled. "Smiley, natcherly."

"He cut out of the saloon through the back door soon as his check was cashed," Peerless testified. "Wouldn't even stay and have one drink with us, the stuck-up bugger."

"Then where the hell is the knothead?"

Silence. Until Skeeter further provided:

"Gettin' his ashes hauled."

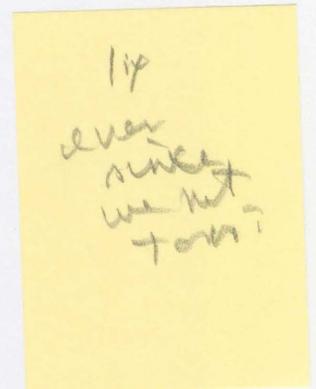
That puzzled me, but not Herman, who let out a wild drunken laugh. Revelation came when Highpockets swiped a hand toward the sheepwagons where the sales ladies had set up shop. "He claimed he had a lot of Butte nookie to catch up on."

Jones checked his watch against what he was hearing. "More than an hour ago, the sonofabitch has been at it? That don't take forever."

"More's the pity," said Shakespeare, to stifled laughs from the hobo audience.

Catching a second wind of swearing, Jones clambered into the driver's seat, saying the goddamn fornicating stud rooster Smiley could walk back to the ranch with his pants around his ankles for all he cared.

The ride to the Diamond Buckle was riotous, as fight stories were traded on their way into legend. You would have thought the Watering Hole was the Little Bighorn, and our crew was the victorious Indians. Better yet, under the watchful eye of Highpockets the jackpot winnings meanwhile were being counted out by Skeeter, hunched over so the cash would not blow out of his hat and carefully



holding up greenbacks one by one in the moonlight to determine whether they were sawbucks or twenties, doling out the proceeds of the bet evenly among us. Fingy clutched his with all eight fingers as if he could not believe his good fortune.

Pooch burst into more words than he ordinarily issued in a week: "First time we ever come back from town with more moolah than we went in with."

"Hee hee, stick with me and I'll have you boys livin' on the plush," Skeeter took all due credit. He judiciously handed a fistful of money to me instead of Herman, slumped against the back of the pickup cab singing softly to himself in German. "Here be your and his share, Snag."

For a long wonderful moment I clutched the winnings in triumph, over Aunt Kate's careless tossing away of my safety-pinned stash and the preaching pickpocket's cunning theft of Herman's wallet and for that matter, the slicked-up ex-convict vying for my suitcase with everything I owned in it. Then, grinning back at the moon over the Promised Land that was the Big Hole, I stuck the folded bills down the front of my pants for safety.

The crew hit the bunkhouse still high as kites, but mostly from exuberance rather than what they had poured into themselves at the Watering Hole. The chilly ride in the back of the pickup had even sobered up Herman appreciably, so much so that he made it to his bunk without my help. He sank onto it, rubbing his head with both hands as if to get things operating fully in there. "Big night, hah?" he said thickly, blinking at me as I proudly patted the wad of cash pouched down there in my underwear. "How much did we winned?"

"Enough to get married on," Harv's serene answer took care of that, from where he was already fixing up an envelope to mail his windfall to Letty. The rest of the crew all were in the crapper at once, oddly enough. It sounded like some kind of hobo palaver going on in there, maybe something mysteriously connected

to Skeeter's ability to generate a jackpot. Pretty quick, Highpockets could be heard checking with the bunch one by one, "You for it?" and the answering Yeahs! and Yups!

They filed into the bunk room like men with a mission, Highpockets in the lead, the others crowding behind him with a mix of expressions, from Skeeter's crinkled countenance to Shakespeare looking wise to Pooch wearing an anxious attempt at a grin.

"The Johnson family has had a little powwow," Highpockets announced as the hoboes gathered around us. "One Eye, we're hoping you can stick with us after haying. Orchard country next, apple-knocking out in Washington." His gaze shifted to me. "Snag's welcome to come along, too, if that's in the cards."

Herman was unable to say anything for some seconds. "Honored, I am," he finally got out. "Good eye-dea, for me." He struggled even more for the next words. "The boy," he swallowed so hard that it brought an awful lump to my throat too—"has somebody to go to."

"Any way you two work it out," Highpockets left it at and turned away. "Let's hit the sack, boys. Jones will be on a tear in the morning to make us earn those wages."

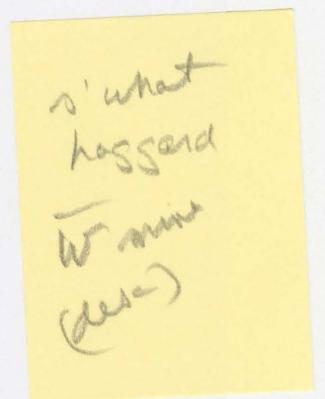
Now Herman and I adjourned to the crapper. He put a steadying hand on the sink and studied his wistful reflection in the mirror, mine alongside his.

"Donny, it is for best if I go with them. When haying is over, no more sickles, and I am *ptttht*."

"I know."

"Will miss you like everything."

"Me, too. I mean, I-I'll miss you, too." It took all I could do to stay dry-eyed and keep my voice from breaking. "Walk tall, podner."



“Ja, you do same,” he managed. “We were good pair on the loose, Red Chief.”

Amid the settled snores and nose-whistlings of the sleeping crew, I lay sleepless for a long, long time, as haunted as I'd been by the damnable wall plaque of the praying boy in Aunt Kate's attic. This time by life, not death. For the first time since the Double W cookhouse I whined, only to myself, but the silent kind is as mournful as the other. The miles upon miles of my summer, the immense Greyhound journey right down to the last bus to Wisdom, were simply leaving me torn in two, between Herman and Gram. She and Letty seemed like, what, mirages, distant and beckoning, but Herman was my indispensable partner from the depths of the Manitowoc stay to the ups and downs of the open road.

My imagination failed me as I tried to conceive of life without him, or his without me. How can you ever forget someone you will think of every time you eat a piece of toast? Or whenever you touch a map, your fingers bring ^{was} memory of red routes once followed to adventure of whatever kind? Or even catching the wink of an eye, sparkling as glass, from someone you are devoted to?

As bereft as I was for myself, I was just as afraid for what waited ahead for him, on the move with the hoboes and on the run at the same time, always with the threat of some yard bull or hick dick matching him up with a MOST WANTED poster, and I would not be there to rescue him with some tall tale that we were actually Schneiders back to when people ran around buck naked in Switzerland.

As for counting on luck to help us out of our divided fate, phooey and you-know-what. In my misery I felt I might as well throw the black arrowhead into the Big Hole river. The cheerful sentiments in the autograph book seemed sickly against the true messages of life. Loco things happened without rhyme or reason, and that was that. The most hard-hearted set of words in the language, and the only

“Skeets, you’re so full of it your eyes are turning brown,” Deacon dismissed that boast with a laugh.

“By the grace of whatever ain’t unholy, I swear it’s true, Deac,” Skeeter persisted. “Seen him do it with my own two eyes.” Sensing a chance to hold forth, Peerless had moved in and backed that with, “I’m a witness to that my own self. Damnedest stunt since Jesus turned ditchwater into muscatel.”

His interest piqued now in spite of himself, the Tumbling T haymaker peered along the bar at our crew carrying on in Saturday night fashion, hoisting drinks and gabbing as if they hadn’t seen each other for weeks. “Where’s this miracle of nature you’re bragging up?”

“Sittin’ right there, answerin’ to the name of One Eye,” Skeeter pointed a skeletal aged finger toward Herman.

Deacon followed that up with a dubious look, then the even more skeptical inquiry to Herman. “So you’re this hipper-dipper sipper who can identify every beer this side of horse piss, huh?”

Herman drew himself up with pride. “Ja, is true.”

“Tell ye what we’re gonna do, Deac, if you got any guts left in that stewpot belly of yours. ^{Skeeter} We’ll bet that our fella here can have a swig of any of these”--the sweep of his arm indicated the line of beer spigots half the length of the bar, as any serious Montana bar had--“let’s say, oh, half a dozen just to make it sporting, and tell you like that”--a snap of his fingers like a starter’s gun going off--“what every by God one is, without him knowing aforehand.”

Deacon took another look at Herman, who gave him back a vague horsy grin and drained his glass as if in challenge, and it all of a sudden occurred to me how many empty glasses were in front of him when I came back from the telephone call. “Hey, though, he’s already had--” I tried to warn Skeeter, but Deacon overrode me with the shrewd conclusion, “Beer gets to be plain old beer the more

Skeeter

you drink of it. What do you think, boys? Shall we call this windjammer's bluff?"

That brought cries of "Hell, yeah!" and "I'm in!" from the Tumbling T crew.

"This suit you okay?" Highpockets shouldered in to make sure with Herman.

"Ja, betsa bootsies," said Herman, with a wink at me which I found alarmingly woozy. "Suits me to a T Tumbler!" he ambitiously tried a joke.

"Babs, set him up six of the Montana brews, shotglasses only," Deacon directed. "We don't want him swilling the stuff long enough to get familiar with it. The Muskeeter here claims he only needs a first swig anyway."

"STOP WITH EVERYTHING!"

Herman had resoundingly slapped a hand on the bar in a manner that indeed did slam the proceedings to a halt. Gesturing in rather grand fashion at the long line of beer spigots as everyone watched wide-eyed, he elucidated, "Not all of these wild woolly brewings am I acquainted with. Samples first, please, bar maiden."

Immediately Deacon was suspiciously accusing Skeeter and Highpockets of trying to pull a fast one by having our man wet his whistle too familiarly before the real taste test, while they hotly argued back that the man was new to Montana and it was essential to the bet for him to learn Babs's stock first so he'd have comparisons to go on. I could not deny the logic--even Pooch delivered "Damn straight" in recognition of it--but was leery of how much beer Herman was taking aboard before the drinks that counted. I did not even know enough then to have the bigger worry, that in the era when almost every Montana city had its own brewery, the brewers almost to a man were of German origin, leading to a certain sameness of product. It had been nearly thirty years since Herman was testing steins of beer in Munich; did his sense of taste have that much memory of the Germanic tricks of the trade, such as they were?

We were about to find out, because Deacon and his side grudgingly gave in, and Babs the bartender, smiling to herself at all the fresh commerce, set up half a dozen shot glasses. As she named off each beer, I as our chosen representative in this--Highpockets firm that Herman savvied me better than anyone else and we wanted no monkey business in making the individual beers known to him--wrote each on a cash register slip and put it face down under the respective brew.

Highlander, out of Missoula. Kessler from Helena. Great Falls Select. The beer from Butte, baldly named Butte Beer. Kalispell Goat Mountain Brew. Anaconda Avalanche Ale.

Unsteady but unconcerned, Herman winked at me with his glass eye, wrapped a hand around the first shotglass, for some reason unleashed the toast, "To the health of all lovers!" and lifted the Goat Mountain Brew to his lips.

Eyes half-shut in concentration as I called out the name of each one, he sipped his way through the preliminary beers. When he was done and jovially declared that Montana beer at least was better than the product of any horse, as quick as the laughter died down Skeeter flapped some money under Deacon's nose and flopped it down on the bar as the start of the pot. "Now about them bets, if ye haven't lost your nerve."

Experience sometimes lives up to its reputation as a teacher. From my time of hanging around the Double W bunkhouse and its card sharks, I was keeping an eye on Midnight Frankie. When he stayed perfectly poker-faced but flipped a nice fresh twenty-dollar bill into the pot--a lot of money, on our wages--saying, "Let's get some skin in the game," I immediately dug out a similar twenty from our stash. Nor was I the only one rushing to follow Midnight Frankie's lead, Highpockets thumbing the sum out of his wages with the declaration, "I'm in for a double sawbuck, too," and Harv thinking it over for a moment and then silently doing the

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same, followed in quick succession by Peerless, Fingy and Pooch. "There's our chunk of the jackpot, Deacon," Skeeter crowed in challenge, "decorate the mahogany or say uncle."

Faced with our crew's total backing of Herman, the Tumbling T outfit looked uneasily at one another, but when Deacon demanded, "C'mon, don't let this gang of broken-down blanket stiffs buffalo us," they all matched our bets. Just like that, a couple hundred dollars lay in a green pile on the bar.

"All right, One Eye, hoist 'em and name 'em off," Skeeter led the roof-raising chorus of encouragement from our side. But before Babs could move to the taps to repeat the beers, Deacon stopped her and everything else with a shrill two-fingered whistle, evidently a hobo signal for something like stop, look, and listen.

In the immediate silence, the Tumbling T chieftain swelled up with the full attention he had drawn, and sprung his demand. "Nothing against PeeWee here"--that again! I could have been put on trial for the murderous look I gave him--"but I want to handle them shot glasses and slips of paper myself, starting behind there at the taps. Just so there's no wrong impression of anything funny taking place along the way. You mind, Babs?"

The bartender backed away to lean against her cash register. "Since whichever bunch of you wins that jackpot is going to pay full price for shot glasses of beer, you can keep on all night for all I care."

Highpockets checked with Herman, who replied as far he was concerned any fool who wanted to could pour the beer. Establishing himself at the taps, Deacon made a big deal of drawing the six small glasses of beer, as I hung over the bar watching to make sure he assigned the right slip of paper to each one. Then he arranged the setup on the bar, five glasses in a row in front of Herman with one held back, the hole card, so to speak, so Herman could not figure out the final sample by process of elimination. "We'll let him off with five out of six, if I have

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the option of switching this one in," Deacon peeked secretively at the slip under it, "so he don't pull some memorization trick on us. Fair enough?"

Skeeter and Highpockets mulled the proposition but could see nothing wrong with it, while Herman pittypatted the bar impatiently to start the tasting. It was agreed I would read out the brand of beer on each slip of paper as Herman named them off, and with a flourish Deacon mixed around the shotglasses with their accompanying slips to his contentment and the great drink contest got underway.

Reciting "Ready on right, ready on left, ready on firing line!" in soldierly fashion, Herman reached for the first slug of beer, swilled it briefly before swallowing, and declared "Bee-yoot!" which I verified as the Butte brew. "Attaway, One Eye!" and "Show 'em what the Diamond Buckle stands for!" came the shouts of encouragement from our crew, while the Tumbling T outfit groaned in disbelief.

So it went, down the line, each beer identified correctly at the first sip, until there stood the last two shotglasses, the one Deacon was holding back and the other resting in front of Herman.

Grinning tipsily but still in command of himself, he threw the challenge to Deacon. "Which one is to tickle my tonsils?"

"You're lucky so far," Deacon said sourly, "but let's see if that luck ain't due to run out about now." So saying, he switched the hole card shotglass in for the other one.

This beer I couldn't even guess at. A darker foamy brew than the others, it had to be either Goat Mountain or Avalanche, but with everything riding on Herman's final feat of swilling a mouthful and identifying it, fifty-fifty odds all of a sudden didn't seem anything like a cinch. But quite nonchalantly, he raised the shotglass, said "Bottoms upside," and in one motion swigged the mystery beer.

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chronically resorting to dishes featuring canned tomatoes, and making a racket in the kitchen as if the pots and pans were taking a beating while she hashed meals together. Milking time brought another uproar almost daily. She and Smiley hated each other, with her regularly complaining loudly about the splatters of manure on the milk buckets the choreboy would bring in after milking Waltzing Matilda. I have read that the finest Persian carpets would have one strand deliberately left astray, to avoid the sin of pride that perfection might bring. Mrs. Costello was something like that loose thread in the pattern of the Double Buckle, and of course I regarded her as poor material compared to Gram. But that was neither here nor there; Mrs. Costello obviously had to be put up with, as I could read in Rags's face as she ed in on us before we could reach his office.

"Can I get you and your guest"--she didn't mean me--"some fresh baked oatmeal cookies and coffee?"

"No thanks, we'll save our appetites," Rags said politely. "Excuse us, we've got business in the office."

With a final curious look at me, off she went down the hall, next making an anvil chorus of pots and pans as she started doing the dishes.

Rags wagged his head and said something under his breath which sounded like, "It takes all kinds." He ushered me on into the office and said to make myself at home, which was like telling me I had come a long way from a hobo kip in the willows. I wished Herman were in there with me to share the giddy expedience.

Turning to go, Rags thought to add: "Just so we're straight on this phone business. You can check on Granny every so often even if I'm not here. I'll tell Jones and Mrs. Costello it's okay." Somewhere upstairs a radio was going, nice and soft. He winked at me and headed for the stairs, calling, "I'm coming, Delilah."

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I sat down at the big desk in the office, trying to take in everything. Around on all the walls were framed photographs and awards of the kind I had hoped to see when I was under the impression Aunt Kate was Kate Smith; the real thing had me open-mouthed as I gazed at the collection. Wowie. ^{abo} From right here at the seat of Rags Rasmussen's ranch empire, I could see the daybooks arranged as neatly as you would expect from the most scrupulous bronc rider in the world, and fine old furniture with put the Double W's to shame. One item was what I recognized from reading about the Pilgrims as a ^g sinner's bench, a straightbacked church pew which must have been a rare antique. On it sat one of those hand-carved signs sold at the craft booths outside rodeo arenas, with the wording WHY IS TEMPTATION ALWAYS THE TASTIEST THING ON THE MENU? Well, nobody said Rags lacked a sense of humor.

I had to get down to business and across the summerful of distances make the phone call to Gram, putting on miles in her wheelchair, reading my weekly letters supposedly chronicling the good times I was having in Manitowoc with Aunt Kate. I knew I had to pick up the phone and do it, but was afraid to. What if she had decided to make up with her stuckup sister, found out I was no longer in Wisconsin, and demanded to know where in tarnation I was and what I was up to? I'd have to face that if and when it came. Meanwhile, I dialed.

The phone line hummed, Sister Carma Jean answered and for once did not give me a bad time about asking to talk to Gram, instead springing on me the equivalent of, "Here she is."

"Donny! I was starting wonder if the phone line between here and Wisconsin is down."

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