

Then, putting his hands on his knees

he got up, gave me and went to the doorway of the shop, gazing out at

"Sicles can wait until morning. Let's go be Johnson family."

"Car coming

the zzzz of the grindstone.

"Look, it's Rags!"

Unmistakably, the purple Cadillac was pulling up to the house, like an automobile ad in a slick magazine, what with evening enriching the color of the car and . Rags climbed stiffly out from behind the wheel, still in his bronc riding clothes. For once he was not the real 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 and so forth wear. Herman and I tried not to ^{saw}stare, without success.

"Go on in and make yourself comfortable, darling," Rags shooed 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."

As she sashayed on in, Jones came out of the foreman bungalow to greet Rags. "Got a visitor, I see. Another buckle bunny?"

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

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

. only
thing
looking
was a
jersey
sky

He gazed into the dark, as he must have gazed into many a night since that one in a Munich beer hall. Herman was thriving.

"Look, it's Rags!"

Unmistakably, the purple Cadillac was pulling up to the house, like an automobile ad in a slick magazine, what with evening enriching the color of the car and . Rags climbed stiffly out from behind the wheel, still in his bronc riding clothes. For once he was not the real 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 and so forth wear. Herman and I tried not to stare, without success.

"Go on in and make yourself comfortable, darling," Rags shooed 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."

As she sashayed on in, Jones came out of the foreman cotage to greet Rags. "Got a visitor, I see. Another buckle bunny?"

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

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

"Suzie Q there 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 oodled. Herman's expression said he wished he'd kept me in the man talk in the bunkhouse. "Saw on the way in you're actually putting up some hay. How'd you do in rounding up a crew?"

"Old hands from the jungle same as ever, except for" --Jones swept a hand toward us--"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 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, sure as shooting," 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 a sissy, blurting, "We saw you 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 initated 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, nice meeting you. 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. I mean, I won't get in your way with the company or anything."

"Hold," Jones 00. Rags looked surprised at my boldness. "What's the hurry on a phone call?"

"To my sick grandma." Seeing Rags glance at Herman, 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 every reason to get on that phone. Come on and use the one in my office."

Somehow I had not anticipated this,

"Just so we're straight on this phone business. You can check on Granny every so often even if I'm not here. I'll tell Jones and Mrs. 00 it's okay."

Somewhere upstairs a radio was going, nice and soft. He winked at me and headed for the stairs, calling, "I'm coming, Delilah."

I sat at the desk Across a summerful of distances was Gram, putting on miles in her wheelchair, reading my weekly letters supposedly chronicling the good times in was having in Manitowoc with Aunt Kate. I knew I should phone her, but was afraid to. What if she decided to make up with her stuckup sister, find out I was no longer in Wisconsin, and demand to know where in 00 I was and what I was up to

As I had my courage up and was reaching for the phone, I heard a shuffling of slippers in the doorway. The cook, Mrs. 00 was on her way to the kitchen, probably for a snack which her ample build did not need,

She and Smiley hated each other, wrangling daily about the condition of the milk buckets he bought in and she had to wash along with the kitchen dishes.

"Is it my fault that cow can crap and kick like 00? I'm gonna shoot that bitch someday," not making it as clear as he should have that he meant Waltzing Matilda rather than Mrs. 00.

"You're bellyaching over nothing," Highpockets 00ed. "If you'd ridden as many killer horses at Rasmussen, you might have a purple Daddylac too."

"Gets sort of thick in there."

In the construction of each stack--and Skeeter's question back in the hobo jungle had been pertinent, the Big Hole method was giant stacks--

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

That cast him into silence for some seconds, evidently dealing with his longing until he could put it into words. "We've got that all worked out. I'm going to save my wages, and when haying's over, I'll send for her and we'll light out for New Mexico. Send Carl a postcard in Spanish."

"Hah," Herman nodded approval, navigator of countries and languages that he was, and I laughed to myself at the vision of the ornery little sheriff cussing a blue streak unintelligible except for the postmark and signature.

I hesitated.

To the hayfield. This unforgettable summer... We got down to it.

The hay crop was nothing elss thanb gorgeous. Jones... "You know what's said about Montana. Any good year has to provide for all its poor relations." But you could tell he was pleased, and in the good weather and bountiful windrows the crew turned into haymaking fiends, the loaf-shaped haystacks rising in the fields. Harvey really did prove to be a man and a half on the stack, ...Some days we skidded the beaverslide to three new fields... Those days fell away from us like fleeces. What a privilege life was, all of a sudden.

Call to Gram. Cook tries to listen in?

But that was their misfortune and none of my own, as an old song went,

"Does Mr. Rasmussen know you're in here?"

"Yeah, he does. You want to go upstairs and ask him?"

"Hmmpf," she tightened her wrapper around her and retreated to her room.

Manitowoc could have been a million miles away. For that matter, so could Great Falls and Gram.

"It's getting late in Manitowoc, isn't it?"

"We're just back from the show.

"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 hoboos' variety, I drew a blank on that one. "Uh, who was that, again?"

"The 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."

"If I had his money and he had a feather up his ass, we'd both be tickled."

"You're bellyaching over nothing," Highpockets 00ed. "If you'd ridden as many killer horses at Rasmussen, you might have a purple Daddylac too."

"Gets sort of thick in there."

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

phone
line
rumored

id you say

more

Harv
wanders
out

That cast him into silence for some seconds, evidently dealing with his longing until he could put it into words. "We've got that all worked out. I'm going to save my wages, and when haying's over, I'll send for her and we'll light out for New Mexico. Send Carl a postcard in Spanish."

"Hah," Herman nodded approval, navigator of countries and languages that he was, and I laughed to myself at the vision of the ornery little sheriff cussing a blue streak unintelligible except for the postmark and signature.

I hesitated.

To the hayfield. This unforgettable summer... We got down to it.

The hay crop was nothing elss than gorgeous. Jones... "You know what's said about Montana. Any good year has to provide for all its poor relations." But you could tell he was pleased, and in the good weather and bountiful windrows the crew turned into haymaking fiends, the loaf-shaped haystacks rising in the fields. Harvey really did prove to be a man and a half on the stack, ...Some days we skidded the beaverslide to three new fields... Those days fell away from us like fleeces. What a privilege life was, all of a sudden.

Call to Gram. Cook tries to listen in?

Gram kept track, after all.

"Family emergency."

"Must be, for him to let you around anything of his. When I was rodeoing with him, he didn't even like any of hus hanging around that fancy car."

Particularly you, I bet, I thought but didn't say anything.

"I hope it's nothing catchng?"

"My grandmother is in the hospital after an operation, if you have to know."

He leered. "I had one of them sick grannies once. Got me out of a lot of the fifth grade, poor old soul."

I slipped past and left him to the latest fight with Mrs. 00 over the latest spilt milk or cow crap or whatever Waltzing Matilda had inflicted on the bucket.

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."

"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," he met that crime with the French salute, "but no choice do we have if we want our." 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?"

"I guess we'll find out," I muttered, seeing no choice but to cash "It still feels to me like something against the law."

"Add to the list," Herman said.

Jones assembled us at the pickup.

"I know some of you"--he looked from one to one at all of them, leaving out only Herman and me--"are going to get pie-eyed, or as close to it as you can. Saturday night is made for howling at the moon, I remember that old ki-yi-yippy stuff myself. So go ahead and enjoy yourselves, but when I'm done getting the

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

That cast him into silence for some seconds, evidently dealing with his longing until he could put it into words. "We've got that all worked out. I'm going to save my wages, and when haying's over, I'll send for her and we'll light out for New Mexico. Send Carl a postcard in Spanish."

"Hah," Herman nodded approval, navigator of countries and languages that he was, and I laughed to myself at the vision of the ornery little sheriff

I hesitated.

He gazed into the dark, as he must have gazed into many a night since that one in a Munich beer hall.

"What are we going to do with these? They're not in our own names, isn't it forgery or something to cash them?"

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

"Donny, calm down. All is not lost. Maybe they do not ask any too much questions in *the* Watering Hole. Isn't that part of the West?"

"I dunno. It still feels to me like forgery."

*something against law.
not of*

"I know some of you"--he looked from one to one at all of them, leaving out only Herman and me--"are going to get pie-eyed, or as close to it as you can. Saturday night is made for howling at the moon, I remember that old ki-yi-yippy stuff myself. So go ahead and enjoy yourselves, but when I'm done getting the parts and the grub and so forth and say it's time, you have to come back to the ranch with me right then, no exceptions. I am not trotting back into to Wisdom in

the morning to fetch any of you hungover all to hell, from some goddamn back alley where you're sleeping it off."

"We hear you," said Highpockets, which served as notice that he would deliver the crew at the right time, whatever shape they were in. I thought I saw a gleam of approval in Herman, veteran of the Schooner and member of any number of Great Lakes crews that landed ashore in Manitowoc with weeks of thirst built up. I still was worried to a frazzle about signing a phony name to my check, but when Lon said, "Let's go, moonhowlers," I piled into the pickup the same as the rest of the crew.

The Watering Hole

There were a couple of sheepwagons that hadn't been there before prominent now in the vacant lot between the bar and the gas station. Blackie 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.."

I hesitated.

"If it isn't Nonie, my favorite bar owner in all the world."

"If it isn't, you need your eyesight checked something serious. How're tricks, Pockets? Oh ho ho, you've come up in the world."

"What's the story here?"

"Our stacker man."

"By rights, I'm not supposed to let kids in here."

"I'm thirteen

"Here you go, angel."

Angel. That was a new one.

"Can I have a couple dollars of chicken feed? some silver?"

"No kids allowed in here."

"He's with us," Highpockets said. "M of the crew, his money is as good as anybody else's."

"We usually only cash checks for paying customers."

"Do you want your wages, or not?"

"Nothing to worry. I will give you business enough for us both."

I wrote *Scotty Schneider* on the back of the check. The bartender did not even look at the signature, simply counted out my wages in nice green bills. He did the same with Herman's check, and suddenly we were flush with money of the sort we had not seen since the fingersmith preacher lifted Herman's wallet. With that soul-shaking bump in the road now behind us, Herman was in a good mood, comically twirling his finger double speed at his temple as if deep thinking was required for the big decision he was making. "Guess what, Donny. 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." Signaling the bartender, he sunnily included me. "You want bottle of Crushed Orange, same reason, I betcha."

"Not now, maybe later. I have to go do something. Call my grandmother."

"Ja, I was nearly to say so,"

The store had an arrangement common to mercantiles in those days before telephones were everywhere, a nook in the back where a wall phone...and an egg timer.

"I've been having a regular visitor. You'll never guess who." She could not have been more right about that. "Letty."

"What happened to Havre?"

"A boss who pinched her bottom one time too many. Like once. Why didn't you tell me in one of your letters you met up with her on the bus?"

"She's working the lunch counter at the Woolworth's. Here's even better news. She can get me on

There it was, imagination come true.

"That's--that's terrific news."

"You got company, boys, Here comes the Tumbling T crew."

There was no mistaking who was the Big Ole of this outfit of hoboes turned haymakers, a hawknosed sharp-eyed gent--I use that term loosely--with the same air of authority about him as Highpockets 00ed in our crew. until the Jersey Mosquito called out to the Tumbling T's main man, "Deacon! You old sidewinder, c'mon over here and pretend you're social."

"Herm--I mean, Gramps, I need to talk to you about something."

"Has to wait. 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 or Goethe. "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. As he and Pooch lapsed back into their mute pleasure of imbibing, I began to catch the drift of the Jersey Mosquito's earnest jawboning of the Tumbling T chief next to us.

Now
I was
in a
dilemma

"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 00 by my lonesome, you sonofagun."

"Every man for himself, like the elephant said as he danced among the chickens," 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."

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

"By the grace of whatever ain't unholy, I swear it's true, Deac," Skeeter persisted. "Seen him do it with my own eyes." Sensing a 00, Peerless had moved in and backed that with, "I'm a witness to that my own self. Damnedest stunt since Jesus turned ditchwater into muscatel."

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

"Sittin' right there

Herman drew himself up with pride. "Ja, is true."

"Ask the kid here, it's his granddaddy," Peerless urged, "he's got no reason to stretch the truth."

"Oh, don't he? He could catch it just from hanging around with the bunch of you." Deacon "What's your name, peewee?"

"Snag." I had no trouble baring the dagger tooth.

Deacon wasn't thrown easily. "Are you sure it isn't Howie?"

"No, honest, it's--"

"As in, Howie you going to pull my leg next?"

The Tumbling T crew laughed their fool heads off, while ours shifted their feet uneasily. Until with a fortifying gulp of his beer, Skeeter took charge.

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

Deacon took a second look at Herman, who gave him back a vague horsy grin, and it all of a sudden occurred to me I had been gone long enough on the telephone call for him to have more than a beer or two. "Hey, though, he's already had--" I tried to warn Skeeter, but Deacon overrode me with the shrewd conclusion, "Beer gets to be plain old beer the more you drink of it. What do you think, boys? Shall we call this windjammer's bluff?" That brought cries of "Hell, yeah! and 'I'm in!'" from the Tumbling T crew.

"This suit you okay?" Highpockets made sure with Herman.

"Ja, betcha bootsies," said Herman, with a wink at me which I found alarmingly. "To a Tumbler T!"

"Nonie, set him up six of the Montana brews, shot glasses only," Deacon directed. "We don't want him swilling the stuff long enough to get familiar with it--the Muskeeter here claims he only needs a first swig anyway." At the time I caught

on to only half of the doubly smart maneuver he had just pulled--the restrictive shot glasses were what Herman was accustomed to in Saturday visits to the Schooner, but in that era when almost every Montana city had its own brewery, the brewers almost to a man were of German origin, leading to a certain sameness of product. It had been nearly thirty years since Herman was testing steins of beer in Munich; did his sense of taste have that much memory of the Germanic tricks of the trade, such as they were?

Highpockets took the point in roundabout fashion. "Don't jump the gun, Deacon," he shut down his counterpart who was twirling a finger at the bartender to hurry up and pour. "The man is new to Montana, right?" He checked with me, and I nodded. "It's only fair for him to sample Nonie's stock first, so he gets a taste to go on."

Grudgingly Deacon agreed, and I didn't see any way around it myself, Herman had to know. Accordingly the bartender set up half a dozen shot glasses, naming off each beer as I--our chosen representative in this, Highpockets firm that Herman savvied me better than anyone else and we wanted no monkey business in making the individual beers known to him--wrote each down on a cash register slip and put it face down under the proper beer. Highlander, out of Missoula. Kessler from Helena. Great Falls Select. The beer from Butte, baldly named Butte Beer. Kalispell Rocky Mountain Brew. Anaconda Avalanche Ale.

Herman held his thumb and index finger an inch apart. "Just up to--"

--the Pope's petticoats, yeah, yeah. Don't worry, I don't have a reputation for pouring too much."

Herman sipped his way through the preliminary beers, half-closed eyes in his rutted face as I called out the name of each.

From my time of hanging around the Double W bunkhouse and its card sharks, I instinctively was watching Midnight Frankie. When he stayed poker-

They
want.
He's never
drank...
any
of them

faced but tossed a tenspot on the bar--a lot of money, on our wages--saying, "Let's get some sklin in the game," I immediately dug out a similar ten from our stash. I was not the only one following Midnight Frankie's lead. Highpockets said, "I'm in for a double fin, too," and Harv silently did the same, followed in quick succession by Peerless, Fingy and Pooch.

Faced with our crew's total backing of Herman, the Tumbling T outfit looked uneasily at one another, but when Deacon said, "C'mon, don't let these 00s buffalo us," they all matched our bets. Just like that, more than a hundred dollars lay in a green stack on the bar.

Herman gave a big belch of satisfaction.

The beer vendor protested. "Let's don't get carried away here. The gent has done what he said he could, and--"

"Six glasses again, same beers. But this time, we hold back the sixth one as the hole card, he don't get to taste it. That way, there ain't no guessing it there at the end.

"Time to quit piddling around. I got ten to your twenty that he can't do them all, one right after the other. We'll see how good his...

"Nothing against PeeWee"--that again! I could have been put on trial for the murderous look I gave him--"but I want to handle them shot glasses and slips of paper myself, starting behind there at the taps. Just so there's no wrong impression of anything funny taking place along the way."

Herman held up a hand for silence.

"You mind, Nonie?"

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

"One more thing. We want him blindfolded."

Herman, or "You got half blindfold for one-eyed person?"

Herman reached up to take out his glass eye until I grabbed his arm. "No, don't. Give us a spoon, he'll show you."

ice pick

"Jeezus," oled Blackie. "You'd want to be sure which eye you did that to."

"Convinced now, Deacon?"

"Yeah, but we still want him blindfolded, in case he's picking up signals from the kid here somehow with that peeper he's got left."

"Is all right, Pockets. I do not need to see to take fool's money."

"There's our money, Deacon. Decorate the mahogany."

Deacon made a big deal of drawing the six small glasses of beer, peeking at the slips of paper and arranging the setup on the bar, five glasses in a row in front of Herman and the hold card one, so to speak, back by the taps. "There you go."

"To the health of all lovers."

The last one I couldn't even guess at.. A darker foamy brew had to be either Highlander or Mother Lode, but with everything riding on Herman's final feat of swilling a mouthful and identifying it, fifty-fifty odds all of a sudden didn't seem anything like a cinch. But quite nonchalantly for a tipsy person wearing a blindfold, he put out his hand to receive the last shot glass. "Ready on firing line. Bottoms up."

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

"Told you," Deacon crowed. "Wore out his gullet after so many beers. Let's have that money and we'll even buy you a consolation round, Pockets," he couldn't hide his smirk.

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

The blow must have loosened up something somehow. "K-k-k-cough drop," he spluttered, pointing shakily at the offending shot glass.

"Deacon, you cheating bastard," Highpockets caught on to the dodge ahead of the rest of us, but not by much. "Grab him." Harvey already had accomplished that, locking the protesting Deacon to his chest from behind as casually as gathering an armful of hay. "Frisk him good," Highpockets ordered, Midnight Frankie and Blackie quick on the job. Into sight came an orange box bearing the words LUDEN'S MENTHOL COUGH DROPS LEMON FLAVOR.

"I'd say you just forfeited, Deacon," Highpockets pronounced, while I snatched off Herman's blindfold as he stayed bent over the bar, wheezing and still trying to clear his voicebox.

"Can't you take a joke?" Deacon squawked in Harvey's steely grip. "Let's call it a draw and just scrap the bet."

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

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

"Tell it in church, ye whistledick," the Jersey Mosquito put a stop to this. "We're claimin' the pot fair and square," he declared, whipping off his hat and scooping the pile of money into it. Then with surprising agility, he hoisted his bony old rump onto the bar, swung his legs over as a couple of Tumbling T gang

made futile grabs at him, and disappeared down among beer barrels and such, clutching the hatful of cash to him.

That set off general mayhem.

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

Meanwhile I saw that the bartender, repeating "Goddamn it, settle down!" to no effect, had pulled out a pool stick sawed off to the right length to make a good club and was starting around the end of the bar to put it to use.

Seeing this was getting serious, I tugged at Herman for us to scoot out of there. Blinking his eye at the melee around him, he resisted my pulling, saying thickly, "Wait, Donny, I have to help fellas fight."

"You've had your war," I gritted out and hauled at him with all my might, yanking him off the bar stool in the direction of the door. In my death grip on his arm, he stumbled after me as we skinned along the bar, ducking and dodging swinging fists and reeling bodies as much as we could, out into the street and to the pickup.

After manipulating him into sitting on the running board, with him still protesting that he wanted to join the battle that could be heard raging on in the Watering Hole, I said loudly and clearly: "Don't move. Sing a song. Time for Goethe to lift up the soul."

“Good eye-dea,” he said dreamily, and began to croon to himself in German.

With him established there, I raced off and into the Merc.

Lon Ames was chucking an armload of loaves of bread onto the counter while the storekeeper kept tally. Before he could ask what my rush was, I stammered, “The fellas are ready to go back to the ranch.”

“What, they drank the town dry already?” He turned away to grab boxes of macaroni off a shelf. “Tell them I’ll be there by the time they can piss the beer out of theirselves. I’m not stopping every two minutes on the way to the ranch so somebody can take a leak.”

“Uhm, if you could hurry. They’re sort of in a fight.”

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

“STOP IT!” he roared before he was even half through the doorway. “Or I’ll see to it that every one of you sonofabitches of both crews is fired and your asses run out of town before morning!”

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

Deacon squirmed as much as he could, very little, then managed to turn his head toward Lon. “Since you put it that way, we’re peaceable.”

“Us, too,” Highpockets agreed, climbing off him. “You heard what the man said, boys. Let’s take our winnings and evaporate out of here. Right,

Skeeter?" He whirled around, looking in every corner. "SKEETER? Where the hell did he and that hatful of money go?"

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

"No, that's okay, we'll ride in back."

The crew piled into the box of the pickup, Lon counting us with chops of a hand like you do sheep. He came up one short. "Who's missing?"

Skeeter giggled. "Sweeney, natcherly."

"Where the hell is the knothed?"

Silence. Until somebody in the cluster of us provided:

"Getting his ashes hauled."

That puzzled me, but not Herman, who let out a wild drunken laugh. Revelation came when Highpockets swiped a hand toward the sheepwagons where the sales ladies had set up shop. "He said he had a lot of Butte nookie to catch up on, Lon. Wouldn't even come and have one drink with us."

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

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

greenbacks one by one in the moonlight to determine whether they were fivers or sawbucks, doling out the proceeds of the bet evenly among us. Fingy clutched his with all eight fingers as if he could not believe his good fortune. Pooch burst into more words than he ordinarily issued in a week: "First time we ever come back from town with more moolah than we went in with."

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

I steered Herman to his bunk

dangerous. Because whenever I tried to conceive of life without Herman, my imagination failed me.

At breakfast, black coffee was the main course as hangovers were nursed. Herman looked not much the worse for wear, an advantage he had by always looking hardused. Lon 00ed at the empty chair next to his.

"Sweeney is no longer employed at the Diamond Buckle. I need a volunteer to be choreboy until I can get into Dillon and find a new one."

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

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

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

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

"I'm out."

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

"Damn damn damn it," the foreman seethed, "all in hell I'm asking is for some one of you to pitch a little hay to the horses, slop the hogs, gather the eggs--"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lon took one more look at Herman, sitting there by me with his wrists hanging out of his too-short sleeves and a horsy grin skewed up toward his glass eye. "Okay," he dragged the word out, "let's see how they do it in the old country. Scotty, go get the milk pails for him."

Need I say, the bunkhouse emptied out and the barn gained a full audience of spectators to watch Herman take on Waltzing Matilda.

"No betting," Highpockets decreed, to the evident disappointment of Skeeter.

"So-o-o, bossy,"

Waltzing Matilda shifted hind feet, flashing a kick that would have taken out a person's kneecap while she was at it.

"Jeezus," Peerless cried, "watch yourself, One Eye. That OO's a killer."

"Telled you the cows lived downstairs."

"I am choreboy for good. More wages, a little," he held his thumb and first finger apart just barely.

"It is a good spot for me, after you go to gymnasium. Excuse me all over, school."

Here was my chance. To tell him I was leaving before that, after the next Saturday payday, in fact. And I flubbed it.

"Day off. It's raining like a cow pissing on a flat rock."

"Karl May did not make that saying, I betcha."

To best recapture that moment, I have to say the sensation was like a bolt sliding home in my mind. The idea fastened in to me...

"I have some things to tell you first."

"Such as, if it won't wait?"

As fast as I could spill it out, I told her I was not in Manitowoc, hadn't been for weeks and weeks, Herman and I had hit the road because he couldn't get along with Aunt Kate and she had put me on the bus.... "They even fought about toast, and I was scared I'd be put in the orphanage when I got back where you were because

"Put you on the bus, that long ago? Donny, where in Creation have you been all this while?"

"Uhm, different places. Herman wanted to see some things and I wanted to along with. Gram, it went fine. He's, he's really something to travel with."

"Are you through? I hope?"

"Gram, I have something to tell you."

"Out with it, then. You sound like you have a lot on your mind."

It took more than one try to say the hardest words of my life.

"I'm not coming. To Great Falls."

...

"I can't leave Herman. He needs me too much."

"You mean Dutch? Then bring him, too."

"That's not a good idea. I can't tell you why."

"What on earth has got into you, Donny? Quit fiddle-faddling around and tell me where you are."

"I-I can't. If I do, you know you would come get me first thing."

"I'd be entitled to, wouldn't I."

"I'll come see you, if you want. Thanksgiving or Christmas or sometime."

"Have you lost your senses? What about school?"

"I can go here. A school bus runs right by the--place where I am."

"Is he--doing something to you? To make you stay?"

"Not that at all. It's like--he's in another country, and needs me to sort of be his guide."

"Gram, I'm, I'm going to hang up. This is nothing against you, honest. I'll call you again sometime."

"Donny, please, don't--"

Those three hardest words to get past, I dropped the phone in its cradle. Then sat there sobbing to myself dry, although

How dare I? Leave Gram, who had 00ed to raise me? I could tell myself she would be free of me. Letty would look out for her. I could tell myself forty things of that sort, and still my heart would be torn.

"Donny, you are hard to keep up with."

"Cross my heart."

Either he misunderstood or understood way beyond my vow. "Across your heart is a big distance, Donny. You are sure you want to go so far and be with a hobo like me?"

"Sure I'm sure. "You know what I mean."

"What does your Gram think about this?"

"She thinks it's fine. Said to tell you..." "Herman, listen, a really nice lady she knows is watching out for her, they're gonna share somewhere to live and work the lunch counter together and the whole thing, and I'll go see them, uh, once in a while, and it's the best I know how to do. Can we stop talking about it?"

"Your best is good enough." His expression said, *For now.*

It was the mean little sheriff from the first dog bus of all, back at the start of summer.

His first step out of the patrol car, he stopped short and looked at me from under his load of hat, all too much recognition registering in the apple-doll face. "Huh, I thought you was going to see relatives, punkin. Back east someplace."

Too flustered to think, I pointed at Herman. "Here's--here's one of those relatives, right here, see. He came west instead."

"Did he now." Sheriff Kinnick, as I couldn't help but remember his name was, sized both of us up in our shabby work clothes. "More running around with no visible means of support, from the looks of you and him. Pretty close to bumming, if you ask me." As I watched in alarm, he strode over to Herman, taking care not to step into a cow pie with his dainty boots. "Just where do you fit into this, Bosphus?"

"Fritz," Herman maintained, his good eye starting to tic. "Scotty's grandpa, I am."

"You sure sound like it, Scotch as all get out," the sheriff said cynically. "Malone," he spoke over his shoulder to the Dillon sheriff standing to one side in all this, "you ever seen this mug before? Seems to me I've laid eyes on--"

"Howdy, Carl. You out seeing the country?" Harvey materialized behind Herman at that moment, the rest of the crew fanned out behind him as they came drifting over from the horseshoe pit.

"Well, if it ain't the object of my affection," Sheriff Kinnick made a mock simper. "Harvey the Houdini of the stony lonesome. Took me a while to run you down, lunkhead, but here we both are, just like old--"

"Hey, Johnny Law," Highpockets spoke up, stepping in beside Harvey and Herman. "What's your beef? These fellas are with us," he indicated Harvey and Herman and me, with Skeeter and Blackie and Peerless and Fingy and Midnight Andy ranged around him nodding support. "Members of the human race in good standing."

"I bet they are," the shrimpy sheriff....Your type...

I could see it in their eyes, the pent-up rage and hate from years of railyard bulls and Palookaville sheriffs, the law

Lon Ames meanwhile looked like he was going to explode. "Not our stack man, goddamn it! Mike, can't this wait until we're done haying in a few weeks?"

The Dillon sheriff..."Not according to my colleague here."

"What seems to be the diffewculty?"

"Somebody else here you better meet," the other lawman introduced Rags.

"Thanks for nothing, Malone," the Glasgow sheriff rocked back on his pointy heels a little, taking in Rags. "You didn't tell me this is his spread."

"You didn't seem to be in a frame of mind where it'd make any difference," his counterpart from Dillon said sourly.

"Saw you ride at the Calgary Stampede," the little sheriff told Rags as if that amounted to a private audience. "You do know how to stick on a horse."

"That pony was Snow Snake," Rags filled in like the professional he was, as the crew gathered closer around in curiosity. "Sort of a rubber buckner, not too tough to ride once you get used to the bounces."

Self-encouraged, the visiting sheriff strutted out loud with, "Did a little bronc stomping myself, when I wasn't much more than a snotnose kid." He jerked his head in my direction, outraging me. "Breaking saddle stock for folks on alfalfa farms up along the Missouri, that sort of thing." Hearing a snigger and the muttered comment "Plough jockeys" from somewhere in the circle of onlookers, he reddened and backed down. "Of course, that don't quite stack up against your career."

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

"Sheriff Kinnick's from up at Glasgow. Seems like he's here to arrest your stack man."

Rags looked at the runty lawman. "Aw, no. How about if we give you a two or three other guys from the crew for Harv, straight across. A good stack man is hard to find."

That broke the ice briefly in the tense gathering, but Sheriff Kinnick immediately turned frosty again. "I didn't come this far for jokes. I been on the track of this lamebrain"--he pointed an accusing finger at Harvey, standing quietly there looking like--"every chance I get all summer. Talked to bus drivers until they was running out my ears, but I lost his trail in Butte. Then I got smart and asked myself who else makes regular runs to burgs off the beaten path. Beer truck drivers." The sheriff let out his mean little laugh. "You make sort of a conspicuous hitchhiker."

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

Give it to Sheriff Kinnick, he didn't give ground, only chuckled that chilly way. "Nice try," he said up into Highpockets' face, "but no hearing judge in his right mind is gonna take the testimony of a drifter over the Wolf Point jailers who had Harv for company days on end when the fool wasn't busting out. Besides, you get in court and there might be some natural curiosity about your own propensity for law abiding or not."

Harv spoke up. "It's my 00, Pockets, thanks anyway."

The Glasgow sheriff forced a chuckle. "Let's get down to the pussy purr here."

"You got a sheet of paper to back that up?" Rags asked. The sheriff grumpily handed over the warrant and Rags read it all the way through, glancing up when he got to the bottom. "What did I hear your name is?"

"They're brothers!" I blurted. "I heard them both say so."

"That right? Spit in your milk, did he?"

"That don't matter."

"And you don't have anything better to do than track me down across half the state."

"He broke out of jail."

"Told you he's a hard worker," Rags said mildly. "Harvey, what were you in for?"

"Fightin' in a bar."

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

"That's as may be," the little sheriff muttered, glancing around the hostile ring of faces, "but none of you acted up like that in my jurisdiction. I'm only interested in this knothed. C'mon, Harv, let's go get you some free board and room in lovely Wolf Point."

Harvey folded his arms on his chest. "Nothin' doin'."

"God damn it," the sheriff exploded, "if you do the crime, you're supposed to do the time! That's practically in the Bible. Now get in the patrol car. Front seat. Leave room in the back for other customers," he checked on Herman and me. "Got some WANTED posters in my bag, Malone, brought 'em for us to go through, just on the chance."

"That's real thinking," the Dillon sheriff muttered.

Off to one side, Highpockets said softly without moving his lips, "Skeeter, pass the toothpicks," and the old hobo drifted off to the shop where Herman sharpened things.

"Still nothin' doin'," Harvey declared, not budging. "That jurisdiction you talk about so much--it maybe's slipped your mind I busted out of jail in Wolf Point, and that's not in your county, the way I see it."

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

Listening hard, the sheriff from Dillon appeared uneasy but didn't say anything. Harvey did, though. "Carl, I'll go with you on one condition. I serve my sentence, how much was that again?"--

"Forty-five days," his step-brother lawman answered peevishly.

"Jeezus, for fightin' in a bar?" one of the hoboes on the crew said while others whistled in disbelief.

"Plus whatever the judge throws at you for jailbreaking," Sheriff Kinnick plodded on, glaring around at the audience.

--"in your jail there in Glasgow," Harvey "That way, Janie can visit me when she gets off work at the supper club and I won't need to bust out." He gazed at the smaller man. "If you won't do that for me, you'll have to shoot me to take me."

"That can be arranged, too, according to this pistol."

The mention of a smoke wagon . Skeeter had distributed pitchforks, tines gleaming fresh from the grindstone. I itched to have one and Herman looked determined to take one if he had to. "Not them," Highpockets directed. "Harvey either." Skeeter floated by the three of us as if we didn't exist.

During this, the Dillon sheriff had taken two steps back. "Kinnick, this getting out of hand. Unless he attacks you, I'm not in this."

"Lon,'c'mere by me. Somebody's to be witnesses if this cuts loose on innocent men on their way to pitch some hay and cut a little firewood."

"I tried to tell you, the Johnson family hs its own rules."

"Sounds like a more fair deal to me," Rags chipped in, the crew armed with pitchforks backing him with noises of agreement. "I'll fill in as stack man, as long as Scotty promises not to bury me under a ton of alfalfa."

Looking around furiously at man after man with a tool that could stab hay but more than that, too, Sheriff Kinnick had dropped a hand toward his gun butt,

but not quite touching it. He cast another glance around at the bunch of us, his hand twitching, then let it fall to his side.

Breathing hard, he faced Harvey. "I've got to put up with you under the same roof just like when we was kids, do I," he complained as if he'd been sentenced to his own jail. "Okay, loverboy, Glasgow and Janie it is." Trying to fluff himself up, he turned to his fellow sheriff and growled, "That still leaves this pair." He jerked a thumb at Herman and me. "Something more than jailbreaking is involved with them if I don't make my guess. Let's get at those posters, I kind of got a hunch I've seen the four-eyed one's puss before."

I knew it. He was out to get us, was going to get us. Our life together, our lives separately, was going to fizzle into separation and incarceration.

"Now let's don't get excited all over again here," Rags drawled, stepping in front of the pair of lawmen. "I have a better idea before you get to reading too much into faces. J. Edgar, you and me need to palaver." He jerked his head toward the horse corral and ambled off toward it. Sheriff Kinnick's face darkened, but he pivoted to follow Rags, warning over his shoulder, "Don't try to quit the country while my back is turned, Harv." With a straight face Harvey responded he wouldn't think of escaping right out in the open. Actually, hightailing off into the sagebrush was on my mind. Where we stood watching, though, Herman's hand had resumed its grip on my shoulder when he heard *palaver*. I wasn't so sure any amount of talking to the mean little sheriff could help us, dead-set as he was to haul Herman off to whatever stony lonesome they threw enemy aliens into and clap me in the orphanage.

Rags was speaking softly to the horses and feeding them sugar cubes by the time the sheriff joined him at the corral, and the soft drawl that the crowd of us could not quite hear clearly now was directed at the sheriff. After a little of that, the

sheriff was the one rubbing his jaw. He edged closer to Rags and said something so low we couldn't catch it. Rags drew his head back and looked down at him with not a favorable expression, but after a moment stuck his hand out. They shook, and headed back to us, the sheriff strutting beside Rags' long-legged stride.

"Get your stuff and we'll head for Glasgow, Harv," he said as if it had been his own idea all along. He turned to Herman and me with a sniff. "On second thought, these yahoos aren't my worry."

as Harvey fetched his bedroll from the bunkhouse and shook hands all around with the crew, all of them wishing him good luck and Skeeter assuring him forty-five days was a jail term a person could do standing on his head.

"I dealt myself out of it on the WANTED situation, back there. But that don't mean you can't take a peek at the posters and come back in a few weeks and--"

Harvey interrupted. "Carl, let it go. Or I'll sing 'Indian Love Call' day and night in your own hoosegow."

With a perfectly straight face, the sheriff from Dillon looked across the top of the patrol car at the more or less brothers and addressed the one with a badge. "In the name of peace and quiet, I think I'll just let those posters of yours go home with you. Let's hit the road, shall we?"

Sheriff Kinnick swore and climbed in the front seat. The patrol car

"I have to go up and enter the bronc ridin' at the Glasgow rodeo." "And beforehand, ride at the head of the parade through town right next with that peewee sheriff to help his election chances."

"Now let's sort you two out. Find out what kind of desperadoes I've let on the ranch. Come on up to the house."

"Cook? You don't say." He rubbed that lean jaw a certain way. "Mrs. 00 is only with us through haying, when she goes back to her natural talent for walloping clothes. And come roundup, we're gonna need a bull cook"

At the end of haying, when Highpockets and the Jersey Mosquito and Blackie and the others were borne away by the dog bus to other harvests, other seasons, Herman and I stayed. And stayed and stayed. Joined, yes, by Gram and Letty, and as Skeeter would have said, by the grace of whatever ain't unholy.

They came to Wisdom not by Greyhound, of course, that last dog bus having run its course, but in a purple Cadillac, with Letty riding up front in the company of Rags, and Gram, no fool in these matters, perched in the back seat. I had started school, and I cannot begin to tell you how it elevated my standing when that big car pulled up

That's the story, almost. By that I mean there have been many other chapters of life since I experienced the dog bus and all it took me to, that unforgettable summer, but none that capture memory, page by page, so indelibly. Childhood is not wasted on the young. It is the start of the history that attaches to each of us, the first letters of the signature on existence that we become.

And more right than she even knew, Kate Schmidt ...when she called me a storer, for that is how I have made my living--my life really. With my mouth. Some are told quickly. When Gram was gone (died), Herman (and I) stayed on at the Big Hole ranch... I traveled to Montana State College in Bozeman--of course, by Greyhound--and there met (a prof), another grownup who took me in. 00 was an auctioneer on weekends, and I picked up the chants from him. I was hired at the big livestock 00 in Billings, and then at Denver. It was back in the Big Hole, though, that my real break came--as announcer at the Wisdom Roundup, the annual rodeo taking place within sight of the willows where Herman and I jungled up with the hoboes.

From there, it was straight up. Rodeo contractor in that crowd..."You've got a helluva voice, and you seem to know which end of a horse...

Jackson Sundown in the last go-round at Pendleton. Bill Pickens bulldogging. Famed bucking horses that were never ridden. The seenus joke a thousand times. Madison Square Garden. Television amplified it all.

It happened not that long ago. We in the 00 crew had just pulled in to 00. I had just stepped off the bus, in this case the 00-long Bluebird Wanderlodge our announcing crew traveled in, to stretch my legs when someone over in back of the bucking chutes called out, "Scotty! I mean, Mr.Cameron. Can I get your autograph?"

barrel racer... buckle bunny. In boots and jeans and 00 shirt and lady cowboy blue as the sky, she was the complete package of western girl these days. redheaded as my own daughters. Her freckles were a nice 00 across her nose. Still a kid but a 00 one, seventeen or eighteen. She gave me a smile of the kind a man always remembers.

"Sure thing, ma'am," I replied, sounding old-fashioned even to myself. I have worked my way past calling young women of today "little lady" or anything close--Rags Rasmussen could get away with it if he were still of this earth, but I can't--yet you have to call people something.

"Hand it over, angel." That last word slipped out, but the 00 only gave me a sparkling look. No woman I had met yet, starting with those in my own family, seemed to mind being called something heavenly.

Has him sign rodeo program? "You don't carry an autograph album?"

"Oh, but I do. See, I'll (put on her computer; check w/ Marcella or Tiffany.)

"If I get in there," I half joked, meaning her 00, "I guess there's no getting out ever, huh?"

"You look like your picture (in Rodeo Hall of Fame)."

"Seen it, have you."

"You bet. I'm in there, too." (national high school champions)

I gave her a look. "You got there somewhat faster than me, what's the secret?"

another version: She congratulates him on Rodeo Hall of Fame upcoming ceremony. "I'm going to be there, too, with my folks.

I gave her a look. "You don't say. You got there somewhat faster than me, what's your secret?"

She shrugged prettily. "I'm going to MSU."

Now I had her pegged. Montana State's was always one of the best college rodeo teams.

She was in the second go-round of barrel racing. He notices her horse's name (same as WW workhorse).

"Queen. That's quite some name for a barrel horse."

"She's named after my favorite band. *We are the champions*," she sang, doing a dance move along with it that would have thrown my back out, "*of the world!*" You know it?"

"I do now." Some things change.

"I got her at the Denver Stock Show. You auctioned her, I don't suppose you remember?" "I was eleven then. Going on twelve, more like."

"I was that myself, once."

horse named after favorite singer. Is something wrong?"

"I thought I recognized the name, is all." (same as Diamond Buckle workhorse)

Memory possesses its own fleet way, the red routes of remembrance that lead to (name the characters).silver greyhounds race everlastingly Louie Slewfoot

and those whose names I only knew as Highpockets and Peerless Peterson and Midnight Frankie and Pooch and the Jersey Mosquito. And at the beginning and the end, a wise woman speaks chapter and verse of the journey of a lifetime. "The dog bus gets all kinds, so you just have to plow right in and stake out a place for yourself."

Teutonic, with maybe not enough emphasis on the tonic this once. Herman thought of it from from Schwabian poet, I suppose, and my contribution besides fixing up his English as he translated aloud was to substitute (**change**) Palookaville for the German original, Bad Schniffelheim or something like that. It rests in the middle of the autograph book, so the pages fall open to it. It is written in Herman's hand, but I'm pretty sure it was my truest verse.

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.

"That's really nice, even if I'm not sure I get it all."

"Don't worry, angel. You will someday."

###

“You see that sorrel there, how full he is between the eyes, he’s a dirty SOB, you can teach him something, but you’ll have the hell of a time making the first impression.”

examining the fresh cigar

“What’s up?”

I was out of sorts, even with him.

I gave a weak grin

The seat next to mine was as empty as if the almost within reaching distance of me. Oh man, I had never been this close

“I fix. You don’t worry.”

We were down to chicken feed.

Herman straightened up, tall and 00 as if he had swallowed a yardstick.

The soldier again, perhaps. "We must do it."

"That's pretty well wrecked now," I said bitterly

"They'll throw the book at you, and the key in after it."

"We better scram. Right now."

Where, though?

We unloaded out of there so fast our shadows barely kept up.

a cowboy wobbling along with a beer bottle in hand

"Uhm, Herman, there's something that's been bugging me."

"Bugs are not good."

, you know?"

"Right, keed."

Crinkling his brow at me and then at the clock

That idea wasn't a milker, as Gram would have said. "Herman, let's don't and pretend we did," I tried to talk him out of it.

"No. no, we must..."

"We better skin out of here."

"Hah? Skedaddle? Why?"

"We're next thing to flat broke."

I really only intended to read back

I didn't want to be the sort of person who can't think his way out of a wet paper bag--I could just hear Gram that--

The thought wouldn't go away, though

There! I had done it

"We're never gonna..." I burst out. "Fuck and phooey."

"What is that, 'phooey?'"

"It's...it's... hell if I know. It's just something you say."

Hallo for hello.

Sonofagun, Donny takes to using to control his cussing. Herman's version sounds like Sawnofagawn.

At first he looked cross-eyed enough to need two eye charts.

Wind round the heart (love)

You'd have thought we both were speaking with foreign accents.

This was a really revolting development.

"Pah. If you want to know what God thinks of money, look at who he gives it to."

"Yeah, but,..."

I realized his grasp of things (in the West) had a long way to go. "Uh, Herman, ...

I was thrilled. But was he?

I needed advice, did I ever need advice.

I was naturally curious.

He looked at me gravely.

So many summers later,

"Herman, we need this like another hole in the head."

I have wondered many times since if he was blessed with total recall and a half.

"Holy smokies."

"Tarnation." Said the way he did, it sounded like a country swimming in pitch.

"Yah, yah, yah"

the bobwire.

"Isn't it barb..."

"well, sure, but it's pronounced...never mind."

Another piece of Pete Blegan wisdom by way of Gram was, "We'll just have to see what the next picture on the calendar is."

"Don't get het up."

Up to that moment, I had never been sure what that meant, but if I were to lose

With Herman on the case, I didn't have to

I read that as a signal, loud and clear, that I was being dispatched to hole up there for the rest of the evening,

"Herman, I think we're SOSOL"

"Means what?"

"Sure as Owl Shit Out of Luck."

"That's the breaks."

"We'll just have to give it a whirl and see who gets dizzy."

He thought about that. "Grandpa Pete says?"

"No, me."

You don't have to be an adherent of ghosts to believe in the spirit of a place.

She sharply sat up sraight. "You been reading my palm without my knowing it?"

her sassy expression that sneaked toward a grin

Now she casually hit the mark before I could utter a word.

"I tell you, it's as square as shit in a box."

"Don't give me that happy horseshit."

"Something I still don't get."

"Come again?"

"I solid mean it." "Precious little, and little that's precious."

"What do you know for sure?"

"I don't give a big rat's ass about that."

"The sheriff here from way to hell and gone thinks he's after Harv

"We can strike the trail and be hoot owls." He had that same satisfied look as when he sabotaged the canasta hens.

"Owlhoots," I fixed his OO of desperadoes, "and hit the trail."

"But, but you had to be." "The two of you"--the vision of their double bed with the telltale sway from not only Aunt Kate's sleeping repose but some probable activity down through the years flummoxed me--"ate breakfst together and everything."

"Now let's sort you two out. Find out what kind of desperadoes I've let on the ranch. Come on up to the house."

"Cook? You don't say." He rubbed that lean jaw a certain way. "Mrs. 00 is only with us through haying, when she goes back to her natural talent for walloping clothes. And come roundup, we're gonna need a bull cook"

At the end of haying, when Highpockets and the Jersey Mosquito and Blackie and the others were borne away by the dog bus to other harvests, other seasons, Herman and I stayed. And stayed and stayed. Joined, yes, by Gram and Letty, and as Skeeter would have said, by the grace of whatever ain't unholy.

They came to Wisdom not by Greyhound, of course, that last dog bus having run its course, but in a purple Cadillac, with Letty riding up front in the company of Rags, and Gram, no fool in these matters, perched in the back seat. I had started school, and I cannot begin to tell you how it elevated my standing when that big car pulled up

And Aunt Kate, who resembled Kate Smith but00. I am convinced she knew. She somehow sensed or put two and two together and came up with the three of us. Yet she did not sic the law on Herman, perhaps out of family loyalty to Gram. Or debt she owed meo. Or who knows, some 00 of human nature.

That's the saga of the summer that went loco and ended up at a place called Wisdom. Although not quite the last word, because like Manitou walking the earth as a spirit in Herman's telling, a story restlessly stays on even after it is gone.

By that I mean there have been so many other chapters of my life hinged, page by page in memory, to that singular season when I experienced the dog bus and all it took me to. Contrary to elderly grumbles,.childhood is not wasted on the young. Rather, think of it as the onset of the history that attaches to each of us, the

first letters of the signature on existence that we become. From that summer when I was a dippy kid making up yarns as fast as my imagination could go, memory possesses its own fleet way where silver greyhounds race everlastingly and in an instant, the red routes of remembrance lead to the three soldiers bound for Korea, and the ex-convict who did not quite outfox me and the phony minister who was foxier yet, and the daredevil van driver in the Twin Cities, and the generous Schneiders who even provided a tailormade name, and the Camp Winnebago boys who challenged me tooth and nail, and those whose names I only knew as Highpockets and Peerless Peterson and Midnight Frankie and Pooch and Blackie and the Jersey Mosquito. And at the beginning and the end, a wise woman speaks chapter and verse of the journey of a lifetime. "The dog bus gets all kinds, so you just have to plow right in and stake out a place for yourself."

So it has been, that matter of staking out a place. I was merely a college kid overflowing with ambition when my first break came--you can bet that Rags Rasmussen put in a word with the hometown committee--and I was hired as announcer at the Wisdom Roundup, the annual rodeo taking place within sight of the willows where Herman and I jungled up with the hoboes. From there, my career as the voice of the cowboy sport was straight up. Back there in our Manitowoc showdown, Aunt Kate was more right than either of us knew when she called me a storier, for at microphones from Wisdom to Madison Square Garden for decades now, I have told the tales of bucking horses that never were ridden and broncbusters who never were daunted, and of course the seenus joke a thousand times.

Television amplified it all, and still does. It also brings surprises such the one that happened not that long ago. Those of us in the UltraSports Network crew had pulled in to Reno for its Cowboy-O-Rama three-day show of the circuit's top riders competing for prize money Rags and his generation never dreamed of. I had

"Now let's sort you two out. Find out what kind of desperadoes I've let on the ranch. Come on up to the house."

"Cook? You don't say." He rubbed that lean jaw a certain way. "Mrs. 00 is only with us through haying, when she goes back to her natural talent for walloping clothes. And come roundup, we're gonna need a bull cook, if the other lady didn't mind being called that."

"She won't," I breathed, 00

At the end of haying, when Highpockets and the Jersey Mosquito and Blackie and the others were borne away by the dog bus to other harvests, other seasons, Herman and I stayed. And stayed and stayed. Joined, yes, by Gram and Letty, and as Skeeter would have said, by the grace of whatever ain't unholy.

They came to Wisdom not by Greyhound, of course, that last dog bus having run its course, but in a purple Cadillac, with Letty riding up front in the company of Rags, and Gram, no fool in these matters, perched in the back seat. I had started school, and I cannot begin to tell you how it elevated my standing when that big car pulled up

And Aunt Kate, who resembled Kate Smith but00. I am convinced she knew. She somehow sensed or put two and two together and came up with the three of us. Yet she did not sic the law on Herman, perhaps out of family loyalty to Gram. Or debt she owed meo. Or who knows, some 00 of human nature.

That, then, is the saga of the summer that went loco and ended up at a place called Wisdom. Although not quite the last word, because like Manitou walking the earth as a spirit in Herman's telling, a story restlessly stays on even after it is gone.

By that I mean there have been so many other chapters of my life hinged, page by page in memory, to that singular season when I experienced the dog bus

and all it took me to. Contrary to elderly grumbles, childhood is not wasted on the young. Rather, think of it as the onset of the history that attaches to each of us, the first letters of the signature on existence that we become. From that summer when I was a dippy kid making up yarns as fast as my imagination could go, memory possesses its own fleet way where silver greyhounds race everlastingly and in an instant, the red routes of remembrance lead to the three soldiers bound for Korea, and the ex-convict who did not quite outfox me and the phony minister who was foxier yet, and the daredevil van driver in the Twin Cities, and the generous Schneiders who even provided a tailormade name, and the Camp Winnebago boys who challenged me tooth and nail, and those whose names I only knew as Highpockets and Peerless Peterson and Midnight Frankie and Pooch and Blackie and the Jersey Mosquito. And at the beginning and the end, a wise woman speaks chapter and verse of the journey of a lifetime. "The dog bus gets all kinds, so you just have to plow right in and stake out a place for yourself."

So it has been, that matter of staking out a place. I was merely a college kid overflowing with ambition when my first break came--you can bet that Rags Rasmussen put in a word with the hometown committee--and I was hired as announcer at the Wisdom Roundup, the annual rodeo taking place within sight of the willows where Herman and I jungled up with the hoboos. From there, my career as the voice of the cowboy sport was straight up. Back there in our Manitowoc showdown, Aunt Kate was more right than either of us knew when she called me a storier, for at microphones from Wisdom to Madison Square Garden for decades now, I have told the tales of bucking horses that never were ridden and broncbusters who never were daunted, and of course the seenus joke a thousand times.

Television amplified it all, and still does. It also brings surprises such the one that happened just the other day. Those of us in the UltraSports Network crew

had pulled in to Reno for its Cowboy-O-Rama three-day show of the circuit's top riders competing for prize money Rags and his generation never dreamed of. I had just stepped off the bus, in this case still a Greyhound but refitted into the luxury coach our announcing crew travels in, to stretch my legs before showtime when someone over in back of the bucking chutes called out, "Scotty! I mean, Mr.Cameron!"

I turned to find a good-looking young woman hurrying toward me from the stalls where the barrel racers kept their horses. I am well beyond an age of interest to buckle bunnies, so I knew this wasn't that. Longlegged and coltish, in boots and jeans and practically fluorescent pink snap-button shirt that stood out in the right ways and fashionable Stetson blue as the sky, my visitor was the complete package of rodeo cowgirl these days. By the considerable mane of hair escaping from under the hat, I saw she was as redheaded as my own daughters. Freckles across her nose were another nice feature. I judged her to be still pretty much a kid, in her late teens, but an enterprising one for sure. Charging right up to me, she gave me a smile of the kind a man can't help but respond to. "Can I get your autograph, please, please? It would mean a lot to me," she coaxed, not that I needed any.

"Sure thing, ma'am," I replied, sounding as flagrantly old-fashioned as a square dance dosie-doe even to myself. But at least it showed I have worked my way past calling young women of today "little lady" or anything close.

So it was that I smiled back at her and produced a pen, saying, "Ready and waiting, angel." That last word slipped out, but she only gave me a sparkling look. No woman I had met yet, starting with those in my own family, seemed to mind being called something heavenly. This one proffered an immediate hand that had known ranch work and introduced herself as Mariah Rozier from the Two Medicine country.

"My mother was a barrel racer, too," she rushed the news out during the handshake. "Lexa McCaskill, back then?"

There should be such a thing as a half question mark for the way young people speak today, but after all my years of lingo with Herman the German, who am I to talk? From somewhere back in the hundreds of rodeos I had put voice to, I was a little surprised at myself when I could honestly tell her, "I remember the name."

"She and Dad are in there," she wrinkled her nose at the glitzy casino across the parking lot from the rodeo grounds, "until my go-round. They claim they're going to pay for the trip playing the slot machines. The quarter ones?"

I laughed. "From my experience, you have a better shot at the prize money than they do. What have you got for me to do some penmanship on?" I was somewhat let down when she passed me a crumpled Cowboy-O-Rama program. "You don't have an autograph album?"

"Oh, but I do." She whipped out a palm-size smartphone with a glowing screen. "I'll put you on here and scrapbook it." I have given up trying to follow what her generation can perform with handheld gadgetry, and simply leafed on through the rodeo program to find the Event Results page for enough white space to write on.

Still high-spirited, she made a pretty good pass at flattering me with, "Know what? You look a lot better than that cartoon of you in the Rodeo Hall of Fame."

"That gives me hope," I sighed. Starting to write from memory, I said offhandedly, "Maybe you'll make it to there yourself someday."

"I'm setting out to," she said with the total confidence of the young. "I start at Treasure State U in Great Falls this fall. Communications major." With her complexion, when she blushed, as she did now, it went to the roots of her hair.

Peeking at me to make sure I wouldn't laugh, she confessed, "I want to be a big-time sports announcer, like you." Emboldened when I seemed to take her seriously, she nodded toward the deluxe Greyhound with a sassy grin. "Maybe have a rig like that of my own?"

I followed her gaze to the fancily painted bus, my home on the road for more seasons than I wanted to count, with the bright red lettering emblazoned on its side where the silver dog used to run.

DEAN OF THE ARENA

SCOTTY CAMERON

BRINGS YOU *THE WORLD OF RODEO*

AN ULTRASPORTS EXCLUSIVE.

"I have to warn you, getting to be an oldtimer comes with it," I told her, meaning it about being tagged as dean of anything. To change the subject, I asked, "Hey, when are you up in the barrel racing? I'll give you a big-time introduction, how about."

"Awesome! The second go-round. Queen and I didn't come all the way from Montana to lose," she vowed without a trace of doubt.

"Queen! Now there's a name for a horse." Pausing in my inscribing, I was ready to go into the coincidence of a colossal work mare with that name drawn from a deck of cards and wonder if it was the same with her pony.

Before I could get a word in edgewise, the confident racer breezed on.

"Sure is. I call her that after my favorite band. *We are the champions*," she sang, doing a little dance, "*of the world!*" You know that Queen song?"

"No, but I knew one of those champions," I said huskily, overtaken by the thought of Rags Rasmussen in purple glory atop a mean bronc. I could see him rub his jaw at Cowboy-O-Rama, where a rider sliding into the saddle with a bucking horse under him has to wait out commercials for the casinos sponsoring my

television show. Some things change seemingly overnight in this spinning world, I reminded myself as every man since Adam has had to. While other pieces of the past timelessly go on, like the Diamond Buckle hatband that still adorns my Stetson and the black arrowhead I wear in the clasp of my western bolo tie when I'm on camera in the announcing booth. I don't call it luck any more, but something that defies the odds drives those of us with rambunctious imaginations, change be damned. I could feel the ambition coming off this unlikely soulmate in her skyblue Stetson, in her flush of youth the princess of all that life had to offer, and concentrated on penmanship that had to say something from my years to hers.

She went up on tiptoes in her stirrup-scuffed boots, trying to peek. "Wow, what all are you writing?"

"You'll see. I learned it from somebody wiser than me."

When Herman finally did write in my autograph album, there on the last bus to Wisdom, he came up with something he wouldn't tell me the source of, except to say it was not the doings of Longfellow or Goethe. I fixed up his English as he translated aloud from German. As he labored the last of the lines into ink, he had taken on that expression of giving a little think and said, "Karl May is turning in his grave because he did not put eye-dea in book before us, I betcha, Donny," winking his glass eye.

Thus it was first written in Herman's hand, but I'm pretty sure it is my truest verse as well.

*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.*

When I was finished and gave back the rodeo program, the barrel racer setting out to be a winner in life had her smartphone at the ready to capture the

inscription, but stopped to read it over more than once, freckles congregating as she crinkled her nose at herself. "That's really nice, even if I'm not sure I get it all."

"Don't worry, angel. Someday you will."

###

Horses must have grown since my original dream of driving the stacker team, because the work mare, Queen, stood way over me even with my hat on as I struggled to her side with my arms full of the floppy set of leather straps and metal fastenings that constituted a harness. All of which must be flung, lightly as possible, onto Queen's broad back and then spaced just right from neck to tail and buckled double-quick under the belly with the girth strap to hold the whole slippery apparatus in place and the pulling lines called traces promptly snapped into the hames on the horse collar and so on. What it all adds up to is that a person pretty spiffily had better know what he is doing in harnessing up an animal weighing nearly a ton and the horse needs to understand it is being handled sensibly before its never too plentiful supply of patience runs out.

"Easy, hoss, whoa now, good old Queen, just stand there, attaway," I chanted softly to accustom the mare to my voice while I labored the sections of harness into place on her, wishing I was age thirteen and a foot taller. Looming over me like the giant mother of the horse race, Queen only twitched her gray ears in response, but I could tell she was growing restive as I strained on tiptoes to settle a twisted strap into place on her lofty back.

Every moment of this, I was aware of Lon Ames leaning against the barn wall in back of the stall with his hands in his pockets, critically observing my every

maneuver. Watching in agony next to him was Herman, asking anxiously, "Help some, can I?" as I reached the part of harnessing nobody including the horse liked, situating the crupper that had to band across directly beneath the tail, always a very touchy proposition. At best was the threat of being caught in a discharge of manure the size of green apples, at worst was the danger of getting kicked across the barn.

"Nope," the foreman was absolute. "You'll have your own work cut out for you. The hotshot junior horseman here has to do this his own self."

I will say that as incentives go, the threat of a long walk back to town makes you stretch yourself in a lot of ways. Ever so gingerly I flipped the tail up and settled the crupper into place, prayers or whatever they were for once answered when I did not receive a cascade of horse crap and could edge out of the stall, the harnessing done and the mare only giving me a farewell fart instead of what she could have. Trying not to pant, I couldn't help asking, "How come she's called Queen instead of Big Bertha or something?"

"Rags's idea, from cards," replied Lon Ames, 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 thinker," Herman jammed in, taking that way of warning me not to point out half of that problem could be solved with the French Bible deck in his duffel.

"She's a lot of horse anyway," I left the matter and the tremendous mare at, and turned to the other half of the workteam in the next stall, a tail-swishing black gelding called Bingo. I didn't like the looks of that busy tail. "Anything I ought to know about this cayuse?"

A twitch of the foreman's mustache acknowledged that at least I was bright enough to ask. "Likes to be bribed. Give him a a jag of oats and he'll settle down and let you do anything you want to him."

Sure enough, with Bingo complacently chewing oats I was able to sling the harness on with more confidence, although the tugging and buckling and so on was still quite a reach. Big Hole horses evidently were also capital-B Big. Driven by determination, I darted around Queen's almost as sizable mate until the harnessing was done, then joined Herman in nervously awaiting the foreman's assessment.

"I've seen faster," his dry manner shriveled our hopes. "But you did 'er," he had to admit. "Leave the team tied up until we get to taking equipment to the hayfield." Shoving off from the wall, he headed out of the barn shaking his head but saying, "Let's go to the bunkhouse and get you established with the rest of this world-beating crew."

My feet barely tickled the ground, I was so highly excited as I crossed the yard of the ranch owned by the champion saddle bronc rider of the world. This lucky break was out the far end! Miles better than what I had tried to talk Gram into back at the start of summer when I had my grand scheme of hanging on at the Double W. 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 half a dozen kinds of a fugitive? Most of all, I now was a teamster, maybe the youngest ever and fit to be in Believe It or Not!, even.

I was half into another world, one totally without any Bible-dispensing pickpocket nor MOST WANTED posters nor the kid prison called an orphanage nor for that matter, Aunt Kate--when Herman gradually dropped back a few steps

behind Lon Ames's businesslike strides toward the bunkhouse and I heard a significant "Ssst."

Slowing until I was next to him, surprised at his bothered look, I whispered, "What is it?"

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

"Yeah!"

"One something is on my mind," he fretted, quite a change from his usual "Nothing to worry."

Before he could go on, we heard, "Hold on a sec, here's somebody you might as well meet and get it out of the way." Halting us, Lon Ames called across the yard to a limping man carrying a pan of feed to the chickenhouse. "New hands, Smiley, come get acquainted."

The choreboy, as I knew him to be and Herman was destined to find out, swerved toward us swinging a leg held out stiff. Huh, I thought to myself, first Louie Slewfoot and then the bus driver Hoppy, and now this gimpy ranch hand, all in one summer. Maybe they came in threes, like celebrity deaths and 00.

Smiley, whose name outside the clown makeup might as well have been Cranky As Hell. An encounter with a Brahma bull that turned out wrong had left him with a cowboy leg, crooked and off at an angle which gave him a 00 gait. He seemed to resent the world every step he took.

"When you gonna let me shoot that cow?"

"How many times do I have to tell you," the foreman 00ed, "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 that, and I was in no position to help out.. "Waltzing Matilda is only a damn cow," Lon Ames went on. "Don't make her out to be some kind of hoodoo."

"A bitch from hell, is what she is. Shat on me again." The evidence was fresh and green on his pantleg. "Did her best to kick me, too."

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

"One Eye here will be handling the sickles."

"He's welcome to all the sonofabitching things there is as far as I'm concerned."

The bunkhouse was about what was to be expected in those days, brown beaverboard walls, ironframe cots. Linoleum on the floor. I looked around real quick, concerned about the bunk situation, and saw there were two empty ones off in a corner. Highpockets told me merely with the shift of his eyes in that direction that he had saved those for Herman and me, and we lost no time in unrolling our bedrolls and chucking the duffel out of the way.

"First order of business." 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 00.

"Those lids of yours," the foreman "Diamond Buckle hatbands. The owner thinks these'll add a bit of class."

There was a moment of uncertainty, going back to the rants in the hobo jungle about .

"We can maybe stand a little fancying up," Highpockets finally decided for them all. 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. Herman and I had no qualms, proud to share the Diamond Buckle, even it was the size of a locket. All we lacked now was the owner of that champoinship 00, and of all the land that 00.

On the drive from the Wisdom hobo jungle to the ranch, I had hoped out loud, "Is Rags around?"

"Naw, he's at the Cheyenne rodeo. How'd you know the place is his? Most of these 'boes could be working for Hopalong Cassidy, for all they know."

"Oh, yeah, about the time school starts we'll have to go back east to--" Herman tensed--"Pleasantville. It's around New York, you know. Gramps has a job there, he's the handyman at the Reader's Digest place."

Lon Ames glanced at the pair of us. "Out here, we're not big on previous. Just so's you can do the job."

The ranch. "Maybe *is* Switzerland."

Manitowoc could have been a million miles away. For that matter, so could Great Falls and Gram.

"All right, as soon as you get sorted out here, meet me at the equipment shed. Grease up.

Until Herman asked:

"Donny? What are sickles?"

Harv

needs
repagination

The last two seats were way at the back of the bus, which meant the entire hobo contingent had a chance to look us over from stem to stern as we wove up the aisle. Stepping aboard right after us, from tossing my suitcase and Herman's duffel into the baggage compartment with a collection of bedrolls and what looked to me like bundles of belongings but for some reason were called bindles, the driver sang out, "Okey-doke, final call. Last bus to W-I-S-D-O-M, for those of you who can spell."

"We're all scholars of the Braille sort," a man taller and brawnier than the rest called out.

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

"That's us, Hoppy, last but nowhere near least," a scrawny old fellow with a cracked voice was heard from next. "Had a chance to take drivin' lessons since then, have ye?"

The driver snorted and made as if to fling his cap at the offender. "I have druv longer than you been off your ma's hind tit."

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

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

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

Hoppy mastered the gearshift somewhat better on the downhill run from the Butte business district and away, I could now hope, from the nightmarish orphanage. Herman was breathing easier, too, with the splash of MOST WANTED posters receding behind him. The tortured side of his face missing its eye relaxed a little, even. As the bus hit the highway, I took a last look back at the famous Butte hill where miners dug like gophers to extract copper, my imagination building up the headframes towering over the mines into hangman's scaffolds that didn't get either of us.

That fantasy was put to rest as big Highpockets, who by all indications was some sort of topkick of the hoboes, made his way to the rear and squatted in the aisle by us. Up close, he showed more wear and tear than at first appearance, what Gram called weary lines at the corners of his hooded eyes. Some time back, his nose apparently had been rearranged by a fist--quite possibly from battling his way into being hobo boss--and he bore a sizable quarter-moon scar at the corner of his mouth. But I would not want to have been the other person in a fight, strong as his unrelenting gaze was and the rest of him more than enough to back it up. Cordial but direct, he asked, "You fellows going calling on the near and dear, down in the Hole? Or what?"

Or what required some answering on this bus, all right, as it bucketed along making exhaust noise as if it needed a new muffler, or maybe any muffler. Catching on to the situation if not the conversation level, Herman intuitively sealed his lips in favor of mine.

"Huh-uh, we're going haying like everybody else," I launched into. "See, I'm a stacker team driver, and my grandpa here is a sort of a roustabout, good at lots of stuff. But you need to excuse his not talking," the story built as fast as I could get it out of my mouth, "he's straight from the old country and doesn't savvy English very much. He's over here taking care of me because"--I had to swallow hard to move from invention to the real answer about near and dear relatives--"my parents passed away, and we're all each other has." That at least was the truth of the moment, although Gram was due a major mental apology for substituting Herman for her in the larger picture of life.

Highpockets heard me out with scarcely a blink, his scrutiny all the more unnerving for that. More than a few of the other hoboes were swung around in their seats taking all this in. Like them, Highpockets had on a shapeless old hat that signified rough living and outdoor labor, more than likely the mark of being a true

hobo, I saw too late. Sitting back on his haunches, he eyed our Stetsons and my rodeo shirt. "Are you saying you and Gramps are on your uppers?"

Fortunately I had enough bunkhouse lingo to answer, "We're not broke, but we can see it from here." All the honesty I could summon seemed to be called for. "What it is, we got robbed blind. Back on the dog bus, the one from Billings, I mean." Herman, who had gone stiff as a coffin lid at my designation of him as grandpa, unbent enough to bob his head in confirmation of "robbed blind." I plunged on. "A sonofabitching phony preacher gyppo"--my vocabulary gleaned from the Double W riders fit right in with this audience, it seemed--"picked Gramps's pocket and wiped us clean, so that's why we're on here with you." I made myself shut up, praying that was just enough and not too much or too little.

It at least worked with Highpockets, who relaxed and bounced on his haunches a bit, glancing around at the other listening hoboes. "Their bad luck to run into a fingersmith, pulling the old sky pilot dodge, eh, boys? Seen that one put over on many a pilgrim." He slapped my knee, startling the daylights out of me, and gave Herman that round O sign of forefinger touching the tip of the thumb, the rest of the fingers up, which means OK. Herman smiled weakly. "We don't steal," Highpockets was saying, his gunsight gaze sweeping around to take in the whole set of rough-and-ready men, "at least from each other." Unfolding to his full height, nearly scraping the ceiling of the bus, he gestured around. "You're gonna be with us, better howdy up with the boys."

Right then the bus jolted off the highway, slewing somewhat too fast onto a gravel road headed south. Highpockets grabbed a seatback to keep his balance, laughing. "Hold on to your Stiversants," he advised about our Stetsons, "here comes the real haywagon ride." Another of the hoboes yelped to the driver, "Kick 'er in the ribs and let 'er buck, Hoppy!"

"I'll do the driving, you do the sitting with your thumb up your butt, how about," the driver hollered back, wrestling the steering wheel as the shuddering bus adjusted to the gravel surface, more or less. Which had suddenly narrowed to what my father the construction catskinner would have scoffed at as a goat trail, so much so that Herman and I now were peering almost straight down the steep bank of a big fast-flowing river on our side. I gulped, and Herman narrowed his good eye in concern. I know it wasn't possible for the rear tires to be traveling on thin air over the water, but that's how it seemed.

Unconcerned about the Greyhound flirting with the fishes, Highpockets got back to introductions up and down the aisles. The Jersey Mosquito. Blackie. Oscar the Swede. Midnight Frankie. Snuffy. Overland Pete. Shakespeare, who looked to me like any ordinary human being.

"Then there's Fingy," Highpockets pointed to a squat swarthy man who gave Herman a comradely wink and waved a hand short of two fingers.

The roster of the last bus to Wisdom went on pretty much like that. Bughouse Louie. Pooch. Peerless Peterson. The California Kid, who was the most gray-haired of the bunch. So many others of the sort that I was losing track, and Herman looked swamped from the first by the roll call of nicknames.

No sooner had Highpockets finished than the scrawny one with shoulderblades jutting high as his neck, the Jersey Mosquito known familiarly as Skeeter, leaned into the aisle and addressed me. "That's us, to the last jot and tittle. Now who be ye?"

At least I had no trouble figuring this out, although I had a pang at forsaking Red Chief.

"I'm Snag." My jack-o'-lantern smile showed off the jagged reason. "And him here," I indicated Herman, "is One Eye," no explanation needed there either.

"Good enough for me." Highpockets credited us both and flashed that OK sign again. "Welcome to the Johnson family," he left us with and worked his way seatback by seatback, the aisle a lot like the deck of a rolling ship as the bus galloped along on the unpaved road, up front to where he sat.

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 gross thinger 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 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 relinquishing 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."

"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."

"I call that heaven," 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 more than full day that began with bear robbing and 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 trip was not the longest journey of my life, yet was taking me farther than I ever dreamed. 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 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. Or, say, sailing on the giant ore boat Chequamagon as it pitched and rolled in the Strait of Mackinac, the crew huddling in fear of the Witch of November except for the brave sailor Dutch, as he was then, at my side.

On the immediate other hand, Herman Schmidt 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 Blackie, whose hobo name particularly mystified me because I couldn't see anything dark about him, just a pale unshaven guy with mouse-colored hair peeking from under his hat, 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 names 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 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 your thinger, 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 know 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 names to endorse a check. The rest of us is regular scholars enough to cash our skookum paper right there in The Watering Hole, that's the bar in town. More efficient that way."

I thanked him for that vital lesson and scooted back to my seat. Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, I hunched there stewing to myself, was there no limit to what I had to learn by hand, this summer like no other? Feeling sorry for myself and the autograph book, I was fanning through the empty pages that would never know Overland Pete and Bughouse Louie and maybe too many others to make the pursuit worthwhile, when Herman came to the rescue. "Donny, nothing to worry. Other people will write in your book up to the full, I betcha."

I hadn't even known he was awake--it was twice as hard to tell, after all, with only one eye to judge by--but now, same as ever, he took in the passing landscape as if the West was the Promised Land.

"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 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 post office, the Watering Hole saloon as mentioned by the Jersey Mosquito, a supper club that looked like it had started life as a cafe, some outbuildings, and a sprinkle of houses around. I had seen Palookavilles that amounted to more. Yet the community of Wisdom famously carried one of the best names ever, by way of Lewis and Clark who were thinking big when they passed through the area on their expedition and grandly dubbed three nearby rivers the Philosophy, the Philanthropy, and the Wisdom. None of those graftings lasted through time and local reference--the Wisdom became altered simply to the Big Hole River, which proved to be the roundabout torrent our road had hugged so closely, and still was flowing good and wide here at our destination--but the little town picked up the name and used its remote location to good advantage as the provision point for the 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.

Blackie 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, Donny."

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 like what the hoboes 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 flames that we were joining the bottom end of society, manual laborers with leather gloves stuck in a hind pocket, maybe their only possessions beyond a bindle and a bedroll. Now I was the one swallowing hard.

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

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

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

"Doesn't speak the English, eh?" Highpockets gave me a blinkless 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. Dog robber he may have been, but Wisdom did not seem to offer much prospect along that line.

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

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

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

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

I hustled to the nearest steel shelter with my suitcase, Herman following with his duffel and looking thoughtful at the prospect of the metal tunnel just large enough to hold us if we slept end to end. "Go be acquainted," he more less shoosed 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?"

"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 names all

over the map, Candlestick Bill and Buttermilk Jack and Dakota Slim and the Reno Kid--not to be confused with the California Kid--and Left-handed Marv, who had an empty sleeve where his right arm should have been, and so on through enough others to confuse St. Peter at the gate. My presence as a kid with no kind of a capital K did not seem to bother anyone since Highpockets vouched for me and he clearly was the topkick of the whole bunch, the Big Ole--the squarehead kind--as I soon learned this unelected but acknowledged type of boss was called. Why the hobo community fashioned an oversize Swede as the last word in leadership, I hadn't the foggiest idea--it was their lingo, not mine--but in any case, Highpockets saw to things that needed seeing to, including keeping the peace now when Peerless Peterson and the Reno Kid scuffled over which of them had claimed the spot under a favorable cottonwood first. With that settled by Highpocket's threat to knock their heads together, things went toward normal as Overland Pete called out, "Isn't some charitable soul gonna be the bugler or are we gonna parch to death?"

"That'd be me, damn it." Blackie pulled out a bottle from his bindle and looked around before taking the first swig. "Though without One Eye here to say, we maybe can't tell if that Butte hooch merchant sold me Thunder or maiden piss."

"Let's take it on faith," the Jersey Mosquito said, smacking his lips. "Send the old Bird around."

When the bottle of cheap wine reached me, I of course took some teasing about whether I was going to wet my whistle or stay wet behind the ears, but while it was tempting to join in and initiate myself into the hobo order with a slug of Thunderbird, I lost my nerve at the last moment and passed the bottle along with the excuse, "My Gramps says he does the elbow bending in the family."

"Wise man to to keep you on milk and cookies," said Fingy, accepting the bottle from me. "This stuff'll galvanize your insides," he added before bugling it up for a long snort.

"You said it," said Pooch, taking the bottle next in both hands and duplicating Fingy's swig.

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

Meanwhile the hoboies 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 Gram's suitcase?" Meaning *How could you!*

"Don't be horrified," he begged. "It was that or the moccasins, Donny. 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 mumbled, taking it different 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, for the privilege of living like hoboes.

Even yet, that day's maze of waking in balcony chairs in the Old Faithful Inn and scooting for high ground for a not quite inedible breakfast swiped from a grizzly and grabbing bus seats on borrowed money and surviving that treacherous Butte waiting room to finally land, on the last bus to possibly misnamed Wisdom, in the hobo jungle Herman and I were now picking our way down to in the moonlight--even yet, it reads to me like a full chapter of my life, but we were not out of the proverbial woods yet.

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 Harvey 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," Harvey mentioned.

Highpockets gazed across the leaping flames 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 hoboes 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:

"Harvey."

In the silence that met that, he seemed to reconsider.

"I guess you can call me Harv."

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

"Whatever moniker a man wants to go by is his own business, I reckon," he decided to make an allowance for Harvey or rather Harv, which seemed to me the wisest way to handle an apparently tight-lipped Galahad of the West whom only the mean little Glasgow sheriff and I knew as the jailbreaking fool for love.

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

"Still waters can bust dams," Harvey 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. Harvey 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 Harvey. "Hi again."

He chewed stew which had reached that point, a few moments 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 meaningfully.

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

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

"Then we'll get along," Harv drawled, proffering a hand even larger than Herman's outsize mitt.

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

"Wasn't that tough as jailbreaking goes," Harv reflected, both of us listening keenly but Herman with real reason to. "They got 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 Janie after her shift at the supper club." The mention of his girlfriend brought a pining expression, which he resolutely shook off. "Had to move on from Glasgow, of course," summing up in an aside to me, "you know how Carl is."

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

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

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

After that evident truth, he turned reflective again.

"Still and all, he had something there on the bus, about I should go haying. Taking him up on it, though he don'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 going visiting 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."

"Sure plenty of it to see around here." From a day that must have been even longer than ours, Harv stretched out arms about twice the size of most men's and yawned mightily. "Had to hitch a ride on a beer truck to get here, took a while. That last bus out of Butte was full, if you can believe it."

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 patrol car with a big star on the door practically luminescent in the moonlit night was pulling up. Harv

stayed as he was, as though none of this turn of events applied to him, Herman and I caught up in his example, whether or not we should have taken to the brush.

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

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

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

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

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

But just before he reached ours, Peerless Peterson spat a sizzle of tobacco juice into the fire. "Why can't the bastards leave 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, Harvey 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, from the county seat at Dillon. He's not the worst as hick dicks go." He still was a 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 sheriff and Highpockets acknowledged each other by name as the 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 sheriff was half again bigger than Harv's banty-size Glasgow nemesis, somewhat beefy the way people get from sitting at 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's 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 sheriff got down to business. "Speaking of relaxation, maybe it'd help everyone's mood to know I'm only coming back from district court in Missoula, 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 sheriff 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 sheriff 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 sheriff 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 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 sheriff a sad sweet smile, Herman uttered "Ja," which for once I was really glad sounded so close to good old American "Yah."

"Well, I've seen worse bunches of renegades," the sheriff 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 until next year."

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

"Does not matter much," he too sounded like he was at the bottom of a well. "Mister Sheriff 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 some 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. Thankfully, 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 practically swimming. Off he went to the gravel bar and I ducked into the brush below the road.

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 rodeo 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 hoboes 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 great unknown territory 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, Lon Ames by name, 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 thnk they were all mechanical geniuses." He paused, studyng 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. He squinted shrewdly at the bowlegs on the foreman. "I betcha he knows horse people when he sees some, ja?" his murmur was meant to be encouraging, but missed the mark on us.

"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," Ames 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 back and weak mind wisecrack. Then, slowly he stepped forward as if to take the world on his shoulders. "S'pose 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, Ames was not as impressed as he might have been. "Anyhow, you look the part. 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." Briskly he turned to the other hoboos, his gaze passing me--did he show a flicker of interest at how I was practically falling out of my shoes with eagerness?--as he ticked off on his fingers, "Now I need two mower men and a couple of buckrakers and maybe three dump rakers 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 Frankie chose driving a mowing machine and Blackie and Fingy the easier 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 Ames 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," Ames 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 Lon Ames was committing the same kind of sin against common sense as dumb Sparrowhead on the Double W. Some writer up in society once claimed that the ability to hold two contrary facts in the mind at once was the mark of genius, but I must not have been marked that way. Trying to do so just 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, 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. Ames, sir. Didn't you maybe forget you need a stacker team driver?"

Ames leaned against a rear fender, crossing his arms at my challenge. "Not really. I figure to do 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 skoogy from hitting a ditch and maybe the raker does, too" I started down a well-remembered the list of the Double W haying mishaps. "Or what if the cook throws a fit and quits and--"

"Hey, hey, I have enough keeping me awake at night already," the foreman put a stop to my onslaught. Thinking over what I'd reeled off, he pushed his rodeo 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 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?" The foreman 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

Lon Ames 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 need jobs."

Ames still hesitated. "Nothing against you, but you *are* 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 foreman 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 hoboos are sometimes the teamsters they say they are and sometimes not. You're on, 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, Ames 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?" Ames demanded. "I'd have thought Giddyup and Whoa were pretty much the same anywhere."

"Switzerland."

"No hooey? A yodeleer, is he?" The foreman seemed entertained by the idea, laughing into 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 Ames. "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 got it knocked."

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

"Didn't you see the clasp in his hatband? The livestock brand?"

The galoot salute, meaning No.

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

tracks of braves through all time--I was overawed at the amount of guts it took to bring out that grotesque wound for the world to see. I could not help staring, and no doubt people would--but ^{chances were} most likely the only resemblance anyone take away ^{not be to wanted} would be something like one of those illustrations in *Treasure Island*, of a beached one-eyed pirate.

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

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

At the counter, the clerk idly doing a crossword puzzle took in my suitcase and Herman's duffel with a bored glance as we stepped to the ticket counter. The missing eye didn't faze him a bit. "You boys for the special?"

Herman gave an elaborate shrug as if he didn't grasp that, pretty much the the case for both of us, and left the matter to me. Accordingly I answered with a question. "How do you mean?"

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

The last?

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

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

of
our
ratty
message

I couldn't tell which made me madder, the slam at me as the rawest of travelers or the crack about the wicker suitcase, which for the first time I stuck up for. Hard as it was, I had to ignore the mouthy newsboys--surer than ever that they were the type of dickheads orphanage life produced--because all it would take was one of them wondering who I was hanging around waiting for so long and then catching sight of Herman's likeness on the WANTED poster and yapping, "Say, ain't he the one just went into the johnny?"

Determinedly looking casual, I tried to kill time by gazing around and around the terminal except at the incriminating bulletin board. No Herman, no Herman, as minutes ticked away. Now I was the one with nerves plucking a tune. Fuck and phooey and then some. At this rate, we would never get anywhere, most especially the Big Hole. Butte had us like quicksand, was my fear. Mired in a mass of people with nothing better to do than to stare at strangers, one of whom was a walking target of the FBI. At the other extreme, I couldn't help but dwell on the ex-convict singling me out in the rest room in Bemidji and what followed from that. Had Herman been rolled by some thug in there who thought he carried substantial money on him, maybe knocked out or worse? My worry grew every time I checked the depot clock.

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

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

Words failed me as he said out of the twisted corner of his mouth, "Ready to git, Donny." Talk about walking like Winnetou and Manitou are with you in the

If I had learned anything from experience, it was to catch the bus first and deal later with whatever came along.

Herman may have agreed in principle, but in practice he badly lagged as we started to the ticket window, overtaken by understandable reluctance to show himself with his fugitive likeness mirrored on the wall. Nerves all but twanging out loud, he kept neglecting concealment by the candy bar to shoot jumpy glances over his shoulder into the swarm of people as we tried to edge through the waiting room without attracting notice. "Ssst," I hissed at him to quit it. Things were bad enough without him acting like a master criminal trying to slink out of town.

About then we passed the usual sign for the conveniences, and before I knew it, he had faded like a shadow into the men's rest room, leaving me abandoned with "Donny, I be right back."

Oh, great. Now I was stranded there trying to seem inconspicuous while minding the duffel bag and wicker suitcase, both of which looked suspiciously ratty even alongside the Butte mode of dusty old luggage probably pulled from under the bed. Right away I caught Herman's case of jumpiness. My imagination felt the entire depot population looking at me hanging around that moronic way on the path to the toilet with baggage bigger than I was, and while that may not have been purely the case, the sharp-eyed newsboys roaming the waiting room like coyotes on the hunt, constantly sorting people out as likely customers or not, I tensed up at as an immediate distinct threat.

"Hey, looka the greeny," one of them jeered as they circled past me the first time, which I knew damn well meant greenhorn.

"Yah, fresh off the boat," laughed another. "Probably got that willow yannigan from his granny in the old country."

making
his skin
jump

with names such as Destroying Angel and Look Out were not likely to be physical wonders and fashion plates, nor were they all necessarily examples of what the orphanage did to people. Even had Herman and I been given that realization then, there was a prickly feel that we had better watch our step--that was Butte for you, if you were an outsider--as we cautiously moved off from the Departures board toward the ticket office.

And then we both saw it at once. The bulletin board alongside the ticket window with all manner of things posted, but standing out like a billboard to us the bold black lettering NEW THIS WEEK FROM YOUR FBI and that lineup of posters with Herman's mug prominent on the very end.

once
again

Stopping dead in his tracks, he stared at himself across the distance of the long waiting room. "Are they after me everywhere?" a whisper of despair escaped him.

Did it ever seem so, at our each and every turn, but since then I have caught up with the lore that the dictatorial boss of the Federal Bureau of Investigation at the time, J. Edgar Hoover, used Butte as a Siberia for agents who had fallen out of his favor. Having too little else to do, the local FBI band of exiles was notorious for plastering the city and the country around--even unto Yellowstone National Park, in our experience--with the latest MOST WANTED posters, apparently in the hope of netting criminals in the backwaters of Montana. It was simply our rotten luck of the moment that with his face here, there, and anywhere, their most likely catch was Herman the German.

"Come on," I said through my teeth. "Here," I handed him what little was left of my candy bar, "hold this in front of your face and pretend to eat it while we go across there. We need those sonofabitching tickets right now." Queerly, the schedule board did not show any Wisdom bus beyond the one, even the next day.

Now here we were, only a pair of dog bus tickets short of the half-hidden town that was the gateway to hay heaven. I couldn't wait to get there, brimming as I was with visions of driving the stacker team on some well-run ranch with no Wendell Williamson to say Nuhhuh, horsepower over horses, the birdbrain, while Herman was hired on as--well, that would have to be determined. First, the ride of what appeared from the route map to be only a couple of hours at most, a snap of the fingers for seasoned travelers like us. With that prospect I felt revived after the long miles of the day so far, and Herman seemed to have perked up back into his on-the-loose self, too.

Now that,
we were in
B of flight
change
buses

On the other hand, the distance from the map to the ticket office on the far side of the waiting room gave us both cause to pause. From the moment we stepped in through the ARRIVALS swinging doors, the Butte bus depot looked like a hangout for bums and other toughs. Throughout the waiting room, poorly dressed men with bent shoulders and faces with a lot of hard mileage on them, the best description was, were slouched on benches that would never be mistaken for church pews, and the baggy-eyed women perched next to them did not look much better. Even more unsettling to me were scruffy boys my age roving through the crowd, shrilly hawking newspapers at the top of their voices. Orphans! was my immediate thought, captives of that close relative of the poorfarm, the state orphanage right here in Butte. Around the corner with its door wide open and just waiting, for all I knew, for Herman to be nabbed as a MOST WANTED and me to be dumped into that so-called home for outcast children. The Greyhound waiting room here in the place meant by that jackrabbit telegraph message that could shock a schoolyard to silence, *So and so got sent to the other side of the mountains*, spooked me down to my shorts, in other words.

Through time, it did dawn on me that citizens of a famously tough copper company town with neighborhoods called Muckerville and Dublin Gulch and mines

"See, it's a town called that," my finger had to come into it now to show him a dot on the map so small it was hard to tell from a flyspeck. "Wisdom must amount to something, it has a bus depot and everything, way down there in the Big Hole."

when Leaning in and adjusting his glasses, Herman tried to fathom all this. *so in perspective*

"Something been digged deep, and the town fell in?"

"Huh-uh, the Big Hole is a sort of a, oh, what do they call it, a real round valley with everything like this." I cupped my hands as if carrying water, Herman squinting his good eye as he followed the description. Giving a little think, he soon had the word.

"Basin?"

"That's it! The Big Hole Basin. It's famous in Montana, honest."

"Famous, what for?"

"Hay."

cut? change
 "Cow food?" He then shook his head long and hard. "Donny, are you lost in your mind? What good is hay to us? We cannot be cow farmers."

He continued to balk like that until I managed to spell out to him jobs on a ranch in the best hay country under the sun. "That's the really great thing about the Big Hole," I pressed my argument as I saw him waver in the face of facts such as actual wages to be made in a hideyhole off in a corner of gee-oh-raphy from anywhere. "There's hay up the yanger there, they'll be putting it up the whole rest of the summer. Time enough for--"

"--Killer Boy Dillinger to go away from public eyes," he thought out the rest for himself, nodding his head sanely now instead of shaking it like a rattle. "I take back that you left your mind, Donny," he apologized with a sort of laugh dry as dust. "Let's go to Wisdom place. Maybe some rub off, hah?"

extend
 waiting room. For once, we did not have to run eyes and fingers over the almighty map lettered COAST TO COAST THE FLEET WAY for our connection and destination. Up on the Departures board along with bus times to Denver and Seattle and Portland and Spokane and other metropolises of the West was all we needed to know.

3:10 TO WISDOM.

"Donny, no time to smart ourselves up like Einsteins," Herman had scolded me back there outside the Old Faithful Inn when we were stuck in despair before that all-weather map of bus routes, futilely trying to will ourselves beyond being broke and stranded, and for that matter MOST WANTED, in Yellowstone, which is when I had blurted that what we needed was Wisdom. "They throw me in the stony lonesome, like you say," he grumbled with another look over his shoulder, "I'll have plenty time to git wise."

"No, no, not that kind," I held rock-solid to my inspiration, surer than sure. "Wisdom is a real place we can go to, honest!"

Out of all the map dots of the West I had spotted it, as I kept 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. 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? Then it came to me, in something like fingerspitzengefühl style but from just the right glance alighting on the perfect place. All I had to do was convince Herman, who looked skeptical and then some.

*no,
in that
slam-bang
argument*

*cut
cut*

Herman hardly let our newfound wealth rest in his hand before buying bus tickets out of the natural wonderland of Yellowstone, but then tucked away the remainder of the money, this time in a shirt pocket that buttoned tightly, with the firm pronouncement, "Belly timber must wait, up the road. No candy bars even, until we git where we go."

That was reasoning I could not really argue with, although if it had been up to me, I would have been sorely tempted to risk the rainbow trout special for something to sit on top of that broon breakfast, as he called it, of decrepit bread and mushy pickles.

So it was that we arrived worse for wear inside as well as out, several hours and a long stretch of highway later and not done yet, at the Greyhound terminal in Butte, of all places, Herman unshaven for a couple of days and badly looking it and me in a wrinkled rodeo shirt showing every sign that I had been living in it day and night. Grooming was not foremost on our minds, however. Hunger was making me so cranky Herman had to relent on the candy bars, and he wolfed into the first of his as readily as I did mine while we hustled from the newsstand on into the

& a
couple of
bus
changes

"Uhm, sure, that's where we want to go."

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

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

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

What really caught our attention, though, was the horde of passengers waiting to board. It was all men. If we thought the Butte waiting room crowd were tough lookers, they were an Easter parade compared with this batch, sitting around on bedrolls that looked none too clean, ^{back} lounging around smoking roll-your-own cigarettes, and ^{they gave appearance of being} generally looking like they were straight off freight trains. Most of them wore the cheap dark-gray work shirts known as Texas tuxes which didn't show dirt, but even so, the wearers appeared to be badly in need of a

To us,
you bet.

hard case
yesterday
to see
as they
sat
more
air blew in
tobacco & man

washday. I know Herman was squinting at the gabbing sprawled bunch apprehensively, and surely I was doing the same.

Apparently we were on the driver's mind as much as he was on ours, because he halted under the overhang of the depot just out of earshot of the waiting passenger mob, and gave us a dubious look. "Free advice, worth what it costs, but maybe you gents ought to find some other way to get to Wisdom. 'Gainst regulations, but I can sneak you a refund." He inclined his head toward the squat old bus. "This is what's called the hay wagon, unnerstand. These yahoos aim to hire on in haying, down there in the Big Hole."

"Yeah, well," I spoke right up, Herman backing me with vigorous nods, "that's us, too. Haymakers."

"I dunno," the driver looked us over even more skeptically. "Nothing personal, but one of you seems sort of young and the other one pretty much along in years, to keep up with fellas like these."

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

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

I didn't, though, holding Herman back by his sleeve, too. A vision had come to me from the funnies, unsought but vividly there, of PeeWee the dimwitted little ^{dumb} hobo and his shabby pals mooching along in "Just Trampin'," from the looks of it about like this ragtag collection of humanity we were about to join. The question quavered out of me.

"Wait. Are all of them--bums?"

Quick as I said that, the driver turned to us in a sort of crowhop. "You got that all wrong, sonny," he schooled me, "bums don't ride busses. Tramps, now,

they maybe might if somebody was to give them the money," he furthered my education. "Been known to happen. But these fellas," our gaze followed his to the waiting men, "are hoboes, whole different thing. They ain't your total down-and-outers, more like hard-luck cases. Got to hand it to them, they travel around looking for work. Seasonal, like. Apple glommers, almond knockers, sugar beeters"--Herman's expression skewed even more as he tried to follow the driver's tally---"what hoboes do is follow the crops. Haymakers, about now, tough a job as any," he added pointedly with another skeptical look at the pair of us. "You better unnerstand, living rough like they do, hoboes by nature are a hard lot. Have to be. For them, it's root, hog, or die."

He paused to make sure it all, or at least enough, was sinking in on us.

"That refund is still ready and waiting."

must have given that. got that possible, at one
Herman put a bolstering hand on my shoulder, making our decision. I spoke it, in our biggest leap of fate or faith yet. "We're going with." *an special*

*Nothing
down's.*

Shrugging as if our blind determination was water off his back, the driver crowfooted away toward the waiting bus. "Hop on."

unspoken question, namely how in the name of Manitou or Winnitou or any other leading spirit were we going to get out of this geyser-blowing grizzly-thick wonderland?

Doing my best to make the mental process work as hard as the digestive one, I kept trying to come up with that back-of-the-mind thinger about Yellowstone, the tickle always maddeningly out of reach. Herman appeared to be thinking of nothing except the garbage grub served up by the green elephant, while I was on the edge of frustration. When I noticed him start to nibble a slice of bread a certain way, I couldn't take any more Hermanic high jinks. "Not now, huh?" I groaned.

Giving me a guilty look, he apologized. "Save Australia, I will." Casting aside the start of the toast map, he took on an expression at least as serious as mine.

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 trees, 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 was wood--walls, floor, balcony railings, chairs, benches, ashtray stands, light fixtures. It must have taken a forest to build it all. In the best of circumstances, I would have felt like I didn't belong in such rarefied lodgings. Penniless as we were in this parlor of tourist heaven, I more than half expected someone in authority to spot us instantly and order, "Throw them out. And into the stony lonesome, while you're at it."

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.

"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.

Meanwhile Herman had moved off from the Greyhound map and was studying the Events of the Day. "Herman, hey," I started to whisper to him that we didn't have time for the ranger talk on wildflowers or the nature walk through the steaming pools, when my stomach rumbled enough to deliver the message. Herman heaved a sigh, acknowledging how hungry he was, too. Still peering at the chalked list while I was growing wildly impatient for us to do something, anything, he poked a finger at what I thought was the most peculiar of the Events. "Look who else has appetite." SUNDOWN SUPPER FOR BRUIN--VIEW THE GRIZZLIES AT THE BEAR-FEEDING GROUNDS.

"Old Shatterhand fought grizzly once," the posting reminded him, not that it took much to send him off into the pages of Karl May. "Guess who wonned." He couldn't wait to wink me the answer. "Bear rug, not Old Shatterhand rug."

"Whoopity-doo for him," I let out in exasperation. "But goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, what are we gonna--"

He tapped the blackboard beside SUNDOWN SUPPER FOR BRUIN as if it was my own suggestion. "We have time, no chance for bus a while. Let's go see broons. Take our heads off our stomachs."

START

new
ch 3

infirmary, and down a couple of hallways and around enough corners, we came to a door with that sign on it.

Herman had the jitters about me doing this alone, but I pointed out that we didn't want the enemy alien thinger 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 really. Trying to buck him up, I in turn gave 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.

"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 Z, the rainbow trout special strikes again. Give a shout if I'm needed, I'm still catching up at the desk." She left me with a pat of

matter

checking
items
in my
coat
pocket

Z

encouragement, and I entered the medical inner sanctum trying to keep my chin up like the bravest Indian who ever walked in moccasins.

The doctor was slipping on his starchy clean white office coat. A man a lot larger than I expected, with a surprising amount of gray in his crewcut, he greeted me with a smile professional as the nurse's.

"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, sport, 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 practically strong enough to throw me out of the office itself. "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 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, 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 rollycoaster thinger." None of that enlightened him nearly enough, I could tell, but desperation sometimes grows into inspiration. "Here, see, 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. ⁹¹ I won't say her contribution to poetry ranks up there with Longfellow and Goethe, but I still think Mae Zimmerman'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.

"So we got here at twilight, that's yesterday," I burst into the full tale of us out to see the West, "and sure enough, there was what Herman, that's my uncle, called a lucky star, right over Old Faithful going off. But it took me until a little bit ago to put the star thinger together with what else your mom said back there on the dog bus, that one of their boys"--again bending close to listen, Dr. Schneider took this in with a twitch of smile--"fixes up people who fall into hot pools or get mauled by grizzlies in Yellowstone." His face turned serious as I told of getting robbed on the last Greyhound by the sonofabitching phony preacher, whom I barely restrained myself from calling that and more.

Straightening up, he 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?"

He mm-hmmed the way someone does to acknowledge they've heard what you've said, whether or not they believe it. "Why eleven dollars and forty cents?"

"Bus fare. Like my uncle says, we're just trying to get someplace south of the moon and north of Hell."

"You uncle has a strange sense of geography," he was half laughing. Turning serious again, he parked his hands in the side pockets of his office coat the way doctors do when they're about to deliver the news, good or bad.

"I've had some dillies come in here, but you beat all." I swallowed real hard at that. Then that twitch of smile showed up on him again. "Nellie," he called out to the front desk, "I've invented a new cure. Bring me a ten and a five from the cash drawer, please."

Looking at me curiously, the nurse swished in, handed him the money, gave me another look and left. Dr. Schneider started to pass me the ten-dollar bill and fiver, but then hesitated, giving me a heart flutter. "If you're so confounded broke, what are you eating on?"

I couldn't tell him bear food. "Not much."

"Nellie," he called through the doorway again, "the case has grown more serious. Bring me another five."

He added that fiver for something to eat to the pair of bills and handed me what amounted to a junior fortune, compared with my situation a minute before. Thanking him six ways to Sunday, I pocketed the money in a hurry and held out the autograph book. "Write down your address, please, huh? We're gonna pay you back, honest."

"Are you. When Uncle Wiggly gets over being nervous in the service, hmm?" Skeptical as he may have been, he wrote his name and address in, topping it with what he said was a prescription for a conditon like mine.

I met a boy with hair so red

it lit up whatever he said.

He does not need a lucky star,

his gift of gab will carry him far.

Passing the album back, Dr. Schneider gave me a last curious look as if still searching for a diagnosis. "You haven't told me, buddy, where that bus fare is supposed to take you."

When I did so, he half laughed again, ending up at what I hoped was just philosophical. "Good luck and Godspeed. Normally it takes most of a lifetime to reach there."

or:
When I
told him
I wanted
to get
there
but got
lucky
anyway.