

"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?"

"Not just yet. The sawbones has to check me over a few more times before he'll let me up. They're slower than the dickens about it after this kind of operation." Again, 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?"

In that summer of many names, Donal and Donnie and Red Chief and Snag and Scotty, and Dutch and Herman and One Eye and Fritz, not even to mention the hoboes' variety, I drew a blank on that one. "Uh, who'd you say, again?"

"The collie dog Aunt Kate got for you, it's right here in your letter, silly."

"Oh, Laddie. You know what, he ran away. Quit the country." I dropped my voice. "Couldn't take any more of Aunt Kate, I guess, she ordered him around all the time, poor pooch. Anyway, nobody knows where he went."

"That's awful, the poor thing just loose like that."

"Yeah, but maybe he's better off, without being bossed to death like that."

in vent

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That carried us through, until we wished each other the very best and hung up until the next time.

The good weather of that Big Hole summer and the bountiful windrows of a gorgeous hay crop turned the crew into haymaking fiends, the loaf-shaped stacks rising in the fields fast enough to please even Jones. Harv really did prove to be a man and a half on the stack, handling many tons a day with his tireless pitchfork. Some days we skidded the beaverslide to three new fields. Those days fell away like fleeces, and I was caught by surprise when payday suddenly arrived, along with lifted spirits on the bunkhouse that it happened to be a Saturday night and time to go to town, which meant to the Watering Hole.

I was ecstatic at getting my first paycheck. Until I looked at it and looked again, made out as it of course was to Scotty Schneider.

For an instant, Herman raised an eyebrow at Fritz Schneider on his, then grinned. "The Kate would have a cat fit, if she could see."

record

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"Yeah, but," I still was seeing trouble in the way the checks were written out, "what are we going to do with these? I mean, since they're not in our real names, isn't it forgery or something to cash them?"

"Ja, probably," he met that crime with the usual salute, "but no choice do we have if we want our money." Seeing that didn't reassure me one least bit, he tried a lighter approach. "One more name maybe can't hurt, Red Chief."

"You're the one who made us into Schneiders," I reminded him shrilly.

"Scotty," he bore down on the word, "calm down some, please. All is not lost. Maybe they do not ask any too much questions in Watering Hole. Isn't that how they do in the West?"

"It still feels to me like something against the law," I muttered.

"Hah. Add to the list," said the most wanted man in the Big Hole.

Going to town on a Saturday night meant spiffing up, baths having been taken in a galvanized tub filled from buckets on the stove--we cut cards for first water and on down the line, and Midnight Frankie with mysterious inevitability won the right to squat and bathe in the clean tubful with the rest of us to follow in the increasingly gray bathwater. Now what passed for town clothes had been dug out, clean shirts and hair slickum so prevalent on the crew it was remindful of kids dressed up for the first day of school. Herman was the true fashion plate, sporting the mermaid tie which drew winks and sly remarks about what he was fishing for with it. My rodeo shirt, somewhat faded and showing wear from its summer of long bus rides and strenuous occasions, was the best I could do, but I was trying to buff my stubble-scuffed shoes into respectability when I happened to notice that my moccasins were not where I kept them beneath the foot of my bunk.

Alarmed, I scrambled down onto hands and knees to search under the bed, but they were definitely missing.



sly

Seeing me down there on all fours looking stricken, Herman caught on immediately. Jumping to his feet from his bunk, he shook the bunkhouse rafters with the outcry, "Someone is thief! Scotty's moccasins is gone. I thought Johnson family does not take from its own."

Everything stopped. Skeeter and Pooch and Midnight Frankie and Shakespeare and Fingy and Harv halted in mid-motion at whatever they were doing, their eyes cutting to one another for some kind of answer to Herman's charge. It was bad luck that Highpockets had gone out to make sure with Jones that the crew would have a goodly amount of time to carouse in town, leaving Peerless to niggle at the moccasin matter as Herman stood there with clenched fists. "Now, now, don't get carried away, One Eye. Maybe them slippers just got misplaced. What makes you think any of us--"

"WAHHOO!" resounded from the crapper, and as we all jerked in that direction, Smiley came prancing out, wearing only his shorts with a towel tucked in like an Indian loincloth and my moccasins.

The spectacle was as grotesque as it was unexpected, his big belly jiggling over the scanty loincloth and his stark bony bad leg stuck out stiff, as if he was half tub of lard and half stick figure. Poking two fingers up behind his head like feathers, he cavorted around in a crazy lopsided dance, the beautiful beadwork fancy dancers captive on his big feet with him warhooping and bellowing, "Wampum night! Hot time in town! Big chief Geronimo hitting the warpath!"

At first too stunned to do anything, the next thing I knew I had let out a howl of my own and launched into Smiley, grabbing him at the knees. Herman was right behind me, shoving him against the wall as I tried to wrest the moccasins off.

"Hey, don't you know entertainment?" Smiley croaked out, struggling against Herman's grasp. He was a large and fleshy man, almost too much for the

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jamming

two of us, but we heard Peerless warn the others of the crew, "Better stay out of it, this isn't any of our business."

"I'm making it mine," Harv's voice reverberated, or at least I felt it so. In no time the bigger better-muscled man had Smiley squashed so tight against the wall he couldn't even squirm as Herman lifted one of his feet like the hoof of a horse and I stripped the moccasin off, and we did the same on the other foot.

Right then coming through the bunkhouse doorway to be met by the three of us grappling with the various parts of the nearly naked Smiley, Highpockets let out, "What in tunket is going on?"

"Highjinks of the wrong kind," drawled Harv.

"Joke not funny one least little bit," Herman attested.

"The dickhead swiped my moccasins," I made the matter clear.

"You're the crappiest audience I ever been around," Smiley complained, yanking the towel out from the vicinity of his private parts. "Hell, I was only trying to draw a laugh, get everybody in the mood for town."

"Ye dumb damn piece of maggot bait," Skeeter piped up, "don'tcha know better than to put your meathooks on somebody else's property in a kip like this? People've been knifed for less than that. Ain't I right, One Eye?"

Taking the cue, Herman drew down the eyelid over his glass eye and thrust a hand into his pants pocket as if fondling something there besides lint, sounding amazingly menacing in uttering, "Lost count of stitches I have schneidered, ja."

"Gramps means he's next thing to a killer," I furthered the bluff, rewarded by seeing the ex-clown's fat red face drain of color until it matched his lardy body. "Nobody told me he packs a shiv," Smiley whined.

Highpockets took all this in and restored order. "Everybody shape up or Jones won't let us off the place. Throw some clothes on," he bossed Smiley even though he did not belong to the hobo contingent, "and let's get to town."

# —————  
The ride into Wisdom was a carefully spaced truce, with Smiley hunkered broodily near the tailgate and Herman and me with our backs against the pickup cab with everyone else between as a buffer, and the miles down the valley of green haystacks passed as agreeably as a picnic outing, the soft and warm summer evening a rare pleasure for men who roughed it in the weathers of hobo life. Naturally Jones drove like the pickup was on fire and quickly enough the little town made itself known, beer signs glowing in most colors of the rainbow at The Watering Hole and the milk-white false front of the mercantile standing out in the dusk. Additionally, there were a couple of sheepwagons that hadn't been there before, prominent now in the vacant lot between the saloon and the gas station. Fingy was the nearest of our bunch to me and I asked in curiosity, "What're those doing here? I thought this was cattle country."

"It's where, ehh, some sales ladies from Butte set up shop on Saturday nights," he answered delicately, and at least I knew enough not to ask what they were selling.

Jones pulled in right at the swinging doors of the Watering Hole. As the crew filed into the joint joshing and laughing, I held back, uncertain. Herman had no such hesitation.

"Wages, remember, Mister Scotty Schneider?" he said firmly, guiding me with his hand on my back to the entrance to I didn't know what.

The Watering Hole inside stopped the two of us in our tracks, maybe even thrust us back a step and much farther than that in remembering. Festooned with lariat ropes and leather reins draped in graceful arcs from the ceiling and the side wall hung end to end with bridles and harness and tacked up ten-gallon hats beyond their days and even angora chaps reminiscent of the leggings I had worn in the fancy

dancing exhibition, the ageless old saloon was like a western dryland cousin of the Schooner, back in Manitowoc. Herman made it official with the exclamation, "Is like home!"

As the crew trooped to the long bar, Skeeter by seniority took the lead, comically doffing his hat and holding it over his heart as he addressed the woman of about Gram's age standing ready at the cash register. "If it ain't Babs, my favoritist bartender in all of Creation."

"If it isn't, you old fart, you need your eyesight checked something serious," she bantered back. "How're tricks, Skeets?" Spotting the Diamond Buckle hatband on him and the rest of us, she let out a teasing hoot. "Oh ho ho, fellas, you've come up in the world."

"We like to think so," the Jersey Mosquito dropped his hat on the bar to claim his drinking spot as the rest of the crew settled onto bar stools like a flock of birds alighting. "And just to prove it, tune up your cash register, Babs honey, we have got checks galore to cash."

"Again this year," the bespectacled bartender sighed, "fancy that." She fussed with her cash register, lifting out the coin drawer entirely for the fat stash of cash underneath. "Okey-doke, highrollers, the First National Bank of Babs is now open."

Herman still was gazing affectionately around at the saloon trappings, but I watched furtively as Pooch slipped his paycheck to Highpockets to endorse for him, recalling Skeeter's admonition on the last bus that certain people's education did not necessarily include reading and writing. Well, hell, that told me, if forgery was in the works we weren't the only ones, and I got on line with Herman close behind me.

Only to have the bartender pin my check to the bar with an unyielding hand before I could endorse it. "Uh-uh, not so fast," she peered at me through her wire-rim glasses. "What's the story here, Pockets, you taken on a mascot these days?"

"Our stacker driver," Highpockets right away spoke up for me, Skeeter pitching in, "It's his age when I hit the road, so that just goes to show you he's a functionin' employee."

She was unmoved. "By rights, I'm not supposed to allow kids in here, let alone be shoveling money to them."

"Hey," I tried indignantly, "I'm thirteen." Herman nodded maybe too vigorously in backing that up.

"And I'm the Queen of Romania. Sorry, sonny, but I can't accommodate you."

"Have a heart, Babs, he's with us," Highpockets argued, sticking up for me in the good name of the Johnson family insofar as that existed.

"Pockets, I can only cash checks for paying customers or I'd be banking for the whole town right down to the dogs and cats."

"Nothing to worry," Herman asserted with the smack of a hand on the bar so loud everyone jumped a little. "Bar maiden, enough business for us both and then some, I will give you."

The bar maiden, gray-haired as could be, smirked with pleasure at the compliment, intended or otherwise. "You sound like you mean business, sure enough, buster," she allowed, looking him over from the mermaid tie to his strong eyeglasses that pretty much matched hers. "All right, everybody saw the miracle, the flower of youth here grew up while we were watching." She lifted her hand off my paycheck with the freeing instruction: "Dab your name on it and hand it over."

Fingers mentally crossed, I wrote *Scotty Schneider* on the back of the check. The bartender did not even look at the signature, simply stashed it in the

cash register with the others and counted out my wages in nice green bills. "Here you go, angel."

Angel. That was a new one.

As I soaked that in, she cashed Herman's check the same way she'd done mine, and suddenly we were flush with money of the sort we had not seen since the fingersmith preacher robbed us. With that soul-shaking bump in the road now only a bad memory, Herman was in the best of moods, twirling his finger double speed at his temple as if strenuous thinking was required for the big decision he was making.

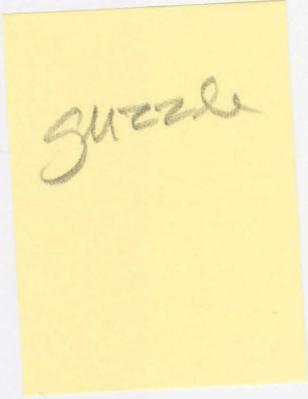
"Guess what, Scotty. I am having a schooner, hah"--he cocked his eye at the line of spigots along the bar with blazoned handles that were a far cry from the labels of the multiple beers of Great Lakes ports, but indisputably promised the same intoxicant--"to celebrate that we are haymakers, got the smackers to prove it." He dropped his voice. "And no posters of Killer Boy Dillinger out easy to be seen, I watched buildings careful on way in. Saving my neck, the Big Hole is," he grinned triumphantly. "Drink to that, let us."

Signaling the bartender from where she was busy setting up glasses of beer for the rest of the crew, he sunnily included me. "You want bottle of Crushed Orange, I betcha."

"Not now, maybe later." I had been weighing watching people drink beer against what was nagging at me, and conscience was winning out. "I need to go do something. It was so busy all week, I forgot to call Gram at the ranch."

"Ja, I was nearly to say so." Herman shooed me toward the swinging doors. "Go, do. I will hold fort here."

As I was pretty sure of, the Wisdom store had an arrangement common to mercantiles in those days before telephones were everywhere, a nook in the back



Suzzle

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."

"Geez, 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."

I was boggled by that, the entire picture of the lipstick-imprinted 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."

in her  
new job  
there.

"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 Glasgow Supper Club. Here's even better news. She can get me on as night cook."

"There 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 fully 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. The jackpot of my wishes, but also a king hell dilemma. The best I could parry 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

Good  
wages  
&  
a decent  
boss

best low  
price.  
Borrowing  
supper  
club?

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, a triumph for any eleven-year-old bus-riding stray--even a sparrowhead like Wendell Williamson would be forced to admit that was a feat. The bunkhouse hoboos 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 Great Falls, 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.

cut  
Wendell?  
or  
earlier  
one(s)?

Blairson

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 the Great Falls news, I was overridden by Babs announcing as if she was directing traffic:

#

Elison

“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 hoboes 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. <sup>✓</sup> T 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. Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, I ~~felt~~ <sup>felt</sup> 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 decisive moment, I mustered myself as much as I was able. “Herm--I mean, Gramps, I need to talk to you about something.”



"Has to wait, please," he said, somewhere in another world as he hoisted his glass for an appreciative sip. "Pooch and me, we got big thoughts to think. Don't we, podner."

"Damn straight," Pooch said mechanically.

"Yeah, but I really need to tell you--"

"Saturday night is to howl," Herman formulated as if it had come from Longfellow. "And lucky us, here we are, south of the moon, hah?"

He shut me down with such a fond grin--for me, for the decorated saloon so much like the Schooner, for the company of our hobo pals--that I did not have the heart to tear him away. There are times when mercy cancels anything else.

As he and Pooch lapsed back into their mute pleasure of imbibing, I tried to clear my head by seeing what else Saturday night in the Watering Hole had to offer, and it was then that I began to catch the drift of the Jersey Mosquito's earnest jawboning of the Tumbling T boss hobo.

"Haven't seen you since we was in that boxcar on the Ma and Pa"--the Maryland and Pennsylvania Railroad in hobo nomenclature--"and that Baltimore yard bull came callin' with a billy club in one hand and handcuffs in the other. I swear, Deac, never saw a man bail out the other side of a boxcar as fast as you. Left me to deal with that railroad dick by my lonesome, you sonofagun."

"Survival of the fastest," Deacon stated his philosophy smugly. The two of them batted boasts and putdowns back and forth like that until Skeeter sprung the trap I realized he had been baiting all along.

"I'm telling ye, Deacon, I know you think you're a helluva drinkin' man. But we got a fella who puts you to shame when it comes to lickin' a glass. Our man here can take the least leetle sip of anythin' captured in a bottle and tell you just exactly what it is."

"I'm just about to be there," I maintained, but waltzing wide around the sickle as Herman shakily balanced it while climbing onto the grindstone seat. "I need to tell Gramps one last thing about how we do it in this country."

"Hurry up about it," Jones warned, "standing around gabbing doesn't put up any hay."

As he departed, I took a reluctant deep breath and pulled the medicine pouch out from under my shirt and over my head. "Here, I'll leave this with you a while to go by," I told Herman, unsheathing the arrowhead and placing it on the frame of the grindstone in front of him. "This is what he means about sharp and not rounded off, see? Grind them until they have an edge like this and no more, savvy?"

"Like maybe so?" He tentatively pedaled and sent sparks flying from the bevel of steel meeting the grindstone. Then, though, he halted the encouraging screech of the grinding to pick up the arrowhead and feel its whetted edge with his thumb.

"Lucky one more time, you and it, Donny," he said so softly I didn't correct him to *Scotty*. Holding the charmed piece, he gazed around at the prosperous-looking buildings of the ranch and the shielding mountains beyond and past even that horizon, I believe, to the ups and downs the dog bus had carried us through all the way from Manitowoc; then at me, the hunted look gone from him at last.

"Knocked, we have still got it, ja?"

"Close call," I expelled in relief, relaxing back into the haze of well-being that came with a Diamond Buckle hatband. "But yeah, we still do."

In that summer of flying calendar pages, Big Hole haying was a streak of time, when I take account of myself then, that I can scarcely believe packed so much into my life in so short a period. I suppose it would be like a kid of today

thumbing through the holdings of some smart phone that shows him himself and realizing that a couple of years and robust inches have been slipped onto his pouty eleven-year-old self without notice. Electrifying, to use a word that still holds true of such a shot of overnight growing up.

Exactly as I had seen myself when I ventured into Wendell Williamson's lair to offer myself as stacker team driver in Double W haying before the sparrowhead turned me down in favor of a dumb truck, I proudly was in charge of my own pair of workhorses and a steel cable that the team pulled to hoist the stacker fork laden with hay, and--here truly was the weight of responsibility to rest on eleven-year-old shoulders--of halting the horses every time at just the right instant to drop the thick cloud of hay atop of the stack wherever Harv indicated with his pitchfork.

In doing so, I had to manipulate a ton and a half of actual horses at the end of leather reins, back and forth the fifty-foot-length of the cable each time Shakespeare or Highpockets delivered an overflowing buckrake load onto the broad stacker fork for sending up. Horses are not thrilled with walking backwards--me either--yet that was half our job, backing to the stacker after the hay was dumped at Harv's altitude, and I needed to steadily cluck and coax and tug the reins just so to return us to our waiting spot for the next load. My salvation was Queen, as magnificent to me as the Trojan horse must have been in that age-old tale and as smart as she was grand, dutifully tugging Brandy, dumb as they come except when oats and the barn stall were involved, along with her in the pulling power that ran the stacker.

Love is a strong word to use anytime, but I loved that big gray mare, already taking a giant step or two before I could say "Giddyup" or "Whoa back," her big hooves largely responsible for the steady path we wore into the stubble beside each stack, like the front walk to the mansion of hay Harv was building with

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 *doseess* 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 00, and he was not always wrong. Skeeter went farther back in the workingman's struggle against the crapitalists, as he called them, when he was a participant in the Seattle general strike of 1919 that got beaten down. "I got this

battler  
fight

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far from that suckerfish mayor," he still lamented falling short by an arm's length, "I ought've killed him then and there, done the world a favor." 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. Then 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, 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 pink *Police Gazettes* that were passed around until they fell apart. Ostensibly deep into "Is Marciano a Cheese Contender Or a Legit Champ?" and the amazing number of secret lives of Elizabeth Taylor, I was all ears for Smiley's latest lustful tale of conquest. Herman was in the crapper, as the convenience with the toilet and sink and shower was always called in a bunkhouse, shaving as he did each evening to stay out of the morning crush for the sink, so I was free of frowns warning me not to listen too much. Smiley was a surprise candidate for rodeo Romeo, to call it that, with his moonface and globular belly, but to hear him tell it he was God's gift to women.

This particular tale of lust involved a devastating Canadian <sup>Manda</sup> fence-sitting at the Calgary Stampede, who couldn't keep her eyes off Smiley as he went through his clown routine in the arena. To make a really long story short, he got word to her to meet him in back of the chutes while the chuckwagon race was being run, while he'd have a break from clowning. <sup>en</sup> "And we hightailed off to the little trailer I traveled the circuit in back in them days," he finished triumphantly, his rubbery face stretched into a triumphant leer. "Probably in record time, we done the deed every which way. Didn't even have to shed my overalls."

"Ye never even took off your clown outfit first?" Skeeter registered probably everybody's shock at the lack of etiquette. "What are ye, some kind of deviated prevert?"

"You're just jealous," said Smiley smugly, "of how them rodeo sweethearts liked to play rooty toot toot on my gazoot flute."

I was working on every which way and that rooty toot toot part and not really getting anywhere when Highpockets raised onto his elbows on his bunk and spoke up sharply, "Watch your mouth around the kid, can't you?"

"I ain't burning his ears off, am I, Snag," Smiley protested. "He has to learn the facts of life sometime."

"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 hoboos 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 the 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 with those big hands making fists and his shoulders rigid with a show of strength startling to everyone but me. "I was only funnin' with the boy, no harm in that, huh?"

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“Do your funnying 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 duffel bag and tucked the ivory-handled cutter away, snapping me to attention with, “Let’s catch air. Come help me with sickles.”

Neither of us said anything as we crossed the yard to the blacksmith shop in the waning daylight, our long shadows mixing together on the ground in our strides. I felt guilty, although not sure why, and sneaking a look at Herman’s set face was no help.

I trailed him into the blacksmith shop past the grindstone, much too plainly sickles not the first thing on his mind. He pulled out a pair of stout boxes from under the workbench and upended them for us to sit on. The sagging old shop which had been a shambles at first, littered with stray tools and rusting pieces of metal and anything else that collects from breakdowns and repairs on a ranch, he had made tidy as a hardware store between his sessions of sharpening sickles. It has taken me until now to fully realize he had repeated the greenhouse, a thousand miles from Manitowoc, an orderly haven.

“Donny,” he made no pretense at Scotty or Snag, “I am having doubts about this place.”

“W-why?” The Big Hole was showing off in the evening light, the mountaintops still goldenly sunlit while dusk softened the valley of hayfields to buckskin color, with the first town lights of Wisdom sparkling in the distance. To me, the Diamond Buckle ranch right then could not be beat, in any way I could think of.

Herman hunched forward toward me, as if making sure his words penetrated. “Bad company, you are keeping. Not your fault. My own.”

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all his own

could

"Aw, come on, Herman, don't let what happened in there get you down," I pooh-poohed the bunkhouse episode. "Smiley is as loose as the spool on a shithouse door and you shut him up good and that's that."

Herman passed a hand over his face. "There is some of what I mean. You are picking up language like from the garbage dump."

"So what?" If he was wrought up, so was I. "Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, this is what it's like on a ranch. I know the bunkhouse guys cuss like crazy and carry on like outlaws sometimes and all that. But they've been places and done things." I looked him straight in the eye, the good one. "Like you have."

"I have been"--his voice rose, then dwindled--"maybe too much places." He gazed off into the mountain shades of evening, as he must have gazed into many a night since that one in a Munich beer hall. "I am not example to follow. Life plays me big tricks--"

"Not your fault," I defended him against himself, my entire unasked-for summer of being cast to the fates backing up my words.

"--and I do not want same happening to you."

That jolted me. "Look at me here," he went on in the same grim tone, "and you with me, holed up like two Killer Boy Dillingers."

"But it's working out okay, isn't it?" I mustered in response. "We've got jobs, we're making wages, you're safe from the cops-- Herman, what more do you want?"

He was searching so hard for how to say the next I could see it on him. "I am thinking you should go back to your grossmutter some way."

That, I was relieved to shrug right off. "Well, sure, we both know that. After haying and when school starts, if Gram is, is herself again, I'll have to. But that's a real while yet."

"Now, I mean."

His Hermanic word "horrorfied" exactly fit my reaction. "Just up and leave you? W-why?"

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 on 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

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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 about the Diamond Buckle ranch would be surefire disaster, and even Sister Carma Jean as suspicious keeper of the phone was no cinch to get past unscathed. No surprise, then, that I lamely alibied to Herman, "I, I'm working on it. Gonna tackle Jones somehow about using the phone in the boss house, honest. Just haven't got around to it."

He appeared no more eager than me to tackle a foreman who was as gruff as any top sergeant, but gamely volunteered, "Ask him for you, can I, you think?"

"Better let me," I could see no way around the risky business of negotiating a phone call. "He still thinks you don't know diddly about things in this country and can barely spikka the language. We need to keep him thinking that."

"Ja, do not upset the cart of apples," Herman resigned himself to our situation. We stood up, man and boy and more than that through the confabulations of the summer, and he squinted wryly at the bunkhouse as if seeing through the walls to its inhabitants. "Sickles can wait untl morning. Let's go be Johnson family."

Just as we were about to step into the yard, however, we heard the *whump* a car makes crossing a cattle guard too fast, then the crushy sound of tires speeding on the gravel road.

Putting a protective arm to me, Herman stepped back into the shop doorway exclaiming, "Emergency, some kind? Look at it kick up the dust."

The car swept into the ranch yard past the outbuildings, scattering the chickens Smiley had neglected to put to roost yet, and easy as the toss of a hat, glided to a halt in front of the boss house.

"Emergency, nothing," I yelled. "It's Rags!"

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The purple Cadillac pulled up to the boss house and Rags climbed stiffly out from behind the wheel, still in his classy bronc riding clothes. For once he was not the absolute feature, though, because with him was a blackhaired beauty who instantly made me think of Letty, except that this one's uniform as she popped out of the convertible with a flounce and a laugh was a fringed white leather rodeo outfit like palomino troupe riders wear.

Herman and I tried not to gawk, without success. "Go on in and make yourself comfortable, darling," Rags shoed her into the house with her ditty bag. "I need to act like a rancher a little bit. Catch up with you in no time."

"Promise?" said she, the words dripping with honey.

As she sashayed on in, Jones came hustling up to greet Rags. "Got a visitor, I see. Another buckle bunny?"

"Naw, she's a performer," Rags drawled, flicking a fleck of arena dust off his lavender shirt.

"I bet," Jones said with a straight face.

we heard

“Suzie Q there,” Rags said offhandedly, “is only gonna be here overnight until we pull out for the Reno show, first thing in the morning. She’s an exhibition rider, stands up in the saddle at full gallop and that sort of thing. Came along with me because she says she needs a refreshing whiff of country air.”

Jones actually laughed. “Is that what it’s called these days?”

“Don’t have such a dirty mind, Jonesie,” Rags drawled. Herman’s expression said he wished he’d kept me in the man talk in the bunkhouse. “Saw on the way in you’re managing to put up some hay,” we heard Rags turn businesslike in his casual way. “How’d you make out on the hiring?”

“Old hands from the jungle same as ever, except for”--Jones swept a hand toward where we were standing stock-still as doorposts in the shop doorway--“our Quiz Kid stacker driver and his one-eyed grandpa from the Alps.”

“That’s different. Gives the place a little foreign flavor.” Rags cocked a look across the yard at Herman and me. “Let me take a wild guess,” he said as he came over to shake hands, “which of you is the Alpine one-eyed jack.”

“Hah! I fit that description, right up to the glass peeper,” Herman proclaimed, delivering him a handshake that made him wince. “Hey, be careful,” Rags protested good-naturedly enough, “that’s the hand I dance with.”

Pumped up as I was in other ways, I took care to shake with him almost soft as Indian style, blurring, “We saw you ride at Crow Fair.”

“Did you now.” Rags showed a long-jawed grin. “You had to look quick, the way that hoss had me coming and going.”

“Buzzard Head,” Herman exclaimed. “You rided him until the whistler.”

“I’m a fortunate old kid,” the best bronc rider on earth said modestly. “That hoss was part fish.” He initiated with his hand the way a trout would jump straight ahead, in a series. “Looked a lot harder to stick onto than he was.”

Holy wow. Hearing the inside skinny from Rags Rasmussen on a winning ride had both Herman and me listening open-mouthed.

“Well, glad to hve you on the crew,” Rags said by way of excusing himself as he turned to head for the boss house. “Got company waiting.”

I don't know how it is with everyone, but conscience could strike me like lightning. Here was my chance and it would be gone by morning. Recklessly I requested, “Uhm, can I please ask a favor? I need to make a phone call real bad. I mean, I won't get in your way with the company or anything, honest.”

That set off foreman alarms in Jones in a big way. “Hey, you, anybody who's ever been on a ranch ought to know better,” he put me in my place with a warning finger and simultaneously accused Herman with a scowl. “We can't run the damn outfit with every yayhoo in the bunkhouse trotting up here whenever he wants and tying up the phone and costing us--”

“Simmer down, Jonesie,” Rags held up a hand to quell the outburst and asked me curiously, “What's all the hurry-up on a phone call?”

“To my sick grandma.” Seeing Jones look suspiciously at Herman, supposedly my only relative, I hastily inserted, “On the other side of the family. She's in the hospital in Great Falls, from an awful operation she had to have, it's a way long story.”

Rags rubbed his jaw, a gesture I have always associated with sharpening what comes out the mouth next, as smart guys seem to do it. “Sounds like you have reason enough to get on that phone. Come on in and use the one in my office.” He held up a soothing hand to stop Jones's sputtering protest. “It's all right, Jonesie. The exception proves the rule or something like that.”

Somehow I had not anticipated this, being led in to the inner sanctum of the ranch owner; it had taken me two years to so much as creep into Wendell Williamson's office at the Double W. I felt elevated, there at the side of of the

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,

All but exploding with excitement, I managed to pass the harnessing test--I will say, avoiding a ten-mile walk back to town is no small incentive--even though in the team of workhorses I was given, I had to stretch higher than I thought possible to struggle various straps into place on the lofty back of the huge mare, Queen.

Panting as I finished up on the other workhorse, a sleepy-looking black gelding called Brandy, I couldn't help asking about the gray mare looming out of her stall like the giant mother of the horse race. "How come she's called something nice like Queen instead of Big Mama or something?"

All during my flinging on of harness and scrambling to buckle up this and that, Jones was leaning against the barn wall with his hands in his pockets, critically observing. "The owner's idea, from cards," he replied, appropriately pokerfaced. "Named her that way because he always draws to a queen, thinks it brings him luck. Worthwhile females being as scarce in poker as they are in life generally, according to him."

“Hah, he is some thinkerer,” Herman, nervous spectator, took that way of warning me not to point out half of that problem could be solved with the French bible deck in his duffel.

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

“Is Rags around?”

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

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

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

My feet barely tickled the ground, I was on such a cloud as I crossed the yard of the ranch owned by the champion saddle bronc rider of the world. Was this perfect or what? Miles better than my try at talking Gram into letting me hang on at the Double W back at the start of summer. Look at all that had happened since--in

the giddiness of the moment I folded the high points of dog bus life over the low ones--and hadn't I gained not only the black arrowhead that was big medicine, but Herman, who was something of a found treasure himself except for being a few kinds of a fugitive? Out here he was hidden away, in hobo company where nobody inquired too closely about one's past. To top it all, even if I didn't have a framed certificate to prove it like the gallant Twin Cities newspaper van driver, I now was a teamster!

Accordingly, I was half into another world, one totally without any Bible-dispensing pickpocket nor MOST WANTED posters nor the kid prison called an orphanag<sup>e</sup>--nor for that matter, Aunt Kate--when Herman gradually dropped back a few steps behind Jones's purposeful strides toward the bunkhouse and I heard a significant "Ssst."

Slowing until I was next to him, surprised at his perturbed expression, I whispered, "What's the matter?"

"We are hired, ja?" he made sure in a return whisper. "Knocked, we have got it?"

"Yeah! Out the far end!"

"Good, good. But one something is on my mind," he fretted, quite a change from his usual *Nothing to worry*.

Before Herman could go on, Jones glanced back at the pair of us. "Just to scratch my curiosity itch, where do the pair of you fetch up after haying? Where's home?"

"Oh, where we live when we're not with the Johnson family, you mean," I had to do my best to field that because Herman's face froze as lifeless as a MOST WANTED poster. "About the time school starts we'll have to go back east to--" Herman went even more rigid--"Pleasantville. It's around New York, you know. Gramps has a job there, he's the handyman at the Reader's Digest place."

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Jones chewed his mustache as he contemplated us. "So he's got a job there and a job here, does he. Lucky, lucky him." Reciting straight out of the put-upon ranch foreman's book on rules on dealing with the odder elements of a crew, he let us know, "Out here, we're not big on previous, wherever or whatever a person comes from, understand? Just so's you can do this job."

"Ja, we savvy," Herman forced out more loudly than needed. I gave him a look, wondering what could be spooking him when everything was going so slick.

Before I could nudge him aside and ask that question, Jones halted us, saying "Hold on a sec, here's somebody you might as well meet and get it out of the way." He called across the yard to a man limping along toward the chickenhouse carrying a pan of feed. "New hands, Smiley, come get acquainted."

The choreboy, as I recognized him to be and Herman was destined to find out, swerved toward us swinging a leg held out stiff. Holy wow, I thought to myself, first Louie Slewfoot and then the gimpy bus driver Hoppy, and now this lame specimen, all in one summer. Yeeps. Maybe they came in threes, like when famous people died, according to Gram.

Now came our introduction to Smiley, former rodeo clown, whose name outside the costume might as well have been Cranky As Hell. Clowns as I have known them, essential performers at rodeos in drawing bulls and mean horses away from bucked-off riders at the risk of their own lives, those entertainers in baggy overalls and whiteface makeup stayed physically fit from all the running and ducking and dodging in the soft dirt of the arena. This one had gone to flab and deeper ruin from the look of him, with a beer gut that might have looked comical in a costume but in ranch jeans hung precipitously over his belt. Facially he seemed to be sucking on something sour all the time, lips twisted and eyes narrowed. An encounter with a Brahma bull, we discovered soon enough from bunkhouse

gossip, left him with what is called a cowboy leg, crooked and off at an angle, causing that stiff-limbed gait. He seemed to resent the world of the able-bodied with every step he took. Certainly he acknowledged Herman and me with minimum enthusiasm, muttering "How ya doin'" without interest and immediately turning to Jones to demand, "When you gonna let me shoot that cow?"

"How many times do I have to tell you," the foreman gritted out, "no one is shooting any livestock on a ranch owned by Rags Rasmussen. He'll can your ass and you'll hit the skids so fast your head will swim." Herman's brow furrowed as deep as it could go as he tried to decipher all that, and I was in no position to help out. "Waltzing Matilda is only a damn cow," Jones went on as if this had been said too many times before, too. "Don't make her out to be some kind of out of this world critter that's got you buiffaloed."

"A bitch from hell, is what she is," Smiley whined. "Shat on me again." The evidence was fresh and green all over the bottom half of his pantleg. "Did her best to kick me, too. I tell you, she's a killer."

"It is your job to milk the cows, damn it," Jones declared, "and Waltzing Matilda is the best milker on the place, enough said."

Unsatisfied, Smiley scowled--a severe contradiction in terms, but that was Smiley for you--toward a pasture next to the barn where three cattle were grazing as peacefully as a Wisconsin dairy picture, or rather two of them were. The other was a bony brown and white Guernsey with jutting hipbones and a sort of outlaw longhorn look about her, even though she had been dehorned to stubs. Merely from the way she switched her tail, as if spoiling for a target to use it on, I would have bet solid money that was Waltzing Matilda. Herman, maybe from his own alien notoriety, studied the scandalous cow with interest.

"I have some actual good news for you, if you'll simmer down a minute and listen," Jones informed the would-be cow shooter, who dubiously clammed up

and waited. "You're off of grinding sickles. One Eye here will be handling that chore."

"Ja," Herman put in as if sickles were his ordinary diet. "Like in the old country."

"He's welcome to all those sonofabitching things in the whole Godblasted world as far as I'm concerned," Smiley accepted that with a fresh twist of the lips and lumbered crookedly off to the chickenhouse, bawling in a voice that had not lost any of its arena volume, "Chick, chick, chick, come and get it, you damn featherdusters."

Well, evidently not everyone thought the Diamond Buckle ranch was perfect.

Although Herman was furrowing his brow again after the encounter with Smiley, it took more than a used-up rodeo clown to dent my spirits, and I nearly trod on the foreman's heels into the bunkhouse. The one long single room was the ranch standard in those days, never any bargain, with discolored tan beaverboard walls and bare wooden floor and ironframe cots in two rows and a potbellied stove and a battered table with chairs that had rungs missing. Merely quarters for drifting laborers who came and went with the seasons, the bunkhouse for me was a palace where I'd be in with grown men, actual haymakers, a full-fledged member of the crew. Beat that, at eleven going on twelve.

Gab stopped as the foreman stepped in, the hoboos apparently not short of conversation anytime and anywhere. As Herman and I closely followed Jones in, I looked around real quick in concern about the bunk situation, and saw there were two empty ones off in a corner. Highpockets told me simply with the shift of his eyes in that direction that he had saved those for us, and we lost no time in unrolling our bedrolls and chucking the duffel out of the way.

“We’ll get going on the machinery pretty quick, the mowers and stacker can be greased up and the rakes can have new teeth put in, any fixup you see that needs doing,” the foreman was addressing us all. “First order of business, though, is right here.” Reaching into his hip pocket, he began handing out small leather belts of a kind Herman and I alone recognized.

“What’s these for?” Peerless asked suspiciously, turning his over like it was a snare of some sort.

“Those beat-up lids of yours,” Jones made plain with a tap to his own trim Stetson. “Diamond Buckle hatbands. The owner thinks these’ll add a bit of style, he’s big on that. Give you the feeling of working on a first-class place.”

There was a general moment of uncertainty, going back to the rants in the hobo jungle about the rich with their heel in the face of the poor. This was a step up from that, for sure, but even so it took some thinking about wearing another man’s brand on yourself.

“Might as well tell you the rest now that you’re signed on,” the foreman said into the general silence. “It’s Rags Rasmussen that owns this spread. World champion bronc rider, got the diamond belt buckle to prove it. Heard of him, haven’t you?” he appealed to Highpockets.

“More or less,” Highpockets squared himself up as the Big Ole for the hobo contingent. “We don’t exactly ride in the same fashion, boxcars instead of broncoes.”

Peerless couldn’t keep from harping. “If I had any kind of a diamond and this Rasmussen had a feather up his butt, we’d both be tickled.”

“You’re bellyaching over nothing,” Highpockets shut him down. “If you’d ridden as many killer horses as that man must’ve, you might have something to show for it, too.” He returned his attention to Jones. “We can maybe stand a little fancying up, if that’s all there is to it,” he decided for the hobo group after a glance

around at how the hatbands were being received. Midnight Frankie was scratching the back of the clasp of his with a jackknife to see if it was real silver. "Imagine, the head that wears the crown sharing a touch of it," Shakespeare said, installing his band on a hat that had seen thousands of suns and the grime of countless fields. Pooch watched to see that it was all right to put his on. Harv pondered his, taking no account of what anyone else was doing, then shined the buckle up on his sleeve and fitted the band on. With ours, Herman and I had no qualms about dressing up our battered Stetsons, proud to share the Diamond Buckle, even it was the size of a locket. All we lacked now was the owner of that championship brand, and of the hay land that would give us work and wages and withdrawal from the treacherous world for the rest of the summer.

"All right, let's get to work," Jones led the way out of the bunkhouse, the crew so various in so many other ways in hatbanded unison as we followed him across the yard toward the machine shed, a structure open on one side so the workhorses could be backed in to the tongues of the mowers and dump rakes and buckrakes and hooked up right there under shelter, a perfect setup most ranches were too lazy to do and left the haying equipment scattered around to rust in the weather. Let's hear it for the Diamond Buckle, my head sang with the help of my hatband. I had to stop myself from skipping, everything in me going pitty-pat about this haymaking dream come true.

Until Herman once again dropped back, motioning me to come close enough for a whisper. When I did, he made my heart stop by asking:

"Donny? What are sickles?"

“They’re the thingers you cut hay with!” I had trouble keeping my voice down when I really wanted to screech, *“Fuck and phooey, Herman, you have to know what sickles are or we’re fired and kicked off the ranch to walk to town and right back to where we started in the hobo jungle, only worse off because Highpockets and the others aren’t there to stick up for us and that deputy sheriff could come back and recognize you from a poster and then we’re sunk.”*

Instead, I sort of hissed desperately, “Didn’t you have sickles of some kind in Ger--the old country?”

His face lit up. “Scythes, you mean, I betcha.” He gestured as if swinging that oldfangled curved implement Father Time is always carrying in cartoons.

“No, no!” I bleated. “Nobody has used those since the Pilgrims or somebody. Sickles, see, go in mowing machines,” I tried frantically to assemble an explanation of modern haying, “and cut back and forth like crazy when the horses pull the mowers, and there’s all these teeth that need sharpening a couple of times a day and that’s what you’re supposed to do, what they call riding the stone.”

"Sorry as all git out"--Herman squinted, trying to imagine--"but riding some kind of rock, I do not savvy."

"It's a *grindstone*, get it?" I practically chewed the words up for him. "There's a seat on it and you sit there and pedal it like you would a bicycle and it makes the stone go around fast and--"

I was growing a little hysterical, trying to conduct a lesson in sickle sharpening, with Herman not comprehending that his chore was the absolutely essential first task in haying. As sure as Morphy's law, the heavy green hay would clog the mowing machines if the teeth were dull when Peerless and Midnight Frankie pulled in to the first field to start cutting, and we'd be hoofing it back to town on that long road, right back to being on the run from WANTED posters and orphanage nightmares. And wouldn't you know, with the rest of the crew busy on their machinery with grease guns and oil cans and general fixing up, now here came Jones to deal with us.

"One Eye," the foreman was in his usual hurry, "let's get you squared away at the blacksmith shop so you can start right in on the sickles." As for me, he jerked his head toward the towering wooden framework of the stacker parked behind the shed. "I guess you know where you're headed. Give all those pulleys a helluva good oiling."

"Uhm, I'll get right at it," I claimed, not moving an inch. "Maybe it'd be a good thing for me to stick with Gramps a little bit while you get him started, though? To, ah, translate, sort of."

"Come on, the both of you," Jones said as if it was his own idea, "I don't have time to parley voo in some other lingo." He set off in his bustling stride toward a low old log building near the barn. Trailing him just out of his hearing, I managed to whisper to Herman to simply watch me when we reached there.

wrinkled  
up

The way things were done in haying season, the grindstone had been moved out of the inside of the shop into the big open doorway for space to handle the sickles, which were nearly as long as a man is tall. I could tell Herman caught on to this part of it quick enough as I hopped into the seat and with false enthusiasm--“Oh man, I wish we could trade jobs, Gramps!”--pedaled madly to set the wheel-like grindstone spinning at top speed. I could also see it dawning on him that the wicked-looking limber spans of metal propped against the wall in the cluttered blacksmith shop, each with treacherous teeth from end to end presenting countless chances to cut a finger off, must be the sickles, and he had no idea in this world how to handle the dangerous objects.

Jones noticed his hesitation, too. “This is the sort of thing you did in the old country, right? Up there in the yodeleer meadows?”

“Ja. sure. Might be rusty some, like the siskles--”

“Sickles, Gramps, rhymes with tickles.” I hopped off the grindstone seat and behind Jones’s back pantomimed to the best of my ability grabbing a sickle from the back by the bar that the teeth jutted from and carrying it the do-or-die way a tightrope walker uses a pole to keep his balance.

“Hah,” Herman said as he gingerly approached the sickles and picked up one the excruciatingly careful way I’d shown, “we call them different in Switzerland, got mixed up for one moment.”

Jones wisely backed away, as I did, with Herman advancing to the grindstone like a very shaky tightrope walker indeed, long row of steel teeth lethal as spearpoints wobbling in front of him. “Get yourself unmixed in a hurry and sharpen the bejesus out of the first pair of those,” Jones directed, “so I can send the mower guys out to the field. And don’t round off the goddamn points, like Smiley tends to do. It wears them down too fast.” The foreman whirled to go, impatiently glancing over his shoulder at me. “That stacker is still waiting.”

back and weak mind wisecrack. Then, slowly he stepped forward as if to take the world on his shoulders. "I suppose that'd be me. Up top of that Gibraltar."

The foreman sized him up as if he was too good to be true. "You've stacked hay before?"

"Tons of it."

Inasmuch as any haystack held several tons, that was not as impressive as it might have been. But seeing no chance of a miraculous stack man materializing among the rest of us, the foreman made up his mind. "Well. hell, you look the part anyhow. What's your name?"

"Harv."

The foreman waited, then gave up. "If that's the way you want it, I guess I can stand the suspense until your first paycheck to find out if that's a first name or a last or what you call yourself when the moon is full." The wisp of a smile appeared under his mustache again. "Who am I to talk? I go by Jones myself, one hundred percent." Even to the hobo nation that mocked society by calling itself the Johnson family, going through life as just a Jones sounded like quite a dare, but the man by the fire wore the moniker with bulldog authority.

With that out of the way, Jones <sup>as he now was firmly established</sup> scanned the collection of ragtag individuals beyond Harv, his gaze passing me--did he show a flicker of interest at how I was all but falling out of my shoes with eagerness?--as he briskly ticked off on his fingers, "Now I need two mower men and a couple of buckrakers and dump rakers each and a scatter raker. Any of you balls of fire ambitious enough some for that?"

"Bucking," Highpockets got his bid in. Followed by Peerless Peterson: "I can handle a mower team if they ain't runaways."

The Jersey Mosquito laid his claim. "Maybe it don't look it, but I c'n still climb onto a rake seat." Pooch mustered, "Damn straight. Me, too." Midnight

cut

Frankie chose driving a mowing machine and Fingy the simpler task of riding a dump rake, while Shakespeare, the last person I would have picked out as a teamster, announced he was a buckraking fool. So tense that my skin felt tight, I prepared to spring up the instant when the man doing the hiring would realize he was one haymaker short and announce he lastly required a stacker team driver.

Instead came the awful words, "Good enough. That finishes the crew, so let's get a move on. The pickup's parked up the road," Jones gestured beyond the brush of the hobo jungle. "Come on up when you've got your bindles together and I'll pull out the daybook to talk wages and catch whatever you're using for names. Soon as we're squared away on that, we'll go make hay."

As Highpockets and Harv and the others started making their farewells to Oscar the Swede and Snuffy and Overland Pete and Bughouse Louie and the California Kid and the others from the last bus who would wait for other haying jobs to come along, I turned as numb as a cigar store Indian. This was clearly inconceivable, that a Big Hole horse outfit would not use a teamster but some automotive monstrosity like a Power Wagon on the stacker. Yet it all too evidently was about to occur, that bright-as-a-new-penny Jones was committing the same kind of sin against common sense as dumb Sparrowhead on the Double W. Some lofty writer who probably had never held an honest job once claimed that the ability to grapple with two contrary facts at the same time was the mark of higher intelligence, but I must not have been marked that way. Trying to do so only made my head swim.

Seeing how stricken I looked, Herman leaned down anxiously telling me there were other ranches, nothing to worry, we would be haymakers yet somewheres.

Then I glimpsed it when the foreman stopped to check on something with Highpockets and turned his head a certain way, the wink of morning light as the sun caught the small silvery clasp, not much bigger than a locket but distinct as anything, that held his fancy hatband together.

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

"Hah? How?"

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

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

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

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

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

Thinking over what I'd reeled off, he pushed his pearl-gray Stetson toward the back of his head and faced Herman, who was trying to encourage our way onto the crew with nods and shrugs and grins while keeping a silence and leaving things

hat  
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to me. "Your boy here makes a pretty good argument for you. It's not necessarily nutty to have somebody else drive the stacker team and free me up for whatever the hell else happens. You do look like you've had experience of some kind"--maybe too much experience, from his tone as he eyed Herman's lined face and general muss from sleeping in a culvert--"but where'd you last do your teamstering?"

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

"Yeah?" Jones laughed. "You're the horseman of the family?"

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

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

"Just how old does that make you as we're standing here on the green earth?"

I was perpetually being told I was big for my age. Wasn't it logical for that number to grow to catch up with the rest of me, in this instance? "Thirteen," I said. He looked skeptical. "My next birthday." The next after that, at least. An approximation.

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

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

The foreman still hesitated "Nothing against you, but you're still just a kid, and you can't have been around workhorses any too many years, whatever you say."

"Make you a deal," I scrambled to come up with. "If I can't harness a team the way you like, as fast as anybody else on the place, and show you I can handle the reins, you can fire me right away and we'll walk back to town."

The man called Jones settled his hat again and perhaps his mind. "Now you're talking about something. I could stand that kind of guarantee on this whole damn crew--these hoboes are sometimes the teamsters they say they are and sometimes not. You're on. Toss your stuff on the pickup and I'll test you out soon as we're at the ranch."

He started to the cab of the pickup for his daybook as Highpockets and Harv and the others emerged from the kip in the brush swinging their bindles and bedrolls at their sides. "One more thing," I said quick, stopping him in mid-reach for the door handle. "My grandfather has to come with me. Watch out for me and so on. I'm a, you know, minor."

"Damn it, you're going to have me hiring the whole hobo jungle before you're done." He thought for a second. "All there'd be is grinding sickles and mending broke-down stuff, sort of second fiddle to the choreboy. Not much of a job, general handyman is what it amounts to."

It was going to take some serious stretching, but I was about to try to make the case that Herman, who never in his life had been on a ranch outside the Germanic pages of Karl May, could somehow be generally handy, when he startled us both with the exclamation "Sickles!" and gave the hiring foreman the thumb and finger OK sign. "Ho ho, handled hundreds sickles in the old country."

Both the foreman and I drew back our heads to look at Herman in a new way, Jones eyeing him now him with curiosity or suspicion or both. "I thought your grandkid here did the talking for you. That sounded like you found your tongue all of a sudden."



"I talk broken, but apprehend some, the English," Herman said blandly.

I pitched in, "He means he pretty much savvies what you're saying."

"That's welcome news." He looked hard at me and then at Herman. "You can talk American, but he can't? How's that come to be?"

"My granddad hasn't been here that long from the old country," I made up offhandedly. I still was worried about Herman generally at large on a ranch. "There's a little something maybe you better know," I dropped my voice, "he needs to keep out of the way of the livestock. See, he doesn't speak enough of our language for the horses to understand him, just for instance."

"What old country is that, anyway?" Jones demanded. "I'd have thought Giddyup and Whoa were pretty much the same anywhere."

"Switzerland," I chose willy-nilly out of Hertman's world of toast maps, because it was neither Germany nor Holland of the world of WANTED posters.

"No hooey? A yodeleer, is he?" The foreman seemed entertained by the idea, insofar as I could tell past his mustache. "All right, you're both hired, long enough to prove yourselves, anyhow. Let's get you down in the daybook." He reached into the seat of the pickup for a big ledger. "Start with you, teamster whiz. You're--?"

"Snag." I bared the sharp stump at him in what I hoped was a grin.

His mouth twitched. "When you're not being a knight of the road."

"Scotty." He waited for more and I produced, "Scotty Schneider."

With a sense of wonder or something very much like it, I saw that instant new name go into ink as he wrote it down. "And what's his?"

"Uh, Gramps."

"You got to do better than that."

"Fritz Schneider, I am," Herman spoke up, and if I kept a straight face, I don't know how.

“There, you’re both on the payroll,” the foreman jotted down Herman’s alias or whatever it was to join mine. Done with us at last, he turned to do the same for the rest of the crew waiting in curiosity at the rear of the pickup, first sorting out me and Herman. “Youth and beauty up front with me. The rest of you, dump your plunder in back and jump in.”

“That was a good think by you,” Herman murmured as we settled into the pickup seat to wait for our new employer. “Some Swiss speak German.”

“They do? I figured they talked Switzer or something. Whoo, that was lucky.”

“Luck is the star we steer by,” he invoked for the how manyeth time. I was in agreement for once.

“You know what, Herman?” My mood was so high it was a wonder my head wasn’t hitting the roof of the pickup. “We’ve maybe got it knocked, once and for all.”

“Donny, you are extra happy. These jobs are that good?”

“Didn’t you see the clasp in his hatband? The livestock brand?”

The French salute, meaning No.

“It’s the Diamond Buckle. Guess who owns the ranch.”

"Then we have a lot in common," Harv drawled, proffering a hand even larger than Herman's outsize mitt.

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

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

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

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

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

After that evident truth, he turned reflective again.

2 a/c

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The atmosphere around the campfire changed like a gun had gone off. Certain hoboes evaporated into the willow thicket on the river bank, the others sitting up rigid in a collective stare toward the road, where a black-and-white patrol car with a big star on the door luminescent in the moonlit night was pulling up. Harv stayed as he was, as though none of this turn of events applied to him, and

Herman and I caught up in his example, whether or not we should have taken to the brush.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shut your flytrap," Highpockets snapped at him, "until we see what this is about. You go poking Johnny Law like that and he's likely to poke back with a billy club, you ought to have learned that by now."

The circle around the campfire went tensely silent as he checked from man to man, "Anybody else the bloodhounds might be after, for anything? No? Let's make sure or we're all in for it." On one side of me, Harv looked on innocently, and on the other, Herman somehow was an equal picture of guiltlessness. For my part, I had to sit tight and try not to appear as guilty as I felt about landing the pair of us in this fix, besides associating us with a jailbreaker of Harv's caliber. Luckily, Herman's whisper put some backbone in me. "Remember, big medicine you have. Makes you brave." Newly conscious of the arrowhead and whatever power it carried, there next to my heart, I managed to guilelessly meet Highpockets' eyes as his gaze swept over the three of us, lingered, then moved on.

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

The deputy and Highpockets acknowledged each other by name as the local lawman stepped into the circle of light cast by the campfire. They did not shake hands, which would not have sat well with either of their consituencies. This officer of the law was half again bigger than Harv's banty-size Glasgow nemesis, somewhat beefy the way people get from sitting behind a desk too much, but without that air of throwing his weight around unnecessarily. He did not look overly threatening except for the pistol riding on his hip. That six-shooting symbol of authority, however, was more than enough to draw resentment, loathing, hatred

in some cases, from men harried first by railroad bulls and then the lawmen of communities that wanted them gone the minute their labor was no longer needed. The shift of mood in the encampment was like a chilly wind through a door blown open.

“Only checking to make sure you boys are comfortable,” Mallory spoke directly to Highpockets but all of us were meant to hear. He maybe had some Butte in him, I guessed, the way his chin lifted a little when he spoke to a person, just that inch to let the other know he had adjusted his aim.

“There ain’t nothing like it, bedroom of stars and the moon for your blanket,” Skeeter contributed every so casually, as Peerless spat into the fire again. “Care to kip with us for the thrill of it all?”

“I think I heard a feather bed call my name,” Mallory chose to joke in return with a hand cupped to his ear. No one laughed. Heaving a sigh, the deputy got down to business. “Speaking of relaxation, maybe it’d help everyone’s mood to know I’m only coming back from a hearing at the county courthouse over in Dillon, not on the lookout for anyone in particular. But,” he paused significantly, “I figured I’d stop by Highpockets’ old stomping grounds here just to keep myself up to date. Any new faces I ought to be acquainted with, on the odd chance they’d show up in town on Saturday night and I wouldn’t recognize them as haymakers instead of plain old drunks?”

Several of the hoboes who were already at the kip when our bus bunch arrived grudgingly owned up to being first-timers in Big Hole haying. The deputy made a mental note of each, then raised his eyebrows as he came to Harv and Herman and me. Harv merely nodded civilly to him. I was tongue-tied, and Herman did not want to sound the least bit German. In these circumstances, muteness could be construed as guilt--we certainly had a nearly overflowing

accumulation of that among the three of us--and just as the silence was building too deep, Highpockets stepped in.

"Snag and his gramps there, One Eye, have been with us since we were sugaring, over by Glendive. The big fella, too. They're jake."

"If you say so, Pockets." The deputy apparently could not help wondering about me, though. "Say there, Moses in the bullrushes. You're sort of young to be hitting the road like this. What brings you to hay country?"

"My s-s-summer vacation. From school."

"Some vacation." Mallory was growing more curious, the audience around the campfire restless with his lingering presence. Highpockets was looking concerned. "These your folks here," the deputy persisted, "this pair of specimens?"

Herman's hand firmed on mine, helping to take the quiver out of my voice. "You guessed it. My Gramps, here, and my, uh--"

"Cousin," said Harv offhandedly. "First cousin," he glanced at the deputy sheriff barely an instant as if that was the issue.

Mallory's jaw came up an inch, but he did not challenge Harv's version of family life. He turned to Herman, studying the ruined side of face where the eye had been and the facial wrinkles that looked deeper than ever in the flicker of the firelight. "Must be nice to have a helper in raising the youngster out in the rough like this, huh, oldtimer?" his question was not without sympathy.

Giving the lawman a sad sweet smile, Herman uttered "Ja," which for once I was really glad sounded close enough to good old American "Yeah."

"Well, I've seen worse bunches of renegades," the deputy tried joking again, making a move toward leaving but not before a conciliatory nod to Highpockets and a general one to the rest of us. "Just don't tear the town up on Saturday night and you won't see my smiling face again."

~~A~~ —————

“Herman?” My voice sounded hollow in the confine of the culvert where we were stretched feet to feet. “Do you think that deputy sheriff believed Harv?”

“Does not matter much,” he too sounded like he was at the bottom of a well. “Mister Deputy made believe he did. Sometimes make-believe is as good as belief, hah?” I heard him shift inch by inch to try and get anywhere near comfortable on the corrugated metal, the bedrolls literally saving our skins. “Better catch winks, Donny. Tomorrow might be big day.”

They all were big days, in the Big Hole. And I was the first to see this one come, at least as represented in human form.

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

~~Stetson?~~

I was relieving myself when a bowlegged man of medium size came thrashing through the willows, swearing impressively, right into the path of what I was at. He cut a quick detour, giving me an annoyed look. "Hey, PeeWee. Watch where you're aiming that thing."

"Oops, sorry."

Still swearing enough to cause thunder, he plowed on through the brush toward the encampment, leaving me red with embarrassment, but what was worse, slapped with that tag. There it was. PeeWee, peeing in wee fashion in the bushes, homeless as a tumbleweed. Nowhere near making Believe It Or Not! but already dubbed into the funnies. My shameful fallen state in life, a tramp, a shrimpy one at that.

No, damn it, a hobo. A haymaker, I resolved nearly to my bursting point, if anyone would just let me. Buttoning up quickly, on a hunch I set off after the visitor crashing his way toward the campfire.

As he burst through the brush into the clearing with me close behind, the tandem of us drawing the attention of the entire kip, I saw he was wearing good but not fancy cowboy boots and a stockman Stetson with a tooled leather hatband complete with a miniature clasp. He probably was around forty years old, although his brown soup-strainer mustache was tinged with gray. Halting on the opposite side of the campfire from where Highpockets and Harv and others were lining up for Midnight Frankie's version of breakfast, he held his palms toward the blaze as if needing to take the chill off. "Morning, men."

"We can agree with both of those," Highpockets acknowledged, the rest of the hoboos risking no commitment beyond silent nods. "What's on your mind otherwise?"

"Putting up hay fast and furious, what the hell else?"

By now Herman had silently joined me, ruddy from the cold water of the river and with his glass eye in and his eyeglasses on. I can't say he looked like a new person, but at least he looked like the old Herman the German, the one ready to hop a bus for the Promised Land somewhere south of the moon and north of Hell. His strong hand on my shoulder lent support as we found a place in the growing circle of hoboes crowding around to hear what came next from the man warming himself by the fire.

Identifying himself as foreman on a ranch plentiful with those Big Hole hayfields, the new arrival glanced around the circle, right over me and past Herman, sorting faces with his quick eyes.

"I'm hoping some of you are the genuine haymaking article, unlike your pals next door," he jerked his head in disgust toward some kip farther up the river. "They don't want to hear about anything but tractors and power mowers. You'd think they were all mechanical geniuses." He paused, studying the waiting faces more intently. "What I'm saying, we're still a horse outfit."

Can a person jump for joy standing still? Not really. But his words set off that kind of upspring of elation in me. At last! Surely an outfit like that would need a stacker team driver, wouldn't it? If only one of the older hoboes didn't beat me out for the job. In an onrush of anxiety at that and wild with desire at the same time, I seesawed so nervously that Herman couldn't help but notice my agitation and whispered, "Stand steady as a soldier, Donny."

"We don't have anything in particular against horses so long as they don't have anything against us," Highpockets was saying. "Am I right, boys?" Amid answers such as "Pretty much" and "more or less," Peerless took care to specify, "Although we ain't no bronco busters, either."

"Don't worry, that's taken care of," the ghost of a smile visited under the foreman's mustache. "Here's the setup," he brusquely went on. "The spread I

work for used to be the Hashknife--maybe some of you put in some time there?" On our side of the campfire, someone muttered, "That sure as hell fit the grub there. All knife, no hash."

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

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

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

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

"Stack man."

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

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

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

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

"Shh. Watch Harv."

Without twitching a muscle, the fugitive from the Wolf Point stony lonesome still seemed to be studying the first pronouncement, before the strong

To my relief and no doubt Herman's, the other hoboes took his lead, everyone settling in for the ride, which may have looked short on the map but wound along the twisty river which would head one direction and then another, with timbered mountains hemming it in so close it was hard to see the sky. I began to wonder about this route that hardly seemed to rate being marked in red on a map. Why were there no towns? Or ranches? A forest ranger station, even. Out there in back road nowhere, I grew more jittery as every riverbend curve threatened the Greyhound's groaning springs and Hoppy's straining grapple with the steering wheel, the water always right down there waiting for a bus to capsize upside down.

Soon enough, I had something else to worry about. When a swerve around a pothole the size of a washtub swayed Herman halfway into my seat, he glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then took me by the ear again, this time with a harder pinch. His whisper was all that much sharper, too. "Why am I grossvader all the sudden?"

Uh oh. I didn't have to understand German to know his meaning and that he was put out about being designated grandfather.

"It's to cover our tracks," I sped into rapid-fire explanation as low as I could whisper. "See, this way, if anybody ever picks up our trail and starts nosing around, you're not on the spot for being my great-uncle, like they're looking for, you're just my grandpa in the natural order of things." Herman's deep frown did not move a muscle. Casting around for anything that might thaw him, I invoked the Apache method or what I hoped might be. "I bet Winnetou did this all the time, scrubbing out his trail with a batch of sagebrush or something, so his enemy couldn't run him down. That's all we're doing, you being the grossfather is just our, uh, scrub brush, sort of."

Herman did not buy my interpretation entirely, his grip on my ear not letting up. "Your eye-dea, this Wisdom bus is," he cast a dubious look around at our fellow passengers. "Now look who we are with, one step from bums."

"Two," I said, wincing from his hold on me. "Tramps are in between, remember."

He still didn't relent. "What is this Johnsons family?"

I took a guess. "Maybe it means all the hoboes, sort of like a tribe?" This time I harked back to Crow Fair. "Like the Indians we saw in the camp there, but without tepees or braids or moccasins--"

"No fancy dancing, I betcha, either," he said, pretty sarcastic for him.

"Herman, listen," I persevered, ear pinch or no ear pinch, "like it or not, we have to stick with these guys. Think about it, OK?" I managed to flash the hobo sign for that. "You can tell by looking they aren't ever going to turn you in, are they. They've got their own reasons to avoid the cops."

"Ja, I got that feeling," he conceded, finally relinquishng my earlobe. His murmur seemingly from the bottom of his soul surrendered further. "You are total dead sure about this, getting us into this Johnsons family?"

"Sure I'm sure. What else are we going to do, be on our own while you stick out all over Montana like a sore thumb and somebody recognizes you from that WANTED poster in a post office or someplace and next thing we know, you're headed for prison and I'm slapbang into that orphanage in Butte, right?"

Wrinkled in concentration as he did think things over, Herman followed my logic around all the corners he could, finally shaking his head. "If you say so, Donny. I don't got a better eye-dea." He pressed against his seatback as if bracing himself. "Let's go be hoboes, Gramps will live and learn."

No sooner had our whispered conversation ended than a shout from down the aisle roused the Jersey Mosquito, sitting across from us. "Hey, Skeeter, you old skinflint, pass the bugle," the Johnson family member known as Peerless Peterson, if I remembered the roll call right, piped up, spitting a tobacco plug onto the floor evidently to clear his mouth.

Not for the purpose it sounded like, though. "I'm the man what can, ye damn moocher," Skeeter yipped back, but instead of a musical instrument fumbled out from somewhere something long and slim wrapped in a paper bag. Seeing me onlooking in confusion, Skeeter paused to explain, "Hoppy ain't supposed to see any bottles on the bus. This way, he don't. Right, Hop?"

"You have got the only Greyhound driver with blinders on," Hoppy agreed to that, perilously close to the truth according to the way he hunched over the wheel to peer fixedly through the windshield as the bus shimmied on the washboard road.

Skeeter, proper host, was screwing the top off the hidden bottle when he noticed Herman craning over in curiosity along with me. "Hey there, One Eye, you want a swig? This is giggle juice you don't get just any old where, it's--"

"Wait, don't tell him," I jumped in barely in time. "He'll tell you."

Herman received the sacked bottle from the surprised Skeeter, nodded his thanks, tipped it up like sounding the bugle charge, and chugged enough of a drink to swirl in his mouth good and plenty. He swallowed as if the contents were tough going down, but when he got his voice, he announced without a shade of a doubt:

"Fruit wine, plenty fermented. Wild Irish Rose, I betcha."

"Damned if he ain't right," Skeeter said, popeyed with awe. "How'd ye do that? Boys, we got a miracle worker here. At the hooch store I asked for Rosie in a skirt," he displayed the bagged bottle Herman had without hesitation handed back to him, "I was gonna have some fun with you fellas whose tongues has been

worked to leather by too much Thunderbird. But One Eye nailed it first taste. Beat that!"

Highpockets, who didn't seem to miss anything, shifted in his seat and pinned a penetrating look on me. "What's more, his English improves around a bottle, eh? Usually that operates the other way."

"Yeah, well,"--I didn't have time think up any other explanation for Herman's tasting talent as displayed in *The Schooner* and now in these circumstances, so a sample of the actual story had to serve; he himself still had his mouth busy trying to rid it of the flavor of Wild Irish Rose--"in the old country he worked for a while in one of those places where they make beer, and that was part of his job, guzzling all the other beers to see how those stacked up against theirs."

"That's the job I want in the next life," Fingy was heard from, clasping his hand and a half in prayer.

General acclamation followed that, along with the bottle passing to ready volunteers turning bugler until it ran dry. I sat back to collect myself, the already more than full day was winding to somewhere along a tightrope-wide back road pressing in on me, filling me with that feeling of being transported in more ways than one. This backroad trip was not the longest of my life, yet was taking me farther than I ever dreamed. Letty's inscription in the autograph book promised *Life is a zigzag journey*, and as she said, truer words were never. By now Manitowoc, the Crow rodeo grounds, the marooned time at Old Faithful, scary Butte, each and every one was in the memory book in my head as well as the one in my pocket, while an unforeseen chapter waited ahead. On the one hand, what was happening now tingled in me as a kind of off-kilter excitement, similar to that dreamy daze between sleep and waking in the morning, when what is real and what the mind has manufactured in the night are not clearly divided. At this point, Gram

that  
winds →

would have told me not to get red in the head and over-imagine things, but this last bus carrying Herman and me and our rough-and-ready gang of new companions inevitably made my mind fly around. Here we were, on a journey my imagination couldn't resist playing with, like being on a stagecoach--if the dog bus didn't qualify sufficiently as the modern version, the Rocky Mountain Stage Line and Postal Courier surely did--packed with the equivalent of owlhoots, the roamers and ramblers, taking new names for themselves as they pleased, out to experience everything of the West.

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

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

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

“Knife fight.”

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

“Gramps says to tell you our last name is Schneider, not that it counts for anything in the here and now, we savvy. But he wants you to know schneider

means tailor in the old country, so all he did was cut the other guy some new buttonholes. In his hide.”

The whole busload roared approval of that description, which no doubt went straight into hobo lingo. Relieved, I sat back, surreptitiously stroking the medicine pouch beneath my shirt, thanking the arrowhead for the luck of encountering Mae and Joe and the generous doctor and their fortunate name, while Herman accepted accolades for the Schneider tale with a grin halfway back to Germany.

Things settled down then, the passengers into general gab with each other, trading gripes about railroad bulls who patrolled the switchyards like it was a sin to climb onto a perfectly inviting empty boxcar and countless other indignities the Johnson family had to suffer. I started to relax somewhat, deciding maybe the bus was not going to topple into the river and drown us just yet, although I did not quit stroking the arrowhead every little while to ward that off. But then, as I kept catching snatches of conversation as the Jersey Mosquito yakkety-yakked with Fingy while Overland Pete swapped observations on humanity with Oscar the Swede, a certain feeling came over me. It was unmistakable, and it had me clasping what lay half forgotten in my coat pocket as if it were a precious rediscovery. I had hit the jackpot, I realized. An entire busload of all kinds, here for the taking with a Kwik Klik.

Excitedly I nudged Herman, drawing a grunt and an inquisitive look. “You know what?” I said close to his ear, resisting the urge to grab it as he had grabbed mine. “I need to get these guys in the autograph book. Nobody else has nLon anything like them.”

“Except maybe for racehorses,” he spiked that with a guttural laugh. “Ja, fill your book with odd Johnsons.” He yawned, the Wild Irish Rose perhaps

names

having its effect. "Busy day. While you are gitting them to write, I am going to catch winks."

I still don't know how he could do it, popping off to sleep like that aboard a bus snorting its exhaust and rattling like crazy on the washboard road, but there he went, soundly slumbering by the time I had my pen and album ready and intentions sorted out.

I had brains enough to start with Highpockets, and staggered my way down the aisle to his front seat as the bus bucked along. Ordinarily nothing seemed to surprise him, but this did. He eyed the white album none too trustfully as I squatted by him and reeled off my request known by heart. "If I was to dab something in for you," he questioned, "how would you want it signed?"

"Just with, you know, your moniker." Then I got inspired. "How about *Highpockets, on the last bus to Wisdom.*"

"Fair enough." He took the Kwik Klik and as I had hoped, made a little music on the page.

*There's a land somewhere  
so pretty and fair,  
with rivers of milk and shores of jelly,  
where every man has a millionaire belly.*

"There you go, the hobo anthem, verse number about a hundred and fifty probably," he loosened up into almost a smile as he shifted the album back to me.

"It's nice. I like it." Now I had to try Bughouse Louie sitting next to him, who had been feigning disinterest all the while Highpockets was writng. First, though, I needed my curiosity satisfied. "Can I ask you something?" I stuck with Highpockets. "How come you and the other ho--haymakers wait to take the last bus?"

"I might ask you and One Eye the same," he said mildly, but still giving my heart a flutter as the MOST WANTED poster loomed into the picture. "But I won't."

He leaned back, his big frame squashing the seatback cushion, as he scanned the hard-used and unmaintained interior of the bus, which in that respect matched its exterior, with the practiced eye of a lifetime traveler. "Not exactly soft, swift, and smooth, is it, going by dog in the last of the pack." The bus shuddered across the metal rails of a stock crossing in answer. "But the reason we hold off," he resumed, "to catch this old crate on its last run is because that puts us past the green hay, when ranchers who never learn any better start mowing too soon and try to stack the cut before it dries like it ought to. Haying is tough enough without the stuff being heavy and slippery," he glanced at me to see if I knew that, which I did.

"Uh-huh, real smart," I confirmed, thinking past that seasonal maneuver to the larger matter of Wisdom and the Big Hole and the reputation as a basin of prosperity. "But don't any of you ever, ah, hole up there? I mean, stick around in jobs besides haying?"

Highpockets emphatically shook his head. "Hoboes don't stick," he put it in simplest terms. "We're not barnacles."

Bughouse Louie backed that with a smile that displayed gums instead of teeth. "I sure ain't."

Their point fully made, I thanked the one for honoring my album and was about to ask the other to do the same when I was flatly turned down. "Can't possibly," Bughouse Louie cramped a hand to show me. "Got the arthritics."

Disappointed but expressing my sympathy, I moved on from what would have been that terrific name on the page to someone I figured would have no such trouble wielding a pen, the plain-looking hobo called Shakespeare. By appearance, he might have been anything from a bank teller to an actual whey-faced minister,

but for his hat stained dark from sweat and the faded gray Texas tux work shirt. Accepting the album as if by natural right, he scanned the verse Highpockets had written and sniffed, "Pockets sticks to the tried and true." Not him, according to the way he waved the pen over the waiting page while he thought, his lips moving, straining his brain from the looks of it. Then when he had the rhyme or rhythm or something, he wrote lines like a man possessed.

*The king called for his fiddlers three,*

*He bade them, Play for me your fiddle-diddle-dee.*

*The fiddlers cried, Oh no, sire, not we!*

*The queen giggled and said, They only fiddle that with me.*

*--an original rime by*

*Shakespeare*

Sort of dirty though that seemed to me, I minded my manners and thanked its author--you don't get the name Shakespeare in an autograph book just any day-- and let the sway of the bus carry me to the next candidate along the row, Overland Pete. Seeing me coming with the Kwik Klik and the open album, he shook a hand as pitiful looking as Bughouse Louie's. "I'll pass. Arthritis is acting up something fierce."

Huh. I had never heard of an epidemic of that, but it seemed to be hitting half the people on the bus. Before I could choose my next candidate, I heard an urgent "Psst." The Jersey Mosquito several seats back crooked a finger at me.

When I went and knelt by him, he brought his face of crinkles and wrinkles down almost to mine to confide, "Ye want to be a leetle keerful with that book of yours, Snag. The learnin' of some of the boys didn't happen to have readin' and writin' in it."

"I'm sorry," my face flamed. "I should have thought of that. B-but I really want to get anybody I can."



“Then all’s you need to do is wait till payday and keep an eye out then,” the man known as Skeeter counseled. “Them that takes their wages in hard money prob’ly can’t write their nLon to endorse a check. The rest of us is regular scholars enough to cash our skookum paper right there in The Watering Hole, that’s the bar in town. More eefficient that way.”

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

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

*When you take a look in your memory book*

*Here you will find the lasting kind,*

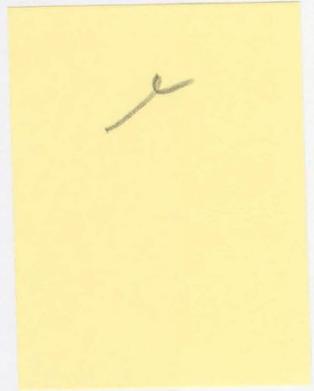
*Old rhymes and new, life in review,*

*Roses in the snow of long ago.*

“Wow, that’s pretty nice,” I said when the final version stood out on the album page in Herman’s scrawly handwriting, “although I’m not sure if I get it all.”

name

“Nothing to worry, you will someday.” He stretched from the exertions of this day, but grinning as he did so. “Last bus is gitting somewheres at last. “See, looking more like a basin,” he drew my attention to the gradual withdrawal of the mountains, making way for the wide-open valley ahead. Where the first hayfields lay tawny in the sun.



The scatter of buildings the bus pulled into at our destination did not look like much of a town. Much of anything.

While the tired dog bus chugged along a wide spot in the highway that was the main street, I tallied a couple of gas stations, a mercantile, a farm equipment business, a post office, the Watering Hole saloon as mentioned by the Jersey Mosquito, a supper club that looked like it had started life as a hashhouse, and a sprinkle of houses around. I had to admit, I'd seen Palookavilles that amounted to more. Yet the community of Wisdom famously carried one of the best nLon ever, by way of Lewis and Clark who were thinking big when they passed through the area on their expedition and grandly dubbed three nearby rivers the Philosophy, the Philanthropy, and the Wisdom. None of those graftings lasted through time and local reference--the Wisdom became altered simply to the Big Hole River, which proved to be the roundabout torrent our road had hugged so closely, and still was flowing good and wide here at our destination--but the little town picked up the name and used its remote location to good advantage as the provision point for the

dealership  
names

great hay valley; the nearest municipality of any size, DILLon, was sixty-five miles away through a mountain range.

I mention this only because there was something about Wisdom, scanty as it looked from a bus window, that immediately appealed to me. Anticipation can cause that, but somehow I felt Herman and I had arrived at a place that did not make too much of itself nor too little, and that felt about right. So, I was alarmed when Hoppy the driver did not even slow down as we passed the black-and-white enameled GREYHOUND sign hung to one side of the mercantile's display window.

"Hey, wait, he missed the depot!" I burst out, Herman jerking to attention beside me.

Overland Pete and the California Kid and some others hooted as if that was the funniest thing they'd ever heard, but Skeeter again rescued me from further embarrassment. "We ain't there yet. The one thing special about this excursion is, Hoppy dumps us off right where we're puttin' up for the night."

Soon enough, those words bore truth. The bus jounced off the highway onto a stub dirt road, heading straight for the brush along the river. "We want the beachfront accommodations down the road, Hoppy," Highpockets ordered up. Which drew the peevish response, "I know, I know. How Godmany times have I druv the passel of you there?" Not far from town, near a hidden-away clearing in the thick diamond willows, we rolled to a stop. "Everybody off, far as the golden chariot goes," the driver recited, as I'd have guessed he did every year.

As everyone piled into the aisles and out, Herman and I were the last off the bus, and the final ones to have our beLongings hurled out of the baggage compartment by Hoppy, who wished us luck with a shake of his head. We turned to have our first good look at a hobo jungle.

Herman, who had witnessed the Depression, chewed the side of his mouth before saying, "Hooverville without shacks, even."

The poorfarm without walls or roof, was my own spooked reaction to the scene of rough-dressed men strewn around a campfire in the dusk as our own bunch from the bus joined them, pitching their bindles and bedrolls into whatever nooks in the brush they could find. I was horribly afraid Herman was going to remind me it was my eye-dea that brought us to this--he was absolutely entitled to--but he confined himself to, "Find ourselves a place for the night, we better."

Since we were too broke to afford a room even if Wisdom had any, our only course of action was staring us in the face. "Okay, we're gonna have to jungle up with the rest of them," I shook myself out of my poorfarm stupor. "First thing is, we don't look right."

Pulling him behind a clump of brush where we were out of sight from the campfire, I rolled up our pants cuffs to the tops of our shoes and generally mussed our clothes up, pulling our shirttails out some to look baggy and so on.

Lifting my Stetson off, I punched my fist up into the crown to take out the neat crimp and make it more like what the hoboos wore. I held out my hand for Herman's eight-galLon pride and joy.

"Do we got to?" he groaned.

"Damn betcha," I said, reaching up for it so he wouldn't have to commit the crime against it himself. "We don't want to stand out like dudes at a testicle festival."

I beat up his hat against the willows, then rubbed it in the dirt for good measure as he watched in agony.

"There you go," I handed him the limp abused Stetson and clapped my own on my head. "Ready?" I inclined my head to the campfire.

"One Eye is with you, Snag," he said as if swallowing hard.

#

Hats beaten up and hearts beating fast, we headed into the hobo jungle in the brush beside the Big Hole River. The kip, as they called it, turned out to be a gravel bar down from a state highway department gravel pit and storage area, where culverts and bridge beams and steel guard rails were stacked. Bunched there in the open air kip, maybe twice as many as were on the bus with us, was a band of men sitting around rolling their smokes in brown cigarette paper. Like beached pirates, was my thought, to go with Herman's roguish missing eye. Imagination aside, it was written in the sparks flying upward from the open campfire and the bubbling of the blackened stewpot hung over the fire that we were joining the bottom end of society, manual laborers with leather gloves stuck in a hind pocket, maybe their only possessions beyond a bundle and a bedroll. Now I was the one swallowing hard.

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

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

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

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

"I will get fixings," Herman startled me further. Chicken hunter he may have been, but Wisdom did not seem to offer much prospect along that line.

Flames

I would worry about that later, right now I had a basic concern about getting any kind of shelter over us for the night. "Ah, Mr. Highpockets, I was wondering--"

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

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

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

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

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

"Nothing to worry. I have eye-dea."

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

I don't know that it would be in any book of etiquette, but I was a lot more welcome walking into the hobo gathering with an armload of firewood than if I had merely strolled in with my face hanging out. "Good fella," said Midnight Frankie,

stirring the black pot of mulligan, as they called the stew, I suppose because it was not aged enough to be slumgullion. I dumped my armload on the firewood pile and retreated to the farthest spot on one of the logs that served as seating surrounding the campfire, wishing Herman was with me to provide moral support or at least company.

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

By now I was nervously glancing out into the dark, wondering what was delaying Herman and kicking myself for not going with him into town and keeping him out of trouble, or at least being on hand when it happened. Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, could even the remotest of towns like Wisdom conceivably be

OK?

plastered with MOST WANTED posters, and he'd been thrown into whatever variety of jail the Big Hole held? I was torn, between holding our spot in the campfire community and plunging into the darkness to go searching for him. What was worse, scared stiff about either one, pinned to my place on the log because deciding either way seemed worse than the other.

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

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

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

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

*"There was an old lady from Nantucket,"*

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

*"Who had a favorite place to tuck it."*

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

*"It slid in, it slid out--"* the recital bounced the springs toward its climax, there is no more apt way to say it. I could see Pooch moving his lips in repetition to catch up with the words, while Midnight Frankie smirked like a veteran of such

moves. Other hoboes banged fists on their knees along with rhythm of the limerick or leaned back grinning expectantly. By now I was thankful Shakespeare's contribution to the autograph book was only vaguely smutty.

*"slick and sure in its route--"* An artful little pause to build suspense, I noted for future reference. Then the culmination, wickedly innocent in tone:

*"under the bed. Her night bucket!"*

"Ye damn fancifier, here we thought we was gettin' somethin' educational," the Jersey Mosquito called out while other critics hooted and kicked dirt in Shakespeares's direction and told him where to stick the old lady's commode. As the merriment went on, I was giggling along until I glanced over my shoulder for any sign of Herman yet and saw a flashlight beam headed straight for our culvert.

I knew it! He'd been nabbed uptown, and here came a cop to confiscate our belongings. Panicked, I slipped away from the campfire circle and stumbled up the road embankment frantically rehearsing pleas to the law officer now shining his light at the mouth of the culvert and pawing around in there.

And found it to be Herman, stowing two sets of blankets and wraps of canvas to roll them in. He kept dumping goods from his armload. A Texas Tux work shirt for each of us. Leather gloves, ditto. Changes of underwear, even. Not to mention the flashlight. "So, Donny," he said after a flick of the beam showed him it was me panting up to the culvert. "We have fixings to be haymakers."

"Holy wow, how'd you get that much? Weren't we next thing to broke?"

He fussed with a bedroll a bit before answering. "Old-timey wicker will just surprise you, how much it brings."

It took me a moment for that to fully penetrate, but when it did--

"You sold the suitcase? Gram will skin me alive!"

Commode  
OK?  
chamber  
pot

“Don’t be horrified,” he begged. “It was that or the moccasins. No choice did I have. Had to get bedrolls, can’t sleep bare on something like this.” He knocked a knuckle against the corrugated metal culvert making it ring hollowly.

“Take it from old soldier who has slept on everything but bed of nails, ja?”

“I guess so,” I muttered, taking it a different thing from having to like it.

“But my moccasins and the rest--what’d you do with my things?”

“In duffel.” He messed around with the bedroll a bit more without looking up. “I solded my Karl May books too, to make room.”

So we both had sacrificed mightily, for the privilege of living like hoboes.

We reached the campfire circle in time for mulligan, served in tin billies from a stash somewhere in the kip, along with spoons that no doubt were missing from many a cheap cafe. Both of us feeling starved--candy bars had been a long time ago--we dug into the stew nearly thick as gravy and featuring chunks of potato and pieces of some meat everyone knew better than to ask about. Amid the concentrated eating and mild conversing, Highpockets suddenly lifted his head, Skeeter identically doing so at the same moment. Clicks of someone walking on gravel could be heard, and across the campfire from where we sat, a rangy man stepped out of the night into the fireshine. He had something about him that made the circle of hoboes stir nervously.

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

I blinked, but he didn’t change. It was Harvey the jailbreaker. Who was supposed to be in that stony Lonesome at the far end of the state, but obviously was not.

Highpockets responded by unfolding to his full height, hitching up his pants and maybe even standing on this tiptoes a little, the Big Ole to the life, but still didn't match the height and breadth of Harv Kinnick.

But doing what he had to do, he challenged: "You smell the grub and are here for a mooch? Or you got something more permanent in mind?"

"Might have," said the newcomer, still as a statue.

"Sort of a nightbird, aren't you," Highpockets spoke the guarded curiosity of the hobo contingent.

"Takes a while to get here by boxcar and thumb," Harvey mentioned.

Highpockets gazed across the leaping flon of the campfire at the taller man for some moments, sensed the unspoken vote of the group that the roadworn stranger qualified to share the kip, and gave in, saying, "If you're bunking rough like the rest of us, there's enough of the great outdoors to go around. Come on in and plant yourself. Any scrapings in that pot for him, Midnight?"

As the Gary Cooper lookalike strode in with that purposeful amble of a town tamer and took a seat on a community log when the resident hoboese shifted over for him, the Jersey Mosquito recited the who-be-ye. The newcomer considered the question with that distant look of a soldier or, as Herman's nudge and whisper conveyed to me, a knight, and came up with:

"Harv will have to do, I guess."

All eyes except his shifted to Highpockets again, who could be seen weighing whether an actual given name was up to hobo code.

"Whatever a man wants to go by is his own business, I reckon," he decided to make an allowance for the lack of a descriptive moniker for Harv.

Peerless Peterson couldn't stop from meddling a little. "You don't have any too much to say for yourself, do you."

5 Peck

“Still waters can bust dams,” Harv drawled, spooning into the billy of stew remnants Midnight Frankie had handed him. After an unsure moment, general laughter broke out. “Stick that in your rear aperture and smoke it,” the Jersey Mosquito joshed Peerless, who grinned painfully and retreated into silence while conversation built back up to normal among everyone else. Harv in the meantime silently kept at his mulligan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Herman stiffened at first, then caught up with my thinking and Harv’s apparent circumstances. “We are not much liking jail either.”

For another twenty smackers, Louie Slewfoot's going rate for saving our skins or at least mine, he drove us to Billings, a safe distance from Crow Fair and its cops in braids, and dropped us at the Greyhound station there.

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

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

*Say, do your remember the time*

*I slipped on a banana peeling*

*and hit the ceiling*

*while wondering why*

*I had a stye in my eye  
and how in hell  
my nose runs while my feet smell?  
Oh, I was in tough condition  
because life's a rough proposition--  
but at least it makes a nice rhyme.*

*--Louie Slewfoot*

*Off the rez and on the go*

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

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

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

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

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

"Not only that," it must have been the big medicine still working in the pouch around my neck that had me thinking so expansively. "See there, then we

*need to  
mention?*

can go on through the park," my finger confidently traveled down the spine of the West, arrivng in Arizona, "all the way to where the Apaches live, how about."

"Now you are speaking," he enthusiastically took up the prospect, only pausing to consider the mountain range neighboring the park, called the Tetons.

"In French, don't that mean--?"

This was common knowledge in every schoolyard. "Titties, damn betcha."

He grinned man to man. "Sounds like worth looking, see if they match the ladies of French bible, you think?"

Until then I hadn't, but I sure would now. First thing was to get us on our way, and I drew Herman's attention to the schedule board, showing that the bus we wanted was about to go. "C'mon, or we're gonna miss it."

"Donny, wait," he held back, concerned. "We have not had bite to eat since breakfast."

"Never mind," I took care of that, seasoned bus hopper that I was, "we'll grab candy bars."

Scrambling onto the bus at the last minute with a handful of Mounds bars apiece, scanning the rows of mostly filled seats in that game of chance of where to sit, we even so were not the last to board. Just as the driver had shut the door with the departing *whoosh*, there was a polite tapping on it, and here came a wisp of a man, hardly enough of him to withstand being blown away by the wind; well-dressed in a mild way, his plain brown suit obviously far from new; gray-headed and with a silvery mustache sharp over his lip like a little awning. He thanked the driver kindly for letting him board, and evidently to make no more fuss deposited himself in the first seat available, which happened to be across from us.

cut?

As the bus pulled out, for once someone got the jump on Herman, with the latecomer leaning across the aisle and inquiring in a cultivated voice, "Where are you gentlemen headed, may I ask?"

"Yallostone Park, next on list," replied Herman, triggered into his usual spiel that he and I were out to see the West but perhaps in deference to the man's oh so polite demeanor, he left off the part about ending up somewhere south of the moon and north of Hell.

"Oh, good for you and the young man there," his visitor approved our intentions with an odd click of his mouth. "Endless things to see in the park," he went on in that same refined tone but clickety at the end of each string of words, "all the marvels of nature. I'm passing through there myself, on my way to visit my daughter in Salt Lake City." By now I had caught on that his false teeth clacked.

"Ah-huh," Herman stalled, like me thinking over the prospect of several hours of clickety-clack conversation like this from across the aisle. "You got some big miles to go."

"So I have, you put it so well." The fine-boned man, on second look maybe not as elderly as he first appeared, smiled under the cookie-duster mustache. "But that's the story of life, isn't it. Keeping on across the unknowable distances that at the end of it all add up to that mystical figure of three score and ten," click-click.

I had heard Herman's gabs with strangers across the aisle so many times I was only half listening to this exchange, more interested in devouring Mounds bars and catching my breath, mentally at least, after the narrow escape from Sparrowhead. But that sizable serving of heavy thought from the little gent drew my attention. By now Herman too was cocking a speculative look at him.

“Please forgive me,” this daintiest of passengers touched the area of the knot of his tie. “There I go again, with my preaching collar on. You see, I’m a minister. Answered the call all those years ago”--a smile peeped from under the mustache again--“those big miles ago, and even though I’m retired, the pulpit still beckons at odd moments.” He laughed at himself, ever so apologetically. “I suppose folks like you unlucky enough to listen to my ramblings are my congregation now. I didn’t mean to intrude, my heart was simply warmed by the sight of the pair of you traveling together.”

Back there at the word *minister*, I stiffened. Dearie dearie goddamn. Why this, why now, why why why? On one of the biggest days of my life, the question of my taking the arrowhead had attached itself to me like a telltale shirt tail that hung out no matter how I tried to tuck it. I mean, I still believed I in no way amounted to a real thief, whatever grabbyguts Wendell Williamson thought, because discovering the arrowhead after it had lain there unclaimed since before Columbus amounted to my luck and his loss, didn’t it? And I deserved half of our canasta winnings just as much as Aunt Kate, didn’t I? Shouldn’t old Hippo Butt and Sparrowhead both know when they were beat, and fold their cards like canasta losers? Yet if the situation was that clearcut, why did it keep bugging me? Now *whoosh*, and right here on the dog bus the latest stranger proved to be a man of the cloth, as I knew from something I’d read such people were called, whose occupation it was to provide answers to things like that, in church and out, from the looks of it.

Oldtimer on the dog bus that I was from sixteen hundred and one miles going back east to Wisconsin and now many hundreds more westward with Herman, I had the crawly feeling that this particular passenger across the aisle was too close for comfort. This was way worse than the nun in black several seats back eyeing me spookily at the start of my trip to Manitowoc or the attic plaque of the kid

on his knees bargaining with death in the night, this was as if the big mystery called God was using the bus-hopping minister like siccing a sheepdog onto strays. "*Go get 'em, Shep, herd them close. Nip 'em good. Here, take this new set of teeth.*"

Maybe a limited dose of religion never hurt anyone, but bumping into the smallfry minister this way bugged me. For some reason, the wispy figure an arm's length away reminded me of the little sheriff who'd arrested Harv of his same name. Trouble came in small sizes as well as large, I was learning.

"No, no, is okay," Herman was busy assuring the kindly minister he wasn't intruding on us, although he sure as hell was, pardon my French. I could tell Herman too was thrown by the religious wraith's sudden appearance. For if my conscience had a few uncomfortable things on it, the one in the seat next to mine must have been considerably weighted down with the phony tale of going back to Germany and this entire disappearing act he had thought up for the two of us. *No tracks behind do we leave* did not sound so simple after Wendell Williamson and now this delver into people's souls.

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

He did? Was I growing to be like Herman that much? Oh man, there was another weighty question--good or bad, to take on the homely yet compelling characteristics of somebody one-eyed, horse-toothed, and, well, Hermanic? "Great-uncle only, I am," he postponed the matter as best he could, with a glassy glance at me. "Donny is best grandnephew ever made. A good boy."

"How fortunate you are, sir," a click and a chuckle from across the aisle. "Great by dint of the fruit of the family tree."

"Ja, I guess."

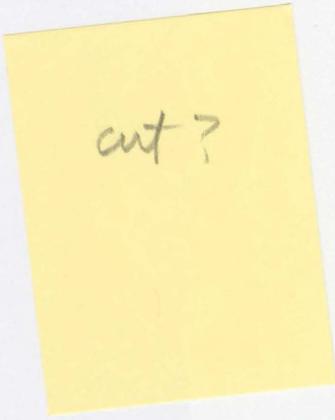
“By the way, my parishioners called me Reverend Mac,” came next, with an extended hand of introduction. “It’s from my middle name, Macintosh,” which had quite a clack to it as he said it.

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

Smiling to the fullest under the rim of mustache, he made the modest gesture toward his collar again. “A contribution I can still make to the good cause is to distribute Bibles into hotel rooms,” he confided. “I have been doing so in Billings, which needs all the salvation it can get. You know the saying, I’m sure, that the Lord made the countryside but the Devil made the city.” He gave another clickety chuckle, Herman and I trying to politely match it with heh-hehs. I think we both were a little afraid of what was coming, rightfully so. Slick as a carnival barker, the man of the cloth or whatever he was now pulled out a black book with gilt lettering, unmistakably a Bible, saying, “I happen to have an extra, and would be gratified if you gentlemen would accept it as a gift from a fellow traveler.”

With it deposited on him that way, Herman had to take the offer, mumbling a thanks and shoveling the Bible along to me as if I were its natural audience. I gave him a look, but he wouldn’t meet my eye, attending instead to the minister’s rambling about the inevitable good that the Good Book would do in those dens of sin, hotel rooms. What he gave us proved to be a flimsy paperback version with typeface about the size of flyspecks, but it still unnerved me enough that I didn’t want it paired with the autograph book, and quick as I could, stuck it in my opposite coat pocket.

“It does provide its rewards, spreading the good word,” the minister still was holding forth to us as if we were in a church on wheels. “And that brings me



cut?

to a question, if I may"--Herman and I both braced, now really knowing what was coming--"are you followers of the Lord, in your own way?"

The bus saved us, barely, gearing down into the town of Laurel at that moment, followed by the driver's announcement of a ten-minute stop to pick up passengers. As the Greyhound pulled over at the hotel serving as depot, I pleaded to Herman, "I need to go," although the urge wasn't really about using the convenience. "Real bad."

"Me too," he was out of his seat as if his pants were on fire, with me right after.

"I'll mind your seats for you," Reverend Mac obligingly called after us.

Making use of the rest room since we were there anyway, we spraddled side by side to discuss the minister matter. Escaping a preacher may not sound like the worst problem there is, but you have to admit it is among the trickier ones.

"Sky pilot, Old Shatterhand would call him," said Herman, buttoning up.

"Nosy old Holy Joe, Gram would call him," I said, doing the same.

"Ja, he is sniffing awful close to us."

"Guess what. I've got an idea."

Hearing me out as we headed back to the bus, Herman brightened up and paid me the ultimate compliment, saying I had a good think.

"You do it first, then I do same," he whispered before we stepped on. As we took our seats, Reverend Mac, his hands peacefully folded, welcomed us back.

He looked as if he'd been jolted in his prayer bones when, first thing, I leaned across Herman and thrust the autograph book at him, asking him ever so nicely to contribute some words of wisdom.

"My goodness, this is quite an honor," he recovered quickly enough, "and I had better make the most of it, hadn't I." He stroked his mustache as he studied the

opened album, apparently sorting through holy thoughts. Then he began to write, surprisingly like a schoolboy toiling away at a handwriting exercise.

*The Good Book is a stay against the darkness*

*a source of wisdom*

*and a comfort in troubled times.*

*Yours in the fellowship of man*

*Isaac M. Dezmosz*

“Written with a pen of iron and with the point of a diamond. That’s biblical,” he said, handing me back the Kwik Klik with that click of his own. “Hallelujah, brother, I thank you for the chance to get those words down.” It 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 remember before sleep claimed me, he was singing softly to himself a little song, *in the sunset of a Jesus sky, there's bright hope for a sinner such as I.*

"Old Faithful Inn, the Waldorf Astoria of Yellowstone National Park. You may disembark if you so wish--"

Herman and I alit in the parking lot after the driver's done-it-a-hundred-times announcement with a cluster of tourists already oohing and ahing. Still trying to yawn ourselves fully awake as we waited for our baggage to be dug from their mountain of suitcases, I looked around for the talkative minister, suspicious that he would hop off to stretch his legs and have another go at us. But there remained no sign of the soul-hunting demon, to mix terms in an unholy way. The little Bible-pusher had disappeared from the seat across from us whenever I cracked an eye open from my series of naps as the bus traveled through the dark, probably to farther back in the aisle where religious pickings might be better, and I figured he must be staying aboard to work on some poor Salt Lake City-bound soul who needed directions to the Lord.

cut?

oh my...  
dark?

Hallelujah, brother, now the Reverend Mac was digested into the memory book, and that was enough of him for me. Quickly putting aside the churchy bus experience, we turned to our much-awaited surroundings. Smell that piney air, feel that high altitude! We had made it to glorious Yellowstone, free as knights and Apaches and other roaming spirits, and in silent agreement we grinned at each other and took a minute to marvel at it all.

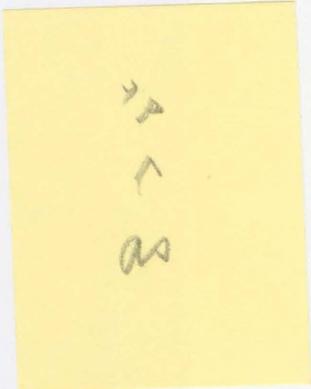
Some distance away, with black forest as a backdrop, floodlights picked out a mound of earth, nearly as white as salt, which we divined must be where the famous geyser would make its appearance. Out and around in what looked like a geyser kitchen, steaming water bubbled out of the ground as if from gigantic boiling pots. Oh man, nature was really cooking here, in all senses of the phrase. And magically, a star brighter than all the others--probably the planet Venus, I now realize--was pinned right there over the geyser site, as Mae Schneider's ditty in the autograph book promised. Yellowstone already was putting on a show for us, and Herman mile-wide grin said he felt the same. Nearly as splendid at the natural wonders for our current purpose was the colossal Old Faithful Inn overlooking all this, several stories high like an elaborate fortress made of logs, with gables everywhere and a sloping roof as long as a ski jump. By now it was long past supertime and a place as grand as that surely would have a menu fit for the gods or at least us and then a nice warm room for the night.

"Notcheral wonders and fancy eats and feathery beds, hah, Donny?" Herman exulted as he shouldered his duffel bag and I hefted my suitcase.

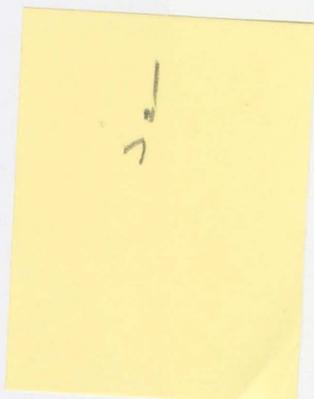
"Yeah, finger-spit knew what it was doing, didn't it," I crowed happily as we started off after everybody else to check in to the fancy Inn and head for supper.

"Donny, wait."

What I heard in Herman's voice stopped me cold. When I glanced back,



Handwritten symbols on a yellow sticky note, including a vertical line with a hook at the top, a small triangle, and a squiggle.



Handwritten symbols on a yellow sticky note, including a vertical line with a hook at the top and a small triangle.

he had dropped the duffel bag and was clutching his chest. Having never seen a heart attack, I nearly had one myself at this sight.

“Herman!” In a stumbling panic, I rushed to him. “Y-you’re not gonna die on me, are you?”

“No, not that. My wallet.” He kept searching his coat pockets over and over. “Is gone.”

“How can it be? Didn’t you put it down the front of your pants when you were sleeping?”

“I didn’t think.”

I could barely squeak out the next. “Was all our money--?”

“Ja.”

“Fuck and phooey, Herman!” my voice came back. “You mean we’re skunk broke?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I tore across the parking lot to where the bus was idling, ready to go, Herman galloping after me. I banged on the door, and Herman joined in as if he would tear it open with his bare hands.

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."

"Sinked, 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."

Still as mad as could be, I piled off the bus to do that very thing, my view of law enforcement having come around full circle in the past few minutes, with Herman more slowly following.

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

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

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

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

“Shhh, notcheral wonder is coming,” he gently shut me up.

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Unstrung as I was anyway by Herman behaving this way, now I was hearing what sounded like low thunder and heavy rain mixed together, although the sky remained cloudless. I thought I felt the earth tremble, but it may have been only me. We turned together toward the source of the sound, a boiling hiss from the whitish mound, and as we watched, in its center what looked like a giant fountain started up, the cascades of steaming water billowing and falling, but steadily and incredibly billowing higher and higher, until the ghostly white column stood taller than the tallest trees, almost touching the single bright star, it looked like.

Yet magnificent as the sight was, it did little to change my anxious mood. Old Faithful was an eyeful, for sure, but so what? It faithfully would be blowing off steam again in an hour or so, after we'd had time to spill our story to whatever passed for cops under these circumstances, but Herman was making no move whatsoever in that direction.

Instead, he motioned wordlessly for me to take a seat in the deck chair next to the one he claimed. Scratching a match on the arm of the chair, he lit a cigar and gazed fixedly at Old Faithful's rising and falling curtains of water as he puffed. Had he gone loco? This I could not understand at all, the two of us planting ourselves there sightseeing the geyser fading slowly back into the ground while the thief who'd left us skunk broke except for a cheap Bible was making a getaway free as the breeze.

Finally he extinguished his cigar and murmured as if coming out of his deepest think yet, "Guess what, Donny. Not a good eye-dea, to go to police."

"Not a--? Sure it is. We've got to, they're the ones to chase down the sonofabitching phony religious--"

"Many questions, they will have."

"So what?"

"Donny, listen one minute."

Something in his voice warned me to prepare myself for what was coming. Not that I possibly could, because what he was leading up to saying was:

"I am not American on paper."

That took some digesting. At first, I didn't know what to make of it.

"Then what are you?"

"German."

"Well, yeah, sure, we been all through that. But who cares about something of that sort any more?"

"*Citizen* of Germany, yet," he spelled out, his voice growing strained.

"Here I am what is called an alien."

Giving this news what I thought it deserved, the French salute, I asked what was wrong with being one of those, whatever they were.

"An enemy alien."

That hit me where it counted. It put things right back to when I learned he was Herman the German and feared he was one of the Hitler demons who shot my father's legs to pieces at Omaha Beach. Was I right the first time?

Fearfully I trembled out, "How--how are you an enemy?"

He threw up his hands. "By not showing my face when World War Zwei"--wincing, he corrected that to Two--"got America in. Some big danger I ever was, hah?"

I listened dumbstruck to the rest, how having had enough of war in the first one, the second time around he quietly shipped out on ore boats like the *Badger Voyager* where no questions were asked as long as you could shovel heaps of coal, keeping himself at sea or whatever it was on the Great Lakes, and, beyond that, essentially hiding out in plain sight. "Manitowoc is German sort of place, you

maybe noticed," he said whimsically. "Government was not going to declare whole town an enemy."

The meaning was sinking in on me now, all right. "You're not supposed to be in this country at all? They'd kick you out?"

"Not at first," he raised my hopes. But then: "Put me in prison, they would."

I was horrified, as Herman's word best said such a thing. "You're that much of an--" I couldn't bring myself to say *enemy* "--alien?"

"By stupid law, ja," ~~that~~ came spat out. Given how law enforcers seemed to automatically side with Sparrowhead against me, I couldn't blame him for feeling picked on. "But if you're still stuck being a, a German," I was back to circling in confusion, "how'd you get here at all?"

He laughed, the hollow empty kind.

"Took French leave."

Unsteadily I told him I didn't quite know what that meant.

"Long story, Donny."

"Hitler, pah. Too bad I did not break his neck when he was close as me to you, that night."

And so in the next unforgettable minutes there in an American national wonderland, I learned that French leave meant desertion, although in this case not from any army but an entire country. Germany, that is, when it was falling to pieces after losing World War One and the Nazis were coming out of the woodwork. As his searching words led me through, my imagination transformed the hunched figure clasping his hands between his legs into a young veteran like my own father coming home from combat. Aunt Kate may have thought Herman had no ambition, but it sounded to me as if he had been smart as an Einstein in his choice of livelihood after his term as a soldier on the losing side: making beer where

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they drank it like water. "In Munich were beer halls like you would not believe, big as this, almost," he pointed a thumb to the whopping Inn behind us. "And Oktoberfest there, two-week festival of foods and beers." He gave that hollow laugh again. "Crow Fair for drunkards. Good place to be a braumeister." From what he said, that was a vital task in the brewing of beer, sampling and comparing to the competition, and he had enough knack at it to work up to a job at a famous place, although I had never heard of it until his chilling telling.

"The Buergerbraukeller, biggest in Munich." He paused, the night just before Armistice Day in 1923 coming back to him as it brought me to the edge of my deck chair. "Not always a good idea to be where history gets made," he ducked his head as if dodging too late. "Packed hall that night, thousands drinking beer, government people there to say the country is not going to the dogs, if anybody would believe them. I am notcherly curious, so I come out from where brew vats are, to listen. Bring stein of beer for myself, why not, and sit at table near the back, where people have left." All of a sudden he flung an arm up as if firing a pistol at the sky, making me nearly jump out of my hide. "Right in time for Hitler to come through door and climb on table and shoot in the air, ja, like some cowboy. Close as me to you," he repeated, shaking his head at how history brushed past him. "But when I try to reach across table to grab him, pull the feet from under this crazy person up there shooting, make him fall on his face like fool he is, Hitler keeps dancing around like cat on a stove, he is so nervous, and I miss him this far." He held his fingers inches apart. " Before I can try again, whole bunch of brownshirts"--storm troopers--"with guns out jump on me and others around, goverment people and all." Drawing a breath, he husked out the rest of the recitation. "Hitler takes those to a room, the rest of us is held at point of guns, told shut up and drink beer. When myself and some others say what is happening is not right, we get knocked around and told we are now on list to be shot." Talk about

spellbound; I was as much all ears as when he'd told about being swept up by the Witch of November, only this November rough weather was called Adolph Hitler.

"A putsch, it was," which he defined as a gamble at taking over everything. "Did not work that time, Nazi march on rest of Munich failed the next day, so putsch collapsed, good thing. But I had two eyes then," he made a wan face, "and did not like look of things in Germany. Beer hall bullies, Hitler bunch was, but maybe more than that if they ever got hold of government, hah? On list to be shot reminded me too much of Hohe Toter Mann"--the specter of Dead Man's Hill sent a real chill up my spine. "*Pthht*, to that," he rid himself of his homeland. Leaning toward me as if that would bring me nearer to understanding, he tapped his temple, where little thinks came from. "Listen, Donny, this is the how of it. Find a safe harbor, is good saying. In Germany then, that meant small ports on the Baltic, where Nazis was not thick on the ground yet. Always ships going out the Baltic Sea, all places of the world." This I could follow almost as though I were at his side escaping from the Nazis and that sonofabitch of all sonsofbitches, Hitler. "I give the ship engineer a little something," he went on, rubbing his fingers together in that familiar gesture meaning money. "He lets me hide in tool room, down where boilers are. Nobody topside comes ever, and I make friends with stokers by helping out. Learn to shovel coal. When we dock in America, jumped ship, I did."

In three paragraphs, there it was, not so long after all. One for Believe It Or Not!--the man who came within the length of his fingers of stopping Hitler. Not only that, the history that had made him an enemy of Germany for real and an enemy of America on paper, both at the same time.

Almost dizzy with the size of the fix he was in--*we* were in--one more thing I had to check on.

"Jumped ship. Is--is that against the law, too?"

“Could say so, ja,” came the not unexpected reply. “Stowaway, is that word,” he ruefully added it to the growing list of other offenses charged to Herman Brinker.

“Aunt Kate,” I whispered again, for no reason but the weight of the question, “was she in on this? You being an alien and all?”

He nodded slowly. “She knew, all the time. Had to. House in her name, car in her name. She is the one that counted, on paper.” He shrugged, helplessly resigned to the one-sided situation. “No identification papers can I show for anything, as enemy alien.”

And she had called *me* a storer? What about living under false pretenses with a husband who was not anything he appeared to be? Busy piling that up against her, it took a few moments for that last part to fully register on me. I thought we were bad off when we simply didn’t have any money. Now we didn’t even have a real Herman.

He turned to me, his expression the most serious yet. This next, I will never forget.

“Donny, I am so much sorry”--if spoken words ever shed tears, it happened now in his broken apology-- “for what is happened. Miles from anywheres, we are, and money gone, trip kaput.” In that moment he looked so much older, the way people do when they are terribly sad. I felt as awful as he looked.

“Hey, it wasn’t just you,” I felt compelled to take my share of the blame, “it was my bright idea for us to go to sleep to get rid of the goddamn minister. If I hadn’t thought that up--”

“*If* is biggest word there is,” he saved me from myself. Or maybe himself along with it. As I watched, he drywashed his face, holding his head in his hands while trying to think. For some moments I held my breath, until he came up with, “No sense beating ourselves like dead horse, hah?”

Just like that, he straightened up, unhunching his shoulders for the first time since the words *enemy* and *alien*, and tipped his cowboy hat back, if not the Herman of the dog bus again a pretty good imitation of it. "We got to git in for the night," cocking his good eye toward the fancy Inn, "into the Waldorfer, someways, Donny."

"But what are we gonna do after that?" I spread my arms helplessly. "About everything."

He gazed off into the distance, as he must have gazed countless miles that way since that night in a Munich beer hall. "We take a leap of fate."

Believe me, I have looked this up, and the roots of fate and faith are not the same. Nonetheless, I picked up my wicker suitcase to follow Herman the German into the Old Faithful Inn.

Ever stepped into an aircraft hangar? The lobby of the elaborate old Inn was like that, only roomier, largely higher. In the big open area I had to tip my head way back to count balcony after balcony held suspended by beams thick as logs, the supports all the way to the towering roof peak positioned each on top of the one below like those circus acrobats standing on one another's shoulders. Except for a mountainous stone fireplace, every single thing in the Inn--walls, floor, balcony railings, chairs, benches, ashtray stands, light fixtures--seemed to be made of timber, actual trees, freaks of the forest according to the fantastic twists and turns of some of the trunks and limbs. Dimly lit only by old electric candles which threw about as much light as Christmas tree bulbs, the place struck me as creepy, as in those fairy tales where bad things happen to travelers in shadowy old inns.

Herman seemed unperturbed. "Like Der Kaiser's hunting lodge, but built by beavers," was his estimate of the pine-forest lobby as we entered, baggage in hand.

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“So, Donny, do like I told,” he whispered as we headed toward the front desk. “Pretend you own the place, whole schmier is your vacation palace.” Before coming in, he had dug down in the duffel bag and found his tie, the out-of-date one with mermaids twined coyly in seaweed, but a tie. He similarly dressed me up by making me put on my moccasins. “Now we are not looking like hoboes so much,” he appraised us with a lot more confidence than I felt.

Or for that matter, the sleepy night clerk, who blinked himself more alert at the sight of us, glancing with a growing frown at his reservation book and our approach. He did take a second look at my impressive moccasins, although that may have been canceled out by his beholding Herman’s dangling mermaids. Whatever he thought, he cleared his throat and addressed our coming:

“Checking in late, sir? Name, please?”

“No, no, got room this afternoon,” Herman waved a hand at the first question and simultaneously erased the second. “Boy here can’t sleep, so went for his souvenir collection from the car and laundry bag along with,” he accounted for our conspicuous wicker suitcase and duffel. “Back to room we go, everything fine and jimmydandy.”

“Oh, say, Grandpa,” I spoke my part as we had to march right by the clerk’s still inquisitive scrutiny, “did you lock the Caddy?”

“Ja, don’t want bears in the Cadillac, hah?” Herman laughed in such jolly fashion it infected the clerk.

Chuckling, the man behind the desk all but ushered us past. “You’re a hundred percent right about that, sir. Good night and sleep tight.”

Up the plank-wide stairs we went, climbing to the absolute top and darkest balcony and passing by rows of rooms until reaching a far corner, as Herman had calculated, out of sight from the front desk. Also as he had counted on, there was more of that wildwood furniture, massive chairs made out of lodgepole, parked

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.

I swear I had no hope in this world of dropping off to sleep, the still-several hours until daylight were going to be one long waking nightmare of bony unrest. Yet somehow I had to be shaken awake when the first hints of dawn shown in the upmost windows of the timbered lobby and Herman was 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, although the wicker suitcase was no help. 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--"

“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

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 life, 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, waggling 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



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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, check 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, depositing 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.

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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 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 to

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?

Still putting his faith in *fingerspitzengefühl*--not that we had much else to draw on--Herman began wagging his fingers again to encourage mine. "Ready, Donny? Find us somewheres to git to, ja?"

"Nothing doing." I tucked my hands in my armpits. "You choose this time. My finger-spitting got us into this."

"Then must git us out, hah?" Herman said a little testily.

Hard to argue with that. But *fingerspitzengefühl* and its outcomes unnerved me and I determinedly kept shaking my head, nothing doing, absolutely not, *you* do it for a change, when a certain dot of all those on the map caught my attention. Before I quite knew what I was doing, my finger flew to it.

"Here," I said, decisive as Napoleon or any of those, "this is what we want."

Startled by the suddenness of my choice, Herman up and peered at the map as if my finger was pulling the wrong kind of trick. Making sure of the small lettering beside the tiny red dot of bus stop, he turned huffy. "Funny as a stitch, Donny. No time for piddling around, please."

"I'm not!" My exasperation at his short-sightedness, both kinds, boiled over. "You're the one who's piddling!"

He retorted to that, and I retorted to his retort, and in no time we were in a slambang argument, the kind where tempers go at one another with all they have until someone's hits its limit and backs off. In this case, Herman's.

"You are not making joke like I thought, hah?" he more or less conceded. "And maybe your finger is on the nose about where we must git to," he went even further after I'd raved that I was stroking the arrowhead in its pouch under my shirt, commanding it to show it was big medicine, damn it, make some luck for a change, and I could feel it working, all the way to the tip of my pointing finger.

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"You are powerfully sure about spot on map," eyeing me in my most rambunctious red in the head state of mind, Herman spoke very carefully.

"Big question is, Donny, how to git anywheres." He glanced over his shoulder at the busloads of tour groups coming and going as free as the breeze. "Can't talk sweet to a driver, don't we wish it was easy as pies, and go on dog bus like seeing the sights, tra la la," he said with a deep and helpless longing for our old days as comparatively innocent cross-country passengers.

Who knows how these things happen, what whiz of a trick the mind will pull when you're least expecting it. Suddenly my thinking apparatus was jogged, the teasing smidgen about Yellowstone standing out clear as purple ink on the white paper of the autograph book. "Herman, I've got it! What you just said! Idea!"

Misunderstanding me, he shook his head so hard it was a wonder his hat didn't fall off. "Donny, no! We can not go begging drivers for tickets or sneaking on bus or such. They will report us, snap like that," he snapped his fingers like a shot, "to rangers and rangers to sheriff and sheriff to FBI and I will be locked up until cows trot home and you, you will be put in--" He hesitated to even say my jail word, *orphanage*.

"Huh-uh, that's not what I meant," I feverishly shook off his concern in turn. "I just finally got reminded of something. Listen up, okay?"

Duly hanging on my every word as I explained my brainstorm, he couldn't help still being dubious.

"It better work right. Or *ptfft*--" He nodded an inch, plenty indicative, to a passing pair of park rangers looking as seriously loaded with authority in their flat hats and badges as any Crow cops.

in vent

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With no other real choice, he accompanied me to the park headquarters, and in we went to the WONDERS OF YELLOWSTONE exhibit, and up to the information counter manned by a veteran ranger who no doubt had heard every possible tourist tale of mishap, including the one we were about to try on him. It didn't help, either, that despite my coaching, Herman pronounced what we needed as the *infirm-ary*.

Maybe his sympathy was simply feigned, but the ranger did peer over the counter as I made myself look miserable as possible, and accorded me, "Oh, the poor kid." Poor, yeah, little did he know. Anyway, he directed us to the infirmary, and down a couple of hallways and around enough corners, we came to a door with that sign on it.

As he found a place to sit and wait outside the office, Herman had some last jitters about me doing this ~~a~~lone, but I pointed out that we didn't want the enemy alien matter to crop up somehow due to a mess of paperwork, did we, and he had to agree he'd better stay absent. "Be brave as anything, like Winnetou and Red Chief," he resorted to the same encouragement as when I had passed myself off as a fancy dancer, not bad advice any time, really. Trying to buck him up as I fished the necessary item out of the duffel and into my jacket pocket, I in turn provided him one of Gram's sayings, "Here goes nothing from nowhere," and took myself into where they treated the infirm.

In the waiting room, a full-lipped and generously lipsticked young woman who reminded me strongly of Letty, except her crisp uniform was a nurse's and I could not spot her name stitched on in the best place, was busy opening up for the day. Probably figuring I had taken a wrong turn in seeking the rest room, she smiled at me in a seasoned way. "Hello there, can I help you find something?"

"Fishbone," I croaked, pointing to my throat.



✓



overmind

“My goodness,” her manner changed that quick, “we need to take care of that, don’t we.” Plucking up an admittance form and sitting right down to administer it, she peeked past me, beginning to look perturbed. “Isn’t there anyone with you?”

“They’re at the geyser,” I gagged some more. “I was supposed to catch up. Slept late, breakfast was slow.”

The perturbed expression did not leave her, but she dropped the form. “We’ll have to get you on paper afterward, it sounds like. Right this way.” Her uniform swishing, she escorted me to the office off the waiting room and stuck her head in. “Throat case, Doc, the rainbow trout special strikes again. Give a shout if I’m needed, I’m still catching up at the desk.”

The doctor was slipping on his starchy clean white office coat as I entered the medical inner sanctum trying to keep my chin up like the bravest Indian who ever walked in moccasins. Not anything like I expected, with a surprising amount of gray in his crewcut and a twinkle in his eye, he greeted me with a smile as professional as the nurse’s even though I was a surprise patient.

“Hello, buddy. Don’t I wish the dining room would stick with hotcakes and eggs for breakfast.” Busying himself with a tray of instruments to explore my throat, he maintained a soothing manner, observing that swallowing a fishbone was not a good way to start the day but at least I was not scalded or mauled.

Ready, he patted the operating table that I couldn’t help looking at without thinking of Gram. “Hop up here, friend, and open wide so I can have a look.”

“Uhm,” I jerked back to reality, “it’s no use.” The doctor stopped short at picking up a tongue depressor so he could go to work down my gullet. “I mean, I didn’t swallow a fishbone or anything.”

Accustomed as he must have been to all kinds of odd cases, he nonetheless scrutinized me with a puzzled frown. "Then what's your problem, hmm? Nothing broken, I hope?"

"Yeah, that's it! Me," I seized my opening. "Flat broke."

"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 son nearly enough, I could tell, but desperation sometimes grows into inspiration. “Here, look, they wrote in my memory book.”

To some extent, amusement replaced bafflement in his expression, I was relieved to see. “You’re a regular traveling library, aren’t you,” he kidded--at least I took it as kidding. Carefully grasping the autograph album, he studied the pair of inscriptions while rubbing a hand through his iron-gray bristle of hair. “That sounds like the old man, all right. And that mother of mine--” He silently read over the neatly composed lines, as did I, my eyes moist.

I won’t say her contribution to poetry ranks up there with Longfellow and Goethe, but I still think Mae Schneider’s tidy verse is so beautiful.

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

After that, again bending close to listen when I told of getting robbed on the last Greyhound by the sonofabitching phony preacher, whom I barely restrained myself from calling that and more, the doctor frowned as if still working on his diagnosis. “Then where’s this uncle of yours? Why isn’t he here with you?”

“Uhm, he’s sort of, you know,” I twirled my forefinger at my temple, “from the war. Scared of people in uniform. Like rangers. Or your nurse, even. What do they call it, nervous in the service?”