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, but none that capture memory, page by page, so magically. Childhood is not wasted on the young.

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..

It happened not that long ago. 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?” behind the chute area at the Great Falls (Billings?) grounds.
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, little lady,"

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, 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).

"Queenie. That’s quite some name for a barrel horse."
“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 WW workhorse)

Teutonic, with maybe not enough emphasis on the tonic this once. Herman thought of it from Schwabian poet, I suppose, and my contribution besides fixing up his English as he translated aloud was to substitute 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 and ...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, kiddo. You will someday.”

###

Were you.” (or You don’t say. or that’s an interesting age.
Wouldn’t you have? 
A life is not a ride to do alone,
Too many roads to Palookaville await.
If two of you, though, go on your own,
Your dreams together will lead to truest fate.

“Can’t I help with something?”

No kidding? 
in a man-to-man way.
“it’s a sort of magic, maybe?”

My hair stiffened, because naturally I heard that as Manitou walkers.
Ghosts ambling around.
“Aw,
“You know some redskins, I betcha, alongside paleface riders?” he mocked the Kate’s charge that he had cowboys and Indians on the brain.
“You know some redskins, I betcha, alongside paleface riders?” he mocked the Kate’s charge that he had cowboys and Indians on the brain.
the woman who appeared on my hand again when I hesitantly put it out was done up in marcel curls, her probably black tresses standing out as light-colored as a freshly shorn sheep fleece

with the gallery of oldfangled portraits gazing at us as if peeking through windows of a distant time

Donal
You think big when you’re that age; life hasn’t taught you the limits of possibility yet. I was sure as anything

My voice was so dry it sounded like it had been through a wringer.

It picked at me, that in some part of myself...

In light of what was to happen, I have thought a lot about...

That may seem like forever ago. But time’s stopless arithmetic will do the same to the year where we are now, depend on it.

Maybe I was only chest-high smart about life, but I was (trying to grow)

“How about that?”
“Herman, you’re too much.”
“Wouldn’t you know,”

My mind stumbled this way and that.

Maybe I was put together wrong,
I started breathing again. (FIND in Bartender?)
I tussled with it.
It feels as deep in me as my bones, the conviction that...

Or was I imagining.
My mind was full of troubles.
Put my mind to it, I could (was perfectly capable of)...
I turned my brain inside-out with thinking, and still none of it would come right.

I craved...

At night on the bus: like the keenly blind, my ears had to be my set of eyes.

I was still bothered. “What if the...

“Right. What I was about to say.”

populated my imagination.

A pocket of my mind still held...

Maybe I was born with something on my mind.

Grinning like a fool, and knowing it, I...

I came undone. (FIND Bartender)

I came apart (at the seams).

I was deflated.

It made me adaptive, I’ll say that for it.

I marveled at...

I was naturally curious.

I reddened.

I never did particularly well in school’ recess was my best subjct. Luckily I liked to read, shut myself within the pages of a book, and that pulled me through...

I could decipher only that...

The kind of a gamble where you could come out shirtless. (used in earlier book?)

, honest as daylight but she couldn’t see it.

What word is strong enough?

...from the tail of my eye

I had it by heart, ...
Call it by whatever name you like, but it is...

"I'll be go to hell."

"What in hell-all (is going on; or, is this about)

"Okay, okay, don't have a shitfit."

I knew I was a gone geezer.

I answered quick as a shot.

the tireless greyhound still running flat-out.

A person didn’t need a bushel of brains to know...

Herman was about as musical as a boulder.

"As in ob-vi-ous, Schmidt. Don't be so."

Gram kept track, after all.

Those days fell away from us like fleeces.

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 ma...

"What the hell kind of a question is that?"

Clear as the wingbeats of something swooping on me.

Herman apparently had never heard of tact, if they had that in German.
still were on the loose in 1951...

What a privilege life was, all of a sudden.

His head tilted that quizzical way.

Logic got lost at this point.

as if he was serving laughing gas.

Gram

Sayings...Some were obviously wise. Others were baffling. "That’s for me to know and you to find out."

“When I get out of the hospital, the nuns will let you know how I am and--”

“Yes, yeah, fine,” I muttered.

“This is as new to me as it is to you,” she husked in turn.

She had been saying that about our situation ever since the pair of us were left on our own in life.

She looked drawn.

Couldn’t life ever let up, on people like us?

The half moon of his forehead hovering near as I clasped my hands between my knees

I was too young
Imagine a 00 that cuts back and forth, leaving a 00 of falled hay. Those were sickles, the 00 of haying. In that time of horse-drawn mowing machines, those teeth had to be sharpened meshing together like a zipper but instantly grindstone with pedal. Riding the seat... “Karl May...”

On the drive from the Wisdom hobo jungle to the ranch, I asked, “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.

“First order of business.”

“What’re these for?” Peerless asked suspiciously.

“Those lids of yours. Diamond Buckle hatbands. The owner thinks these’ll add a bit of class.”

“We can maybe use a little,” Highpockets said. Midnight Frankie was scratching the back of his with a jackknife to see if it was real silver. “All right, let’s get sorted out.” bunkhouse
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Harv was a haystacking marvel

You always see him from here to Sunday, in those 00 duds.

"How's the crew look, Lonnie?"

"Old hands from the jungle as ever, except for our Quiz Kid stacker driver and his one-eyed grandpa from the Alps."

"That's different. Give the place a little foreign 00." He spotted Herman and me. "Let me take a wild guess, which one of you is the Quiz Kid."

"We saw you at Crow Fair."

"Did you now." Rags showed a long-jawed grin.

Herman gave him a handshake that made him wince.

"Hey, be careful. That's the hand I dance with."

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Mrs. 00 also did the crew's laundry, which bothered me. Done right, cooking for a ranch crew as a full-time job, never mind dealing with washtubs and a wringer. The whole crew ate with gusto, and Harv ate with something beyond that.

Smiley, whose name outside the clown makeup might as well have been Scowly.

“How's the crew, Lonnie?”

“Pretty much the usual.

He spotted me. “Who do we have here?”

“We saw you at Crow Fair.”

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Horses must have grown since my original dream of becoming a hayfield teamster, because the work mare, Queen, stood taller than me even with my hat on as I first struggled to her side with my arms full of the weight 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 spread out just right from neck to tail and buckled pronto 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 at the other end the adjustment nobody including the horse liked, 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.

You get the idea. 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, nice Queen, just stand there, attaway,” I chanted softly to accustom the mare to my voice while I labored at the elements of the
harness, wishing I was age thirteen and a foot taller. Looming over me like the giant mother of the horse race, Queen only twitched her 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. Looking agonized next to him was Herman, asking anxiously as I teetered to fasten the reins into the bridle and bit while Queen had decided to shake her head uncooperatively, “Help some, can I?”

“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, a long walk back to town makes you stretch yourself in a lot of ways. Finally I had the harnessing done, the reins snugly tied to an upright and everything, and respectfully edged out of the stall past the mare’s big deadly looking hooves. Trying not to pant, I couldn’t help asking, “How come she’s called Queen?”

“Rags’s idea, from cards,” Lon Ames replied, appropriately pokerfaced. “Named her that way because he always draws to a queen, thinks it brings him luck. Worthwhile females being as scarce in poker as they are in life generally, according to him.”

Herman coughed a little, warning me not to point out that half that problem could be solved with the French Bible deck in his duffel.

“She’s named pretty good anyway,” I left the matter and the regal mare at, and turned to the workhorse in the next stall, a black gelding called Bingo.

“Anything I ought to know about this one?”
A twitch of the foreman’s mustache acknowledged that at least I was bright enough to ask. “Likes to be bribed. Give him a jag of oats and he’ll 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 buckling and tugging and so on was still quite a reach. Big Hole horses evidently were also capital-B Big. When I was done, Herman and I nervously awaited the foreman’s assessment.

“I’ve seen faster,” his dry manner shriveled our hopes. “But you did ’er,” he had to admit. Shoving off from the wall, he headed out of the barn shaking his head a little, 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 as I floated across 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 clinging on at the Double W. Look at all that had happened since, and I had gained not only the black arrowhead that was big medicine but Herman, who was something in his own right. And see, I held a triumphant mental conversation with Gram now, I wasn’t too young to be a stacker teamster—skipping over the fact there had been a few inconclusive moments while trying to strap harness onto Queen’s skyscraping back—and Wisconsin had been when Herman gradually dropped back a few steps behind Lon Ames’s and I heard a significant “Sssst.”

Slowing until I was next to him, surprised at his 00 expression, 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, "Here’s somebody you might as well meet now as later. New hands, Smiley.

Smiley, whose name outside the clown makeup might as well have been Cranky. 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.

"One Eye 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’re 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 championship 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?”
He found out in a hurry, as I whispered to him while Lon Ames led us to the blacksmith shop.

Imagine a 00 that cuts back and forth, leaving a windrow of falled hay. Those were sckles, the 00 of haying. In that time of horse-drawn mowing machines before modern swathers and such, every one those teeth had to be kept sharp. shaped like arrowheads squared off at one end to be bolted to the sickle bar that 00ed back and forth

meshing togethert like a zipper but instantly

grindstone with pedal. Riding the seat...”Karl May

“This is the sort of thing you did in the old country, right? Up there in the yodeleer meadows?”

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

“Sickles,” I

“Ha, we call them different in Switzerland, got mixed up for

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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...Some
days we skidded the beaverslide to three new fields...

--Queen, a high-headed smart old mare, about could operate the stack man
that way by herself, tugging sleepy Bingo along with her--

Horses are not thrilled with walking backwards. Me either. But that was
half our job, backing to the stacker after the load of hay was dumped at Harv’s
altitude. I was pretty much like an elevator operator, in those days when 00 were
run by an attendant in a spiffy uniform who asked “Floors, please?” and let you out
at 00 or even the Empire State building 00, if you were going to th top of the 00
world. A difference was that the attendant was operating an Otis motor while I was
manipulating a couple of ton of horses at the end of leather reins.

wore a path in the stubble, like the front walk to the mansion of hay Harv
was building.

Harv was a haystacking marvel

And Heman. The blacksmith shop was a shambles at first, littered with old
chunks of metal, nothing sorted. Between sessions of sickle grinding, Herman
straightened things up, ut them away. It has taken me until now to fully realize: he
remade it into the greenhouse, a place of orderliness.

You always see him from here to Sunday, in those 00 duds.

“How’s the crew look, Lonnie?”

“Old hands from the jungle as ever, except for our Quiz Kid stacker driver
and his one-eyed grandpa from the Alps.”

“That’s different. Gives the place a little foreign 00.” He spotted Herman
and me. “Let me take a wild guess, which of you is the Alpine one-eyed jack.”

“We saw you at Crow Fair.”
“Did you now.” Rags showed a long-jawed grin.
Herman gave him a handshake that made him wince.
“Hey, be careful. That’s the hand I dance with.”
“Buzzard Head. You rode him until the whistler.”
“I’m a fortunate old kid. That hoss was part fish.” He initiated with his hand the way a fish would jump straight ahead, in a series. “Looked a lot harder to stick onto than he was.”

foreman rousts the bunkhouse: “It’s time to get up and pay for your bed.”

Mrs. 00 also did the crew’s laundry, which bothered me. Done right, cooking for a ranch crew as a full-time job, never mind dealing with washtubs and a wringer. The whole crew ate with gusto, and Harv ate with something beyond that.

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?

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I was all in but my toenails.

Bunk a group of men together for any amount of time, I don’t care whether it’s hoboes or soldiers or 00 or probably Apaches, and a number of them will fall into types. Peerless was the bunkhouse lawyer...It is human nature producing basic varieties on the family tree of man.

Pooch’s contribution to conversation was almost entirely “Damn straight” and “You said it” as he 00. I wondered at the lack of teasing him, because in a schoolyard anyone with a slow mind was in for it. Until I overheard Highpockets take Lon aside that first morning and explain that Pooch had been seriously
worked over by a sap-wielding railroad bull in the Pocatello yards, notorious as the toughest anywhere, and been slow in the head evr since. Lon said nobody needed to be a mental giant to drive a scatter rake, and he’d make sure Pooch was given the tamest team of horses, after my own.

Peerless was a gasbag and an agitoator, but that didn’t mean he was always wrong.

“Can I ask, what happened to--? I rubbed my same fingers tht he was missing.

“Guadalcanal.”


“Aw, no, Pockets.” Blackie gripped the frame of his bed in alarm. “I took one when we was on the sugar beet job, honest.”

“Up,” Highpockets gestured for him to get up off the bed.

“Tell you what, I’ll do it after work one of these nights. No sense spoiling a Sunday with something like that.”

“Grab him, wings and drumsticks.” Highpockets set the example, seizing an arm while the other three men each latched onto one of Blckie’s limbs. With the wildly protesting slung between them, they carried him to the creek and on the count of three, hurled him in.

“Now you’ve done it,” Blackie complained, water running off him. “These goddamn baths aren’t good for a person. I read that someplace once, you can come down with afflictions like lumbago from--” He was interrupted by the bar of soap that hit him in the chest, thrown by Highpockets. “Yank those clothes off and get at the scrubbing,” the order followed. “Down to the skin.”

Sure enough, he was a paler and better-smelling person after that.
The Diamond Buckle wasn’t a perfect ranch. Lon Ames...the crew...00 was fired...

“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.

“So the town whittler gets hooty with me--”

The sheriff gwas giving him a tough time, I think,” I translated in a soft voice for Herman as he spooned up stew from his 00.

“--and nextest thing I know, he’s got his smoke wagon out and cocked and in my beezer--”

“Whoa, smoke wagon must be a gun,” I said breathlessly. Herman “pistolero.”

“--and he marches me off to the calaboose, thirty days for expectorating on the sidewalk.”

stony lonesome.”

Herman murmured to me, “Donny, how many languages does English come in?”

Call to Gram. Cook tries to listen in?
Gram kept track, after all.

“I tell you, she was so fuckulent it wore me out just looking at her. Anyhow, I readied up my John Henry and she hops in bed waiting for the candy
treat, and what do you think happened? Her damned husband chooses that day to come home from work. Talk about interruptus.”

“Donny, let’s go for walk.”

“I know they cuss like crazy and carry on like that. But they’ve been places and done things.” “Like you have.”

“Not much good has it done me for being 00 grandpa.”

“I done it! Beat the Midnighter at his own game.” His moon face lit with a grin, he celebrated with a fresh chaw.

“Care to make it two out of three,” Midnight Frankie said over the purr of his shuffle of the deck, “playing for something besides matchsticks?”

“I sure as hell would not,” Peerless declined the offer to be taken for a ride. “I’d a whole lot rather play rooty toot toot on my trusty skin flute.”

I was working on that anatomically and not really getting anywhere when Highpockets said sharply, “Watch your mouth around the kid, can’t you?”

“I ain’t burning his ears off, am I, Snag,” Peerless protested. “He has to learn the facts of life sometime.”

“Insofar as you ever seen any from a distance,” Skeeter gibed.

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

That brought about rare hesitation in Peerless as he studied me sitting there on my bunk, rough-clad in a thousand-miler shirt like the rest of the crew but still plainly a kid, although a husky one. Whatever other changes the summer had produced in me, I had grown considerably, right past any semblance of eleven going on twelve. “How about it?” Peerless defended his position to the bunkhouse generally but Highpockets in particular. “Let him sail around the world?” It was
years down the line before I fully understood that the phrase meant something like learning the dictionary of sex.

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

“The Pockets is right.” Knuckles showing white on the handle of the water bucket, Herman loomed into the room, there is no other word for it, fixing Peerless with a look that would not be argued with. “Donny is good boy. I will take care of his educating.”

Truer words were never, as the man said.

Those days fell away from us like fleeces. What a privilege life was, all of a sudden

“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.”

“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 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
behind Lon Ames’s undeviating 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 Lon Ames say, “Hold on a sec, here’s somebody you might as well meet and get it out of the way.” He called across the yard to a 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, came toward us swinging. This was verging into strange Believe It Or Not! territory, 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.

“One Eye 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
Playing favorites as I felt entitled to after the distances we had covered together, stacker path upon stacker path, I moved on to the stall of my workteam and treated Queen and Brandy to a half pan of oats apiece. As they munched, I stroked the gray expanse of Queen’s neck and shoulder, reluctant to start yet another goodbye. Intelligently the big mare flickered an ear. Laying my head against her in full confusion of emotions, I clung there with my cheek against the warm smooth hide, unable to do more than sob, “Queen, what am I gonna do?”

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

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

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

“Aw, that weather last night will teach me about having a convertible,” he said ruefully as he came and joined me in the stall. “It was raining like a cow taking a whizz on a flat rock when I pulled in from the Helena fair, so I stuck the Caddy in the equipment shed.” He patted his way along Queen’s side, crooning “Steady, hoss, stand still, old girl,” until he was alongside me and could reach up and fondly tug at her mane. “Nice to be around a horse that isn’t trying to throw me. Pretty good listener, too, isn’t she.” He looked down at me with a long-jawed grin, but his eyes a lot more serious than that. “Maybe I ought to lend an ear, too--Snag, do I remember you go by?”
“Uh-huh, when I’m not Scotty. You know how the ho—-the crew treats names.”

“About like we do bucking broncs, yeah. What’s got you talking to the Queen here?”

“I’m sort of caught between things. See, I’m supposed to go back to my grandmother, she’s better after her operation and can be a cook again like she’s always been and we’d live together with Letty, you’d really like her, everybody does, and I thought that’s what I wanted most in the world. But I’m a handful for her, Gram I mean, she’d be the first to tell you, and I haven’t exactly done what she thinks I was doing, all summer.” I faltered, but had to put the next part together to my intent listener. “What happened was, I met up with, uh, Gramps I call him, And now I don’t want to leave--” I sent a despairing look “--him.”

“The new choreboy,” Rags made sure he was following “a hundred percent improvement on Smiley, Jones tells me.”

“You’re saying this gramps of yours needs you more than your granny does?”

“Bad stuff happens to him when he’s on his own. And to me when I am, too. But when it’s both of us, we sort of wiggle out of things.”

“The two of you are sort of a workteam, huh?”

“That’s not a bad description.”

“I don’t--” The whump of a car on the livestock crossing. We

“You happen to know anything about why we’re being honored by this visit?”

I confessed to him the crew had been in a little bit of a fight in town with the Tumbling T outfit. He frowned, saying that for as long as he had known her, Babs always wrote off fights as the cost of doing business. “This must be some other kind of hard luck.”
Right. “Excuse me,” I threw over my shoulder, already on the run, “I have to get over there.”

By the time I dashed across the yard to where Herman stood frozen beside the horseshoe players, the deputy sheriff from Wisdom was climbing out of the patrol car and giving a sickly smile all around. “Sorry to disturb you, gents.” Which we all knew meant disturbance of some sort was about to reach into our number. I should have seen what was coming when, on the passenger side, a big hat barely appeared above the top of the car.

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

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

“Howdy, Carl. You out seeing the country?” Casual as anything, Harv unfolded out of his chair and came toward the lawmen, although not too close. Veterans at knowing trouble when they saw it, the rest of the crew guardedly drifted near enough to follow what was happening, with me steering Herman to the rear of them in the hope we wouldn’t stand out.

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.”
“Maybe go other way from notcheral wonders,” he mused, still nose to nose with Greyhound possibilities. “Turn our luck around, whole circle.”

So saying, he put his thumb smack dab on the place I least expected.

I sucked in my breath, as much from apprehension as from surprise. “Holy crap, Herman, I know I told you to pick, this time. But do you know anything about--?”

Grinning in admission, he shook his hand as if having touched something hot on the map. “Ja, sounds like some place. I think it is Wild West of its own kind, hah?”

“Ohhhkay,” I saw nothing to do but give in, “if you’ve got your mind made up.”

Now the question was how to get from here to there.

I was trying to think of a hard-luck story, but who could I even try it on? Not a park ranger, what with signs everywhere saying no hitchhiking and no panhandling and no overnight this and that and a list of other no’s, a startling number of which we had already violated or were on the verge of. Not the hotel people, who already had too much of a look at us. Most of all, not some sheriff who would want Herman’s name and full particulars.

Meanwhile Herman had moved off from the Greyhound map and was studying the Events of the Day chalked on a blackboard near the Inn entrance.

“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
For another twenty smackers, Louie Slewfoot’s going rate for saving our skins or at least mine, he drove us to Billings, a safe distance from Crow Fair and its cops in braids, and dropped us at the Greyhound station there. “You fellows sort of make a full day,” he remarked as he handed down the wicker suitcase and duffel bag from the back of the camper, although incredibly enough it still was only around suppertime. “Take good care of that arrowhead, chiefie, so it’ll take care of you,” he advised me with a sly wink as he took his leave of us with a slam of the camper door. But not before, big medicine or whatever doing its work, I coaxed him into an autograph and more.

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

--Louie Slewfoot

Off the rez and on the go
“Not Goethe, but not shabby,” Herman approved, reading over the inscription from a genuine Indian that I had finally proudly attained. “More to him than meets an eye. Too bad he is not Apache.”

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

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

“Yallostone,” Herman ratified, looking over my shouder. “Old Faithful geezer is there?”

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

“Not only that,” it must have been the big medicine still working in the pouch around my neck that had me thinking so expansively. “See there, then we can go on through the park,” my finger confidently traveled down the spine of the West, arrivng in Arizona, “all the way to where the Apaches live, how about.”

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

“In French, don’t that mean--?”

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

He grinned man to man. “Sounds like worth looking, see if they match the ladies of French bible, you think?”
Until then I hadn’t, but I sure would now. First thing was to get us on our way, and I drew Herman’s attention to the schedule board, showing that the bus we wanted was about to go. “C’mon, or we’re gonna miss it.”

“Donny, wait,” he held back, concerned. “No supper, have we had.”

“Never mind,” I took care of that, seasoned bus hopper that I was, “we’ll grab candy bars.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oldtimer on the dog bus that I was from sixteen hundred and one miles
going back east to Wisconsin and now many hundreds more westward with
Herman, I had the crawly feeling that this particular passenger across the aisle was
too close for comfort. This was way worse than the nun in black several seats back
eying me spookily at the start of my trip to Manitowoc or the attic plaque of the kid
on his knees bargaining with death in the night, this was as if the big mystery called
God was using the bus-hopping minister like siccing a sheepdog onto strays. "Go
get 'em, Shep, herd them close. Nip 'em good. Here, take this new set of teeth."

Maybe a limited dose of religion never hurt anyone, but I was scared. For
some reason, the wispy figure an arm’s length away reminded me of the little
sheriff who’d arrested Harvey of his same name. Trouble came in small sizes as
well as large, I was learning.

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

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

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

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

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

"Great by dint of the fruit of the family tree."

"Ja, I guess."

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

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

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

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

“It does provide its rewards, spreading the good word,” the minister still was holding forth to us as if we were in a church on wheels. “And that brings me to a question, if I may”--Herman and I both braced, now really knowing what was coming--“are you followers of the Lord, in your own way?”

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

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

“I’ll mind your seats for you,” Reverend Mac obligingly called after us.

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

“Sky pilot, Old Shatterhand would call him.” said Herman, buttoning up.
“Nosy old Holy Joe, Gram would call him,” I said, doing the same.

“Ja, he is sniffing awful close to us.”

“Guess what. I’ve got an idea.”

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

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

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

“My goodness, this is quite an honor,” he recovered quickly enough, “and I had better make the most of it, hadn’t I.” He stroked his mustache as he studied the opened album, apparently sorting through holy thoughts. Then he began to write, surprisingly like a schoolboy toiling away at a handwriting exercise.

_The Good Book is a stay against the darkness_

_a source of wisdom_

_and a comfort in troubled times._

_Your in the fellowship of man_

_Isaac M. Dezmosz_

“Written with a pen of iron and with the point of a diamond. That’s biblical,” he said, handing me back the Kwik Klik with that click of his own. It seemed to me sort of a preachy inscription and didn’t even rhyme, but what else could I expect, I figured.

“I see you wondering about the last name,” he provided next, noticing Herman’s puzzlement as he studied the inscription over my shoulder. No wonder the man went by Reverend Mac, was my own reaction to what looked like a line from an eyechart. “A touch of Poland in the family, way back,” he smiled as if we
“You mean you don’t even...exist?”

Herman rubbed his jaw as if stroking an answer. Eventually, “A little more than Manitou, some ways,” he waggled a hand in the so-so motion, “but you are right, I cannot be a me.”

Holy Jumping Jesus. I thought we were bad off when we just didn’t have any money. Now we didn’t even have a real Herman. Lucky star up there, hah. If it was supposed to be shining good luck on us, its aim was way to hell off. Nor were we receiving a damn bit of help from the charmed arrowhead in its medicine pouch, dead weight around my neck lately. Hard to know what to cuss at first.

I shivered, for all sorts of reasons. “It’s getting cold out here.”

“Hah, ja, north of Hell,” he heaved a sigh that gave Yellowstone’s mile-and-a-half elevation its due. He turned to me, his expression the most serious yet. This next, I will never forget.

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

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

“If is biggest word there is,” he saved me from myself. Or maybe himself along with it. As I watched, he drywashed his face, holding his head in his hands while trying to think. For some moments I held my breath, until he came up with, “No sense beating ourselfs like dead horse, hah?” Just like that, he straightened up, unhunching his shoulders for the first time since the words enemy and alien, and tipped his cowboy hat back, if not the Herman of the dog bus again a pretty good
imitation of it. “First thing first, Donny. We got to git in for the night,” cocking his good eye toward the fancy Inn, “into lobby of the Waldorfer, anyways.”

“But what are we gonna do after that?” I spread my arms helplessly.

“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 followed Herman the German into the Old Faithful Inn.

Ever stepped into an aircraft hangar? The lobby of the elaborate old Inn was like that, only roomier, largely higher. 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 clink, 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Up the plank-wide stairs we went, climbing to the absolute top balcony and passing by rows of rooms until reaching a far corner, as Herman had calculated, out of sight from the front desk. Also as he had counted on, there was more of that wildwood furniture, massive chairs made out of lodgepole, parked along the balcony for lobby-watching. Grunting and straining, between us we wrestled two of those into our corner and tucked the duffel and suitcase in behind. Ourselves we tried to fit into the rigid wooden seats in some semblance of bedtime positions.
“Arms of Murphy a little hard tonight,” Herman tried to joke in a whisper, patting the tree limbs serving as chair arms.

“About like sleeping on a lumber pile, yeah,” I muttered, squirming in vain to get comfortable at all, missing the upholstered seats of the dog bus as if they were the lap of luxury. For that matter, the screeching springs of the attic bed Aunt Kate consigned me to would have sounded like music just then.

I swear I had no hope in this world of dropping off to sleep, the still-several hours until daylight were going to be one long waking nightmare of bony unrest. Yet somehow I had to be shaken awake when the first hints of dawn shown in the upmost windows of the timbered lobby and Herman was whispering, “Up and at. Outside, we must get before hotel people come around.”

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

Or freeloaders to be arrested on sight, I thought to myself. As we approached the gauntlet of the front desk again, I tried to appear prosperous as royalty who went around in Blackfoot moccasins, although the wicker suitcase was no help. Striding as if he genuinely did own the place, erect as the timber of the lobby and his nose in the air, Herman gave the clerk the barest of nods and a guttural “Guten morgen.”

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

“Checked out, we are,” Herman growled impatiently, throwing in some more gravelly German. “How you say, grabbing early bus.” In the tone of a grouchy weary parent, he indicated me with a swat of his hand as we kept on going, past the desk. “Liebchen too excited to sleep.”
To stretch my wage?
To trade for stuff
page by page?
Everybody craves ’em,
I bet even Jesus saves ’em.
Little green stamps, little green stamps!
Sperry & Hutchinson
Does wonders for my purchasin’.
My book is full at last,
I better spend’em fast.
I’ll get that lamp with the frilly shade,
I’ll fill the tub with free Kool-Ade.
Oh, those bonus-givin’
Guaranteed high-livin’,
Super excellent little green stamps!

I spoke truer than I knew when I assured Herman there in Miles City that
we had reached the part of the country to take our hats off to. The next day, he and
I hopped off the local Greyhound at Crow Fair, and into a vision of the West that
Karl May and Zane Grey at their most feverish could not have come up with.

As if to greet us, what appeared to be a mile of Indians slowly riding in file
was headed in our direction. At last! There we were at the fabled gathering, the
tribal heart of the Indian world. Herman looked as happy as a tabby in catnip. As
was I. We grabbed a spot along the parade route with a few thousand other
paleface onlookers to watch the approaching procession.
As parades go, this one spared no form of horsepower. First came ranch trucks and hard-used pickups turned into floats with bales of hay as seating for the participants, the sides of the vehicles draped with handprinted banners.

THE CROW NATION
WELCOMES
ITS INDIAN BROTHERS AND SISTERS
AND
WHITE FRIENDS

CROW FAIR
A PROUD TRADITION
SINCE 1904

CROW FAIR PRINCESS 1951
VALENTINA BUFFALO CHILD
SPONSORED BY THE WIGWAM CAFE

And so on. The genuine thing for us, though, was the Crow nation saddled up in its glory, the horses’ hooves stirring up little eddies of dust like a lazy ground blizzard as the spectacular column of riders approached. The Crows, not a tribe afraid to show off, were dressed top to bottom in powwow regalia, men in beaded leather vests that caught the sun in brilliant dazzles and women in beautifully soft red velvet dresses decorated with elk teeth. Even the appaloosas and dappled ponies the riders were mounted on glinted with finery, beadwork on saddlebags and rifle scabbards and right down to the cradleboards where babies bobbed on their mothers’ backs.

“Whoo,” I let out in awe as the long, long horseback procession passed, while drums kept up a constant beat we could almost feel in the ground, and the air vibrated with the chant of “Hey-ya-ya-ya, hey-ya-ya-ya” from every side. Herman I think did not even hear me, too taken up with looking at everything.
“See, Donny, chiefs they must be!” he exclaimed at the sight of elders of the tribe wearing war bonnets of golden eagle feathers, gratifying my Red Chief side.

We watched for maybe an hour, to the last decorated pony and lordly rider of the cavalcade. Such is fascination, the spellbinding moment of imagination coming true. I can only speak for myself, but surely Herman too felt like a spectator into a world beyond any dreaming, that day. Back then, the term “native Americans” had not come into usage, but definitely the traditions of the people who were here before Columbus, like the first owner of my precious arrowhead, were on living display beyond anything museums could capture, and indisputably American as well in the presence of the flag-bearing color guard of warbonneted Crow veterans marching in khaki, the same army uniform my father had worn. As far as we were concerned, “Indian” was word enough to carry the magic of the past, and here it was on full show, as if just for us.

“Oh man, that was as good as it gets!” I still was giddy afterwards. “Did you see those saddle blankets, even? They use Pendletons!”

I rattled on about how unbelievably great it was to be there until Herman said, “Ja, I telled you fingerspitzengefühl works like charm,” as if the bus ride all the way from Milwaukee had been merely a matter of giving it a little think.

Already feeling like we’d had one of the great days of our lives, after the parade the two of us followed the flow of the crowd to the ticket booth at the fairground entrance, where the rest of the day’s events were chalked on a slab of blackboard. In unison we read the list.

“Fancy dancing, Donny.”

“Rodeo, Herman.”
I was impatient to get in and start to see everything worth seeing, but he took his time peeling off money for our entrance fee, asking the ticket seller, an Indian of indeterminate age with a single feather sticking straight up out of his hair, if we could stow the duffel bag and suitcase in the booth since we hadn’t had time to find a place to stay. “Hokay, I’ll keep an eye on ‘em,” he jerked a thumb to the corner of the booth and I dragged our luggage there and turned to go.

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

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

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

Then we were funneled into the rodeo grounds—surrounded by a horse-high hog-tight woven wire fence with the gate conspicuously manned by sharp-eyed tribal police; rodeo crowds are not exactly church congregations, and the Crows were taking no chances on drunks and other unwelcome sorts sneaking in—and the pair of us practically walking on air filled with the aromas of fry bread and sizzling steak amid the lane of food booths and craft displays of jewelry and woven blankets and wearables set up next to the arena. “Karl May would not believe his eyes, hah?” Herman chuckled to me when we passed by a backed-in pickup camper, SLEWFOOT ENTERPRISES painted on its cabin, where a bearlike Indian man was punching belt holes in a piece of leather with an electric drill and chanting, “Made to order, folks, best dancing rigs this side of the happy hunting grounds, same price as they was a minute ago, git ‘em right here and now.” Whether or not he was doing any business, suddenly ahead of us at a refreshment stand were fancy dancers everywhere, costumed as if they were under a spell that made them halfway to birds.

The sight cast me into a spell of my own. The day’s fancy-dance exhibition, according to the printed program we had picked up at the gate, would take place between the bronc-riding events, and this batch of selected dancers—many of them not a day older than me, I noticed enviously—were waiting around drinking pop and eating candy bars until called on to perform. Until Herman gently tugged me along, I hung back and gaped at their costumes, covering them almost entirely from beaded moccasins to a feather or two sprouting out of equally beaded headbands. I mean, fancy only began to say it. Fuzzy Angora goat hide step-ins were wrapped around the bottoms of their legs, and fringed vests long as aprons draped down that far. Anklets of sleigh bells were in there, too, jingling with their
every step. The upper part of the body was the real story, though. Strapped on
each dancer’s back was a great big spray of feathers, like a turkey’s tail in full
display. What lucky kids they were in all that getup, I thought with a pang, ready to
dance their Indian hearts out. It may have been my imagination, but my moccasins
seemed to twitch as we passed the dancers by.

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

“Cowboys.”

“Ja? Where abouts?”

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

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

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

“Guess what. It’s shaps.”

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

“Like this. Here, look.” I whipped out the autograph book and showed him what the Mayo Clinic doctor’s wife on the dog bus had written in a pretty hand.

*Here’s champagne to our true friends,*

*And true pain to our sham friends.*

“Hah,” Herman chuckled in surrender. “Crow Fair is education in all ways.” That was true enough, but we had about covered the territory there at the chutes and pretty quick would have to go find seats in the grandstand like ordinary folk.

Then I saw it. If I were telling this story from long enough ago, I suppose it would have been the chariot of a god touched golden by the fire of the sun. As it was, the gleaming purple Cadillac convertible parked at the very end of a row of horse trailers and pickups stopped me in my tracks.

“Herman, look at that!” Recovering, I rushed over to the chrome-heavy car with upswept tail fins and peeked in. The seamless leather seat covers were the same deep purple as the exterior. Likewise the floor mats and door panels. And the crowning touch—on the inlaid-wood steering wheel even the necker knob was that color. I was so excited I was forgetting to breathe. All but certain who had to be the owner of this modern heavenly chariot, I checked the hood ornament. And yes, wonder of wonders, there it was, exactly according to reputation. The shiny replica of a livestock brand replacing the Cadillac’s stylized flying figure.

“See, it is!” I gushed to Herman as he came up behind me. “It’s his!”
“Ja?” He eyed the gaudy car as if it was unique, all right. “Whose?”

“Rags Rasmussen! The champion bronc rider of the world! He’s the most famous there is! That’s his brand, he puts it on everything--the Diamond Buckle.” The symbol of his world championships, in other words. “He’s just the greatest,” I attested as Herman puzzled out the hood ornament for himself. “My folks and me saw him ride at the Great Falls fair. I tell you, he turned that horse every way but loose.”

Babbling on like that about what a famous cowboy we were going to be lucky enough to watch in the saddle bronc go-round, I happened to look past Herman and the air sucked out of me as I gasped, “Here he comes!”

Tall and lanky except for squared-off chest and shoulders like the box the rest of him came in, the champ rider was moseying toward us with purple chaps slung over his arm. No one else in the world walks like a real cowboy, a sort of devil-may-care saunter as if the ground was unfamiliar territory but he was making the best of it. “Would you look at them long legs on Rags,” some admirer over at the chutes remarked. “The Lord took his time when he split him up the middle.”

The object of all attention continued on his way toward the bucking chutes as if cloudwalking, his black boots with the inlaid Diamond Buckle emblem freshly shined, his lavender Stetson spotless, his plum-colored gabardine pants sharply creased. Completing his outfit, I was thrilled to see, was a shirt nearly identical to mine, emphatic purple with a blue yoke and pearl snap buttons. Talk about suave and debonair for real, he carried it on his back in a naturally fitting way that made me wish I was him so hard it hurt.

Blinking along with me at the sight, Herman whispered, “Why is he called Rags?”

“That’s easy. He’s always got his glad rags on when he rides.” Herman still didn’t get it. “Look how dressed up he is.”
“Hah,” he understood and more. “Like a knight, he puts on his best for the tournament, what you mean.”

“The rodeo, you bet,” I confirmed breathlessly. “That makes him the slickest rider there is in every way, see.”

The female population of the rodeo grounds conspicuously thought so, too. Flirtatious hellos were cooed out by barrel racing beauties in tight blue jeans and a performing troupe of blonde cowgirls astride matching palominos, no small number of these contingents so-called buckle bunnies who had an eye for winners, as the famous broncstomper passed. “Later, ladies,” he sent them with a lazy smile.

By now the immaculate lanky figure was nearing the chutes and being greeted by fellow contestants. A calf roper looping out his lariat called out, “How’s it hanging, Rags?”

“Long as a bull snake,” the champion bronc rider of the world said back, loose and easy. “Got to be careful I don’t step on it.”

Now that was man talk. Imagine how my vocabulary would increase around somebody like him. Swamped with hero worship, I could think of only one thing to do, and I did it—a little frantically, but I did it. “I’ll be right back,” I yipped to Herman, and charged over to the most famous cowboy there was, yanking the album out from my belt as I ran.

“Rags? I mean, Mr. Rasmussen. Can I get your autograph, huh, can I?”

He broke stride enough to give me a curious glance.

“I’m helluva sorry to bother you,” I bleated, the pitch of my voice all over the place, “I know you’re getting ready to ride and everything, but this is maybe the only chance to put you in my book and I’m trying to get really famous people in it and you’re right here and—please?”
Amused at my prattling, he smiled and offered up in the same easy drawl as before, “Guess I don’t see why not, if it’s gonna put me in such highfalutin’ company.”

He handed me his chaps to hold, taking the autograph book in return, a swap so momentous it nearly made me keel over. A kid in Cleveland with the pitcher’s glove of Bob Feller bestowed on him, an eleven-year-old New Yorker gripping Joe DiMaggio’s bat—it was that kind of dizzying moment of experience, unexpected and unforgettable, a touch of greatness tingling all through the lucky recipient. Resting the autograph book on the front fender of the Cadillac, Rags Rasmussen started writing. Not merely his signature, I saw, which would have been plenty. An inscription, a full-page one from the way he was going at it! My heartbeat doubled and my mind ballooned as I watched the pen continue in what to me was world championship handwriting.

“Hey, Rags,” a hazer at the nearest bucking chute hollered to him, “better come look over your rigging. You’re up in this first go-round.”

“Great literature takes time, Charlie. Be right there.”

My life took on meaning
back when I was weaning.
My ma pulled me away
from her breast that day,
and said, “Son, time we had a session
for you to learn the big lesson.”
She held up to sight
A can red and white.
“The best invention in tarnation
is this can of Carnation.
It’s milk, you see,
but not from me.
Nor from cow and pail
At risk from that tail.
So if you’re to be a wise man,
seek out marvels like this can--
No tits to pull, no hay to pitch
Just punch a hole in the sonofabitch.”

“There you go,” he said, his signature and all the rest on the page in Kwik Klik purple ink magically matching his riding chaps--clear as anything, a sign to me this was meant to happen. Lucky arrowhead, happy coincidence, the spitzen finger that had put Herman and me in this place at this time, something finally was working in my favor this loco summer. Skyhigh about my newly found good fortune, I heard as in a haze Rags Rasmussen talking to me almost as an equal.

“Seen that little ditty on the bunkhouse wall at the old Circle X ranch down in the Big Hole country, a time ago. Wasn’t much older than you when I started breakin’ horses for outfits like that.” He gave me a look up and down and a long-jawed grin. “Figured it was worth passing along to somebody who knows how to wear a rodeo shirt.”

“Wow, yeah! I mean, thanks a million,” I fumbled out my appreciation for his supremely generous contribution to the autograph book, hugging it to myelf as though it might get away. Unwilling to let go of these minutes of glory with him, I blurted, “Can I ask, what horse did you draw today?”

He shifted from one long leg to the other. “Aw, sort of a crowbait”--he broke off into a rueful laugh and scratched an ear. “Guess I hadn’t ought to use that word around here. Anyway, I pulled out of the hat a little something called Buzzard Head.”
Hearing that just about bowled me over. Talk about a Believe It Or Not! moment. Buzzard Head was famous--the notorious kind of famous--as the most wicked bucking horse on the rodeo circuit, the bronc that had never been ridden. Through the years, contestants at Cheyenne, Pendleton, Great Falls, Calgary, all the big rodeos, had done their best to stay in the saddle for ten seconds aboard Buzzard Head, and eaten arena dirt for their trouble. Worse yet, this was the horse that killed its would-be rider in front of twenty thousand people at Madison Square Garden. I was smitten all over again with this extraordinary day, with Crow Fair, with the great getaway Herman and I had made to reach the promised land of the West. Here was the matchup that people would talk about ever after, the bronc that threw them all and the rider who was never thrown, and Herman and I as fate and luck and blind coincidence would have it were on hand to see history made.

When I had my breath back, I said with more fervor than diplomacy, “Good luck in riding to the whistle.”

“Might need it,” Rags Rasmussen said agreeably. “Get yourself a good seat and enjoy the doings.” Flopping his chaps over a shoulder, he strolled off to meet the meanest horse imaginable as if he hadn’t a worry in the world.

Herman had come up behind me and laid a hand on my shoulder. “Quite a man, he is. Like Old Shatterhand, cool custard, hah?”

“Cool customer,” I fixed that, still idolizing the strolling figure in his riding finery.

“Buzzard Head does not sound like merry-go-round horse,” Herman cocked an inquisitive look at me.

“He’s the worst,” was all I could say. “C’mon,” I still was on fire from the miraculous encounter with my hero Rags, “I know the best place to watch him ride, if they’ll let us.”
“You are sure this is good idea?? Dangerous place, if we fall?” Herman shied away as far as he could from the bronc pawing at the chute planking beside us, as he crept after me on the narrow set of stairs alongside the bucking chutes.

“Then don’t fall,” I gave him the cure over my shoulder. “Shhh. Leave this to me.” I cautioned further, keeping on up the shaky steps that led to the shaded platform beneath the announcer’s booth.

When we popped our heads through the opening in the floor of the platform, what awaited us was pretty much as I expected from other rodeos I’d been to. Clustered there where the arena director and anyone else who counted in running the events could keep track of things at close hand were several Indian men in snazzy beaded vests and the darkest sunglasses made, besides big-hatted rodeo circuit officials, and a few other white guys in gabardine western suits who from the prosperous look of them had to be the livestock contractors providing bucking horses and Brahma bulls for big shows like this one. As I scrambled onto the perch with Herman stumbling after, the only personage paying any particular attention to our arrival was a Crow elder, lean as a coyote, with braids like gray quirts down over his shoulders, who gave us a freezing stare.

“We’re friends of Rags and he told us to get a good seat to watch him ride,” I said hastily as if that took care of the matter. “My uncle here is from, uh, out of the country and this is his first rodeo”--Herman wisely just grinned wide as the moon and did not ask if there were any Apaches around--“and it’d be a real treat for him to see it from up here like this and we’ll stay out of the way, honest, and just--”

“Welcome to Crow Fair, don’t get too close to the horses,” the gray-haired Number One Indian made short work of us and swung back to overseeing the commotion in the chutes beneath our feet where the rigging crew was wrestling saddles onto thrashing broncs.
Establishing ourselves at the far end of a long bench softened by gunny sack cushions filled with cattail reeds—boy, these Crows knew how to do things—Herman put his attention to the printed program that listed saddle bronc riding, calf roping, steer wrestling, barrel racing, bareback riding, and of course, the fancy dancing exhibition. “Same as circus, many acts,” he expressed in satisfaction as I read over his shoulder. But then, coming to the names of the broncs the riders had drawn, Widowmaker and Funeral Wagon and Dive Bomber and similar ones, he nudged me in concern. “Sounds like war, this buckjumping.”

I had no time to reassure him on that as the saddle bronc riding explosively got underway almost beneath where we sat, with an Indian contestant named Joe Earthboy sailing out of the chute on a nasty high-kicking horse called Dynamite Keg. Earthboy and airborne animal became a swirl of dust and leather and mane and tail as the crowd cheered and the announcer chanted encouragement. A full few seconds before the timer’s whistle, the rider flew up and away from the bronc as if dynamite had gone off under him, all right. “Ow,” Herman sympathized as Earthboy met the dirt, gingerly picked himself up, and limped out of the arena.

Which set the tone for that go-round, contestant after contestant getting piled without coming close to completing the ride. By now it was obvious Crow Fair did not fool around in staging bucking contests. Deserving of their blood-and-guts names, these clearly were biggest meanest most treacherous horses available from the professional circuit, as veteran in their way as the career rodeo cowboys who tried to master them. Watching these hoofed terrors with Herman swaying next to me as if he felt every jolt in the saddle himself, I couldn’t stop my nerves from twanging about Rags Rasmussen’s chances on the monarch of them all, Buzzard Head.
All the while--I realize it was as contradictory as could be, but eleven going on twelve is a contrary age--I was having the time of my life. Beside me, Herman was entranced in a Karl May knights-of-the-prairie way as he ohhed and ahhed at the spectacle of cowboys and broncos whirling like tornadoes in the arena. We were sitting pretty in the best seats in the rodeo grounds, comfy as mattress testers, in the shade while an acre of sunburn was occurring in the sweltering grandstand across the way. The Crows were running the proceedings slick as a whistle, the rodeo progressing at just the right rhythm--maybe it had something to do with the drumming still pounding away methodically in the encampment--to keep matters interesting. Directly overhead in the booth that held the announcer and the judges, rodeo’s answer to heaven as the lofty spot where decisions descended from and a fatherly voice spoke out of the blue, the steady patter was as soothing to my ears as a cat’s purr, filling time between the bucking contestants with the broadcaster at the microphone joking with the rodeo clown down in the arena going through antics in overalls six sizes too large and a floppy orange wig. Like committing poetry to memory, I took in every word of their old loved corny routines, as when the clown hollered up to the booth that he hated to leave such a good job as dodging broncs and Brahma bulls, but he needed to move to Arizona for his seen us trouble. “Hey, Curly, don’t you mean sinus trouble?” I could have recited the deep-voiced announcer’s line right along with him. “Nope,” the clown made the most dejected face ever seen and I knew this part by heart too, “the trouble is I was out with another fellow’s wife, and he seen us.”

Hooting and hollering, the crowd reliably responded as if that was the height of humor, while Herman slapped me on the back to tell me he got it and nearly fell off his gunny sack seat guffawing and I laughed as hard as if I hadn’t heard that mossy joke at every rodeo I had ever been to. Life can tickle you in the ribs surprisingly when it’s not digging its thumb in.
All of which is a way of saying, what an emotion came over me in that preci-
sous space of time at Crow Fair. For the first time that unhinged summer, I
felt like I was where I belonged. Around horses and cattle and men of the ranches
and reservations, and the smell of hay in the fields and the ripple of a willowed
creek where magpies chattered. Most of all, I suppose, because he was the author
of this turnaround of our lives, in the company of halfway wizardly Herman, the
pair of us blest with freedom of the road wherever the dog bus ran, enjoying
ourselves to the limit at this peaceable grownup game of cowboys and Indians. This
is not the prettiest description of a perfect moment, but it was a king hell bastard of
a feeling, filling me almost to bursting.

Even the introduction of danger as the next rider was announced—"Here's
the matchup we've all been waiting for," the announcer's voice hushed as if on the
brink of something colossal, "down in chute number six, the reigning world
champion in this event, Rags Rasmussen, on a pony that has never been ridden,
Buzzard Head!"—felt like it fit with the fuliness of the day. Secretly, I would have
given anything to be in those Diamond Buckle boots snuggling into the stirrups
down there on the notorious horse that the riding champ of all mankind was easing
onto. A fantasy like that knows no logic and common sense, of course, because the
most treacherous hazard in all of rodeo was hanging up a foot in a stirrup while
being thrown and getting dragged by a saddled bronc determined to kick the life out
of its trapped victim. While my imagination naturally pasted me into Rags
Rasmussen's place as he rode to the top of his profession, I nonetheless slipped the
black arrowhead from my pocket and out of its thumb pouch, fervently fingering it
for whatever luck it could bring in his matchup against the killer horse.
Herman looked as breathless as I felt, on the edge of his seat as we craned to see into the chute below, watching Rags make his preparations, his purple chaps vivid against the buckskin flanks of the waiting horse. Buzzard Head plainly deserved its name, with a big Roman nose and cold mean eyes at the end of a droopy neck. Clustered behind us, the Crow organizers masked in sunglasses and the gabardined livestock contractors witnessed the doings in the chute as fixedly as we were. Rags took his own sweet time getting ready, casually joking that the chute crew might at least have stuck some chewing gum in the saddle to help him stick on, tugging his hat down tight, putting on soft leather gloves, flexing his boots into the stirrups until it felt right. Then, every motion easy but practiced, one hand gripping the hackamore rope and the other high in the air according to the rules, spurs poised over the point of the bronc’s shoulders, he leaned back almost sleepily in the saddle, balanced against the catapult release he knew was coming. Throughout this, the glassy-eyed horse stayed deathly still, according to reputation saving itself up to attempt murder in the arena.

The tense chute crew stood ready until the man in the saddle said, casual as can be, “Open.”

Then the gate was flung wide, and the bronc erupted out of the chute, twisting its hindquarters in mid-air that initial breathtaking jump. Buzzard Head alit into the arena practically turned around and facing us, as if to convey You wanted to see what a real horse can do, here it is. Instantly the buckskin bronc went airborne again, throwing itself full circle in the opposite direction from the first maneuver, snapping Rags from one side to the other like cracking a whip.

“Damn, it’s a sunfisher,” my fear found words.

Herman needed no translation of that, the crazily bucking creature contorting in its leaps as if to show its belly to the sun. He worried in return, “The picker-ups, they can’t get to Rags neither if he don’t fall.”
I saw what he meant. The pair of Indian pick-up men, whose job it was to trail the action at a little distance and swoop in on their spotted horses to pluck the rider off after the whistle blew, were driven away by the bronc’s hind hooves cutting the air wickedly at every unpredictable twist and turn. Buzzard Head plainly hated everything on four legs as well as two. Now even if Rags survived atop the murderous horse for the full ride, he would have to get out of the trap of stirrups by himself. “Meat wagon,” the grey-braided Crow in back of us issued flatly, sending one of the other Indians swiftly down the steps to the arena gate where the ambulance and its crew waited outside.

An Oooh ran through the crowd as the bronc levitated as high as a horse can go, the ugly head ducking from side to side trying to yank the rope from Rags’s grasp. Possibly the only person there that never to be forgotten day who thought the rider stood a chance as Buzzard Head writhed and twisted and plunged through its bag of tricks was Rags himself, athletically matching split-second reactions to those of the bronc, his long form rebounding from every dodge and dive as if he was made of rubber. I suppose a question for the ages is, What is so spellbinding about watching a man ride an uncooperative horse? Probably something that goes far, far back, the contest between human will and what it finds to match itself against. At least that is the justification for the sport of rodeo, if it needs any. I was rubbing the obsidian arrowhead so hard my fingers went numb as we watched the sunfishing horse do its best and worst, but Rags still in the saddle, even as his hat flew off, bouncing onto the horse’s rump, then to the ground as if Buzzard Head meant to throw the man off his back piece by piece.

Time never passed so slowly. But at last, after the ten-second eternity of Rags Rasmussen’s immortal ride, the whistle blew.

“Jump, right quick!” Herman shouted, as carried away as I was, watching the pickup men futilely trying to spur in on the furiously kicking bronc.
Then, in a feat as unlikely as sticking in the saddle the way he had, Rags shed the stirrups in a lightning backward kick and simultaneously vaulted off in a running dismount. Before Buzzard Head could locate and trample him, the pickup men forced their horses in between, letting Rags saunter to the safety of the chutes, picking up his hat on the way and sailing it up to the pretty woman whistle judge in the announcer’s booth.

That great ride, I knew even then, was the legendary kind that would have people saying for years after, *I was there that day*, and by the luck of the arrowhead or some other working of fate, now I was one of them, forever. It was left to Herman to put the moment into words.

“That was bee-yoot-iffle.”

Then came this, all because I had to use the rodeo version of a convenience, one of the outhouses behind the corrals.

During a break in the action while the chute crew saddled the next round of broncs, I excused myself to Herman and trotted off to do the necessary. Naturally there was a long line there at the one-holer toilets, but I scarcely noticed the wait, my head filled with the dizzying experiences of the day, topped by the purple presence of Rags Rasmussen himself in the memory book. On my way back from the outhouse visit, I still was caught up in such thoughts, trying to decide whether to press my luck and ask the head Crow there on the platform to write himself in, too. He looked kind of mean behind those darkest dark glasses, but at last getting an Indian into the autograph album would make the day just about perfect, wouldn’t it. Couldn’t hurt to try, could it? Maybe if I said to him—

*Whomp*, the sound of hooves striking wood next to my ear sent me sideways. Startled, I reeled back from the corral alley I was passing. In the confusion, it took me a moment to catch up with what was happening. Horses
were being hazed in for the bareback riding, and barebacks generally were unruly
cayuses fresh off the range and not accustomed to being corraled as the saddle
broncs were. This first one being herded through from the holding pen was
spooked by the cutting gate that would send it to one of the bucking chutes and was
trying to kick its way out, hind end first. Almost crosswise in the narrow corral
enclosure with its rump toward me, the snorty bronc kept on kicking up a ruckus
despite the swearing efforts of the corral crew. “Whoa, hoss,” I contributed
uselessly as I backed away farther, ready to continue on my way. But then. Then
the agitated horse turned enough that I caught sight of the brand on its hip, the
double letters registering on me as if still hot off the branding iron.

I stood there like a complete moron, unable to take my eyes off the WW in
the horseflesh. It didn’t take any figuring out that the same would be on all the
broncs in the bareback bucking string. No way had this ever entered my mind, that
Wendell Williamson, livestock contractor to rodeos though he was, might furnish
Double W bucking stock to this one all the way across the state. But perfectly like
the next thing in a nightmare, here came the familiar braying voice in back of the
milling broncs and the frustrated corral crew. “Don’t let ‘em skin themselves up on
the cutting gate, damn it. These nags are worth money, don’tcha know.”

In horror, now I could see the chesty figure through the corral
Sparrowhead, flapping a gunnysack at the hung-up bronc and barging in on the
hard-pressed corral wranglers. My blood drained away.

“Here, let me handle the sonofabitching thing myself,” he broke off a streak
of swearing and scrabbled up the corral fence to run the cutting gate. Panicked, I
backed away fast, but he spotted me. The beady expression of recogniton on the
puffy face expanded into something far worse.

“Hey you, Buckshot! Get your thieving butt over here, I want that
arrowhead back!”
I bolted. Behind me I heard Sparrowhead yelling for the tribal police. Luckily I was able to dodge out of sight around the corrals and back to the arena before the gate cops knew what was up. Every lick of sense told me, though, it would not take long before they tried to sort me out of the crowd. Heart beating a mile a minute, I scrambled up the stairs beside the bucking chutes, reached through the platform opening and grabbed Herman’s ankle. “Hah?” I heard him let out, before he had the good sense to glance down and realize it was me.

He came down as fast as I had gone up, ducking behind a head-high trash bin of the kind called a green elephant where I was hiding. “Donny, what is it? You look like losing your scalp.”

“We’re in trouble up the yanger,” I whimpered.

“Don’t want that, I betcha.” Herman waited for translation and explanation, hanging on every word as the story tumbled out of me about how I took the arrowhead when I left the ranch and Sparrowhead now wanted it back to the extent of siccing the Crow cops on me.

When I was finished, he poked his hat up as if to get a closer look at me. Too close for comfort.

“T ook. As means, stealed?”

“No! I found it in the creek fair and square. I mean, he thinks it’s his because he owns the whole place, but why isn’t it just as much mine, for seeing it in the creek when nobody else had since before Columbus and--”

He held up a hand to halt any more explanation. “Let’s think over. Maybe give it him back?”

“No,” I moaned it this time. “Herman, listen. It’s like when you were a dog robber. Didn’t you take only what you needed? I--I can’t really explain it, but the arrowhead is like that to me. Something I need to have.”
“Different case, that is,” his expression changed, in my favor. He cast a look around the rodeo grounds and that horse-high hogtight fence. “We must get you away.”

There was this about Herman. When he really gave something a think, you could see him generating a brainstorm until his eyes lit up, somehow even the glass one. That happened now, as I listened with every pore open to hope while he assuredly outlined the eye-dea to me. Anything was better than being arrested and branded a thief and handed over the authorities who would send me to the poorfarm for kids the other side of the mountains and I’d lose Gram and my life would go right down the crapper. But Herman’s plan set off all kinds of fresh worries in me.

“You--you’re sure that’ll work? I mean, they’ll know, won’t they? I don’t think I can--”

“You betcha you can,” he had more than enough confidence for both of us, not necessarily a good sign. “Come on, no time is there to waste.”

Scared half out of my wits as I kept looking for the trooper hats of Crow cops to show up, I stuck tight by his side as we sifted along the arena corral where people were watching the rodeo from the backs of pickups and the fenders of their cars, blending in as best we could, which probably was not that much. At last safely reaching the area of food booths and crafts tables and so on, we made straight for the camper pickup where the bearlike Indian man sprang up from his leatherwork when he saw us coming.

“Howdy. You fellows collectors, maybe? ’Cause I got some nice things stashed in the camper here. Buffalo skulls and like that.”

“Hah-uh,” Herman shook off that approach, glancing over his shoulder in one direction while I nervously checked over mine in the other. “Something else, we are in hurry for.”
“In a hurry, huh? Funny, you don’t look like fugitives from a chain gang.”
Humorous as that theoretically was, there was small-eyed suspicion behind it as
the Indian vendor studied the pair of us trying too hard to compose ourselves.
“Anyhow, the something else. What might that be?”
“Your help, ja?” So saying, Herman extracted a twenty-dollar bill from his
billfold but held on to it.
“Huh, twenty smackers,” the Indian acknowledged the sight of the cash,
“that’s starting to look like the price on something else.” He jerked his head toward
the rear of the camper. “Step around the tin tepee here and let’s palaver.”
Back there out of sight, I breathed slightly easier. Waiting to hear what we
had to say, the Indian stood there broad as a bear. Even his head looked like a
grizzly’s, round and low on his shoulders. Herman couldn’t wait to ask. “You are
Apache, maybe? Winnetou, you know about?”
“Winnie who?”
“Not now, okay?” I hissed to Herman.
“Apaches aren’t from around here, friend,” the Indian helped me out in
putting us past any further Karl May enthusiasms out of Herman. “I’m Blackfoot.
Louie Slewfoot, to boot,” he introduced himself, Herman and I shaking hands with
him the proper soft Indian way while keeping our eyes off his clubfoot that jutted
almost sideways from the other one. Briskly he got down to business. “What can
I do for you to loosen your grip on poor old Andy Jackson there,” he indicated the
twenty-dollar bill in Herman’s fist. “Look, he’s turned green.”
Herman glanced at me, I endorsed what he was about to say with a sickly
smile, and he spoke the momentous words that would either save my skin or not.
“Dress up Donny like fancy dancer. Long enough to get him out from
here.”
“Whoa, no way,” Louie Slewfoot backed away a lame step, laughing in disbelief. “These costumes are sort of sacred to Indian people, you can’t just wear them for Halloween.” He gave me a sympathetic wink. “Nothing personal, cowboy, but them freckles of yours are a long way from Indian.”

“Hey, that’s not fair,” I bridled. “I have an Indian name even, Red Chief. Nickname, I mean.”

“Sure you do,” he rolled his eyes, “and I’m Tonto.”

“And look at my moccasins, don’t they count? They’re Blackfoot, like you.” His heavy dark eyebrows drew down as he took a good look, but that was the extent of it. “And I went to school some at Heart Butte with Indian kids,” I persisted insistently, “and--

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he butted in, “all of that gives you full standing in the Wannabe tribe, chiefie, but I can’t go around duding up a white kid in--”

“How about this, then,” I butted right back, reaching the arrowhead out of my pocket and its pouch and flashing it to him in my palm.

“Wah.” Silent now, he put a hand toward the shiny black stone, but didn’t touch it. “That’s big medicine. Where’d you git it?”

“It’s, uh, been in the family.”

“Tell him all, Donny,” Herman warned before wisely hustling off toward the front of the camper to keep a lookout.

I spilled the whole tale of Sparrowhead and the arrowhead, Louie Slewfoot listening without ever taking his gaze off the obsidian gleam of it.

At the end, he growled deep in his throat. “That wampus cat, Williamson. He runs the Gobble Gobble You like the whole earth is his. We have to chase its goddamn cattle off the rez land all the time. The rich sonofabitch sure to hell don’t need any big medicine like that.” With something like an animal grin, he sized me up in a new way. “Dearie dearie goddamn” he expressed, which went straight into
my cussing collection. “How did I git myself into this, fixing you up as a fancy dancer? Gonna take some doing,” he laughed so low it barely came out, “but it’d be a helluva good joke on these Crows, wouldn’t it. They was on Custer’s side, you know. Bastard scouts for Yellow Hair.”

“How did I git myself into this, fixing you up as a fancy dancer? Gonna take some doing,” he laughed so low it barely came out, “but it’d be a helluva good joke on these Crows, wouldn’t it. They was on Custer’s side, you know. Bastard scouts for Yellow Hair.”

“Po-leece are com-ing,” Herman’s soft singsong reached us from his sentry post up front.

I just about dissolved at that, but it galvanized Louie Slewfoot. “Git in,” he half helped half shoved me into the back of the camper, with him clambering after. In there, in the semi-dark, everything was a flurry as I undressed and was dressed all over again by the grunting Louie slipping a long apronlike skin shirt and a beaded harness that hung way down and really woolly leggings—“Them other kids can have their plain old goatskin, this here is pure angora”—and jingle bell anklets and a bunch more onto me.

I was starting to feel as weighted down as a deep-sea diver, but he kept on digging out items and fastening me into them, until we both froze in position when we heard a voice with the flat cadence of the Crows asking Herman where the person for that booth was.

“Hungry, he is. Gone for the frying bread. I am minding for him,” said Heman, as if glad to be of help.

“When he comes back, tell him to keep an eye out for a redheaded punk kid in a purple shirt and give us a holler if he spots him. Some kind of sneak thief we need to turn in to the sheriff,” the Crow cop finished his business and could be heard moving on. Sheriff! The memory of the mean little Glasgow lawman who arrested his own brother gripped me like a seizure, the vision of what all sheriffs must be like.

Louie Slewfoot had his own pronounced reaction. “You would have red hair.” He pawed through his stock of costumery, and the next thing I knew, I was
top-heavy in a turban-like feathered headdress that covered my hair and came halfway down to my eyes. “That’s better. Now we paint you up good.” Working fast, he smeared my face and hands with some oily tan stuff. “The halfbreed kids use this, it makes them look more Indian to the dance judges.”

Along with a knock on the back door came Herman’s urging, “Coast is clear, better hurry.”

“Yeah, yeah. We’re about done. Turn around a half mo, Red Chief.” When I did so, Louie strapped something large and feathered on my back, patted me on a shoulder epaulette the size of a softball and told me, “There you go, chiefie. The rest of this is up to you.”

“Donny, is that you?” Herman met me with astonishment when I hopped out of the camper. Overcome with curiosity myself, I stretched my neck around to glimpse the thing on my back, and blinked at the unmistakable mottled black and white feathers arrayed almost to the ground, fanned out as if in full flight.

“Holy crap! The bald eagle wing thinger!”

“You been to Heart Butte basketball games, sure enough,” Louie Slewfoot granted. Heart Butte had cheerleaders in skimpy skirts like any other high school, but also famously or notoriously, depending on your point of view, a boy dancer rigged up pretty much as I was, stationed at the top of the stands every game who at crucial points would whirl around and around letting out the hair-raising staccato eagle screech, nyih-nyih-nyih. Before a player on the other team was about to shoot a free throw, preferably.

“Never been able to sell the bald eagle getup to these cheapskates down here,” Louie was saying philosophically, “so you might as well give it a little use. Yeah, this too.” He tossed me a small sack leather sack on a thong. “Medicine pouch. Hang it around your neck and put the arrowhead in.” Turning to Herman,
he rubbed his thumb and forefingers together. “Speaking of medicine, where’s that twenty?”

Herman paid up, but we weren’t done with Louie Slewfoot yet, nor he with us. “Hokay, now we need to git Fancy Dan here past the rodeo chief,” he instructed as he set off toward the bucking chutes, motioning us on behind. “Henry Scalp Hunter. He’s not a real chief, but he’s a bossy SOB even for a Crow and somebody has to run the show.”

With my outfit jingling and jangling and Herman fretting that he hoped nothing happened to the moccasins in this, we trailed after Louie’s slewfooted gait, both of us unsure how this was going, especially when he did not turn aside at all as the biggest Crow policeman imaginable, black braids down to his shiny badge, appeared from the back of the chutes and beside him, complaining loudly about the lack of arrest of a certain thieving runt of a kid, Wendell Williamson.

The shaking of my feathers and ankle bells had nothing to do with dance steps. I was convinced my life was going to end then and there, amid horse manure and moccasin tracks. In that big word incarceration, one way or another.

“Th—that’s Sparrowhead,” I quavered to Herman, wanting to turn and run.

“Ja, I thinked so,” he grunted back, keeping right on toward Louie and the oncoming lethal pair. “Don’t be horrified,” he bucked me up as if being scared to death was that easy to be rid of. “This is where you are Red Chief, brave as anything,” I swear he sounded straight off a page of Karl May. “Big medicine in your pouch, remember,” his words made me feel the presence of the arrowhead resting against my chest. “Walk like Winnetou and Manitou are with you, the earth is your hunting ground.” I couldn’t match his steady stride, but I did square my shoulders beneath the epaulettes and skin shirt and work my eagle wing rig as if flying on the ground and marched to the jingle of my bells.
Still, as Louie barreled along on his collision course with Sparrowhead and the Crow version of a harness bull, I said tremulously out the side of my mouth, "Is he gonna turn us in?"

"We find out. Keep walking like you got no business but dancing fancy, Red Chief."

Of all things, Louie planted himself in the path of the oncoming two men. Hunched like a bear spotting prey, he gave the Crow policeman a wicked grin and said:

"Howdy, constable. Glad to see you keeping the peace. No ghosts of Custer around or anything."

The big Crow cop glared, snapped "I don't have time for fool talk," and stepped around him. Giving the Indians an exasperated look, Wendell Williamson sidestepped along with the cop and kept onragging him about finding a purple-shirted kid who stuck out like a sore thumb. Meanwhile, Herman and I swept past unnoticed.

"That was sort of close," Louie Slewfoot remarked when he caught up with us at the bucking chutes. "Hokay, next act. Git in back of the green elephant there and stay out of sight until I tell you," he pointed me to the big trash bin where we hid before, and as for Herman, "You can make yourself useful by standing at one end and sort of blocking the view. Pretend like you're watching the rodeo and you don't know him or me from Sitting Bull."

We took our places, and Louie clomped around to face the platform above the bucking chutes, cupping his hands to his mouth. "See you about something, Henry?" he hollered up to the man in charge. "Won't take time at all."

Peeking past the edge of the trash bin, I could see the rodeo chief turn to him, stone-faced behind the dark sunglasses, his braids more than ever like whips
of authority down over his shoulders. "You again, is it, Slewfoot. I gave you the
booth spot you pestered the crap out of me for. What's eating you now? If you
weren't so frigging good at the squaw work, I wouldn't let your blanket-ass butt in
here."

"Big frigging if, Henry, and you know it," Louie gave no ground. "Don't
be giving me a bad time when I'm trying to be nice to you by perking up your
rodeo with something special, huh? My nephew, Donny. Brung him to show you
spazzes how dancing's done at Heart Butte."

Henry Scalp Hunter laughed without any humor whatsoever. "Pull my
other one, Louie. Nothing doing, we have all the entrants we need." Herman,
practically toppling over in their direction to hear this, looked as anguished as I felt.

Louie ignored the turndown and called out, "Donny! Come show Mr.
Scalp Hunter what a fancy dancer looks like."

I stepped out from behind the green elephant.

From his platform perch, the head Crow looked me over for half a minute,
whipping off his dark glasses to see if the feathered rig on my back was truly the
bald eagle wing thinger, and stopping at my moccasins. My heart thumping a
mighty rhythm, I jigged enough to make the eagle feathers shimmer and the anklet
bells ring-a-ling-ling. Helpfully or not, Herman abandoned his fixed casualness of
staring into the arena to turn around and exclaim, "Some outfit!"

With a dip of his head, Henry Scalp Hunter had to agree, conceding to
Louie: "He's got it all on, for sure. Fine, chuck him in with the other kids. But at
the tail end."

The gaggle of fancy dancers that had been at the refreshment stand was now
bunched at the passageway gate beyond the chutes, where the rodeo clown and
anyone else who needed access to the arena could come and go. Wishing me luck--
"Git out there and show 'em how the cow ate the cabbage," said the one; “Let Manitou in moccasins with you, hah?” said the other--Louie and Herman left me to it, and so, ankles tinkling, I shuffled down the passageway to join the gaudily outfitted assemblage.

Not that the group of them, waiting for their time of glory in the arena, could particularly hear me coming. They jigged and jangled and jiggled and jingled--maybe other jittery words, too, but I don’t know what those would be. These were some wound up-kids. Nonetheless, I couldn’t help but be noticed as I tucked myself in with them. The biggest one of the bunch, an ornery-looking high school kid with a jacknife face, spotted me at once, my black and white wing thinger standing out amid their feathers of the mere golden eagle, dime a dozen out there on the plains. Enviously he looked down that long blade of nose at me, his eyes narrow as the rest of his unwelcoming mug. “Who’re you? Little Beaver?”

Ordinarily those were fighting words, but these were not ordinary circumstances. Trying to make nice, I started to respond, “Donny Ca--” and just in time managed a coughing fit. “Sorry, frog in my throat,” I barely rescued the name situation. “Anyway, Donny, but my dancing name is Slewfoot.”

“Tanglefoot is probably more like it,” the ornery kid, head and shoulders taller than me, suspiciously eyed what he could see of me under all the costume. “So, Donny Frog in the Throat, where’d you dig up the bald eagle rig?”

There comes a point, in something like this, where you just do not want to take any more crap. “That’s for me to know and you to whistle through the hole in your head to find out,” I retorted to Jackknife Face.

“Gotcha there, Ferdie,” the other rigged-up kids hooted, more curious about me than hostile. Giving me a good looking-over, they concluded: “You’re not from here.”

“That’s for sure,” I verified, and let drop: “Heart Butte.”
"Blackfoot," Jackknife Face snickered. "That explains a lot."

The others, though, were as impressed as I’d hoped. "Whoa, the war whoop hoopsters, like in the papers! Neat! You play basketball?"

"Damn betcha," I may have fluffed my feathers some in composing the brag. "We shoot baskets for an hour after school every day. Everybody does, even Shorty the janitor."

"Bunch of crazy gunners," my original skeptic tried to dismiss Heart Butte’s famous basketball proficiency. The others hooted again. "Yeah, they shot the living crap out of you, Ferd. What was that score the last game, about 100 to 20?"

The jackknife-faced one was back at me. "So, baldy. What are you, an apple in reverse?"

Not knowing how to handle that, I parried, "Ever hear of speaking English?"

"Come on, you know--white on the outside and red on the inside?"

"You bet." That fit fine. Maybe he was going to acknowledge me as an honorary Indian after all, and that would be that.

"I still don’t go for this," Jackknife Face took a turn for the worse, though. "We’ve practiced our butts off together and you just show up to do the eagle dance, big as you please? Why should we let you horn in?"

Uh oh. That didn’t sound good. If I got kicked out, I was right back to being searched for all over the rodeo grounds by every Indian policeman. In a panic, I started to protest that the rodeo chief himself had let me into the fancy dancing, but Jackknife Face was not about to give that a hearing. Pointing to me, he called out to the dance leader waiting at the gate, a tribal elder with a skin drum, "Hey, Yellowtail, how come he gets to--"
He was drowned out by a shout from Henry Scalp Hunter, up on the platform. "You there, bird boy! I thought I told you to stay at the back."

"See you at the dancing," I told Jackknife Face as I scooted to the rear of the bunch.

"And now, a special treat, courtesy of crow fair," the announcer's voice crackled in the nick of time, "for your entertainment, the fancy dancers of the Crow nation, junior division!"

"Here we go, boys, do yourselves proud," the dance leader intoned, simultaneously starting up a rhythm with his drum like a slow steady heartbeat and the entire group of dancers with one exception--me, the straggler in more ways than one--burst into "Hey-ya-ya-ya, hey-ya-ya-ya." I caught up, more or less, as the whole befeathered and jinglebob collection of us pranced into the arena, and in the soft dirt each began to dance to the chant and drumbeat.

Did I have any idea of dance steps to do, fancy or otherwise, there in front of thousands in the packed grandstand and the eyes of the Crow nation and the worldbeating bronc rider Rags Rasmussen? No, yes, and maybe. For although I was merely a make-believe Indian in pounds of costume, I did remember the whirling and twirling of the Heart Butte mascot while he scared the neck hair off opponents at basketball games with the high-pitched eagle screech, and may have invented swoops and swirls of my own as I swept rambunctiously around in jigging circles with my arms out like wings and the thinger on my back aquiver in every beautiful black-and-white feather. Caught up in the drum music and the hey-ya-ya-ya but most of all in the moment where imagination became real, I danced as if my flashing beaded moccasins were on fire. I danced as if the medicine pouch with my arrowhead in it was a second heart. I danced for Gram in her hospital bed and wheelchair, danced for Herman the German and his monumental little thinks,
danced for shrewd Louie Slewfoot, danced for the threesome of soldiers fated to Korea and for Leticia the roving waitress and for Harvey the romantic jailbreaker and for the other traveling souls met on the dog bus and inscribed in the memory book, all of us who were hunched up and taking it in slumgullion lives.

So, I suppose I was me, nerved up to the highest degree, but in the moment I was also Red Chief, and who knows, maybe some kind of ghost of Manitou bursting out of wherever a spirit walks through time. Possessed as I was, my moccasined feet knowing no boundaries and my high-pitched eagle shrieks of nyih-nyih-nyih puncturing their chant, I spooked the other fancy-dancing kids away from me as I plain and simple outcrazied them.

By now I could hear as if in a dream the announcer singling me out, calling me Woolly Leggings. “How about that boy, part angora and part bald eagle, quite the combination! Look at him go! He’s got more moves than a Scotchman trying to sneak under the door of a pay toilet. Folks, what you’re seeing here today holds special meaning. These dances go back a long way--”

On the dust cloud raised by the pack of dancing kids, my moment of fame forever with me, I jigged my way from the arena as the exhibition ended and on out the gate of the rodeo grounds, still hopping and writhing, past the stern-faced Indian police watching for a purple shirt and red hair.

Herman was waiting a little way beyond the gate, and immediately gathered me in front of him, herding me to the parking lot near the tepees. “Quick fast. Louie has camper out, you can change there.”

Sweat running off me in streams, as tired as I had ever been, I stood there slack like a horse being unharnessed as Louie took the costume off me piece by piece. “You did pretty good for a redhead,” he allowed. As I slowly dressed in my own clothes, he excused himself, saying he had to try to wangle the same booth spot out of the Crows for the next day, it was a sort of lucky location.
That left Herman, sitting on the narrow bunk at the front of the camper cabin with his arms folded across his chest, saying nothing as he watched me button my rodeo shirt and settle my Stetson on my head. The last thing I did was to make sure the arrowhead hung straight in the medicine pouch under my shirt, where it felt like it belonged. My watcher still had said nothing. Timidly I broke the silence.

“Are--are we gonna keep on?”

Herman took off his glasses, breathed on them and cleaned them with the tail of one of Louie’s costume garments lying there, then with them back on gazed at me as if clearsighted. “On with what, Donny?”

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

Deliberately or not, he kept me in suspense a while more. Finally he said, “More to see out west here, there is. Dog bus is how to get there, ja?”

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

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

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

“Yeah, well, gee, Herman--what do you want to see next?”

“Something without police breathing on us,” he thought. “Notcheral wonders, how about.”
“‘Buggered.’ Bad language.”

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

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

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

Herman gave it that salute. “The French.”

By then we were in in the linoleum-floored cafe section of the otherwise dead Greyhound depot in Aberdeen, the breakfast stop before the long remainder of South Dakota ahead. To my disappointment, the fully named Jean-Louis de Kerouac and his Sweet Adeline had vanished, if I had to guess, to an
accommodation more horizontal than a bus seat. What else could I expect, though—in a vision quest, the spirit carrier often appeared and went quick like that. So, the Red Cloud side of me let it go, the penlight-lit encounter in the night wising me up more than a little about life on the road and beyond, and the rest of me now discovered that the next lesson lay in dealing with Herman over breakfast, that much-fought-over battleground between the Kate and him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Italy?”

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

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

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

Add that to playing a tune with a spoon on his glass eye and dog-robbing behind the lines at places like Dead Man’s Hill and surviving the Witch of November in the Strait of Mackinac and recognizing any beer at first taste and stocking up on Indian lore from Gitchee Gumee to Winnetou, and I realized I was in the company of someone whose surprises just did not stop coming. This was a treat of a kind I could never have dreamed of, but also a challenge. Life with Herman was a size larger than I was used to, like clothing I was supposed to grow into.
His next trick came when I still was digesting the breakfast world of toast, so to speak. At the lunch stop in Lemmon, almost out South Dakota finally into North Dakota after a long morning when the most exciting thing out the bus window was jackrabbits, Herman pushed his half-finished plate away, lit up an el stinko and puffed away, squinting at me reflectively as I polished off peach pie a la mode after chicken fried steak with all the fixings. Smoke clouding over him like a gathering thought, he asked abruptly, “When do you got to go to gymnasium?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Must be done," he insisted. "Otherwise, what if she calls before a letter comes, talks to the Kate? Pthhit, we are."

I had to take his point about our secret trip being kaput if that happened, and even more, the mile-deep trouble I’d be in if Gram had any inkling I was not where I was supposed to be. That fast, I was the one worried about the situation in Manitowoc, and surrendered to whatever scheme Herman had in mind this time. "So, what do I say?"

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

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

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

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

"This is, ah, Donal Cameron," I rushed past any civilities, "please can I talk to my grandmother?"
“Mrs. Blegen, you mean?” The nun sounded none too willing. “She is still getting over the complications from her surgery, I’m sorry to say, and is not allowed visitors yet. Doctor’s orders. Can this wait?”

“Huh-uh,” I gulped out honestly enough with the instigator of this nearly breathing down my neck. “I’m calling from sixteen hundred and one miles away, see,” I made use of Manitowoc, “so I’m not really a visitor, am I.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh Donal, what in the world am I going to do with you?” That panicked me, the issue slambang like that in her own words. Luckily it turned out to be only
Gram being Gram. “How many times do I have to tell you, boy, don’t worry so about me. I had a little setback, is all.”

“Are you gonna be okay?” I quavered. Herman had his ear down practically on top of mine, both of us waiting in anxiety.

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

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

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

“I--I was thinking about you.”

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

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

“My birthday is in October, like yours.”

“Hey, that’s right. I must have got that mixed up. Anyway, better early than never, huh?”

“I see, said the blind man as he picked up the hammer and saw,” she sounded more like her old self. “If there’s nothing else on your mind, funnybones, except having me blow out candles on my cake months early, let me talk to Kitty a minute, please.”
This was the memorized part. “She’s, uh, too busy to talk to you, she said. Getting ready to go to her canasta party. Told me not to spend too much time on the phone with you because it’s long-distance and costs money.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Hallo? How is your operation?”

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

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

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

“Must go, somebody at the door,” he made up with an ease that impressed me. “Don’t worry yourself. He is a good boy.”

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

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

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

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

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

Herman was like a kid on Christmas morn as we rushed across to the
WRANGLERS WESTERN WEAR, conveniently right next to the bar with the flashing
bronz and rider. As we went in the store, he was gamely peeking into his wallet
until I told him, “Put that away, this is on me.” It was rambunctious of me, not say
impetuous, but the smaller sign I had spotted on the storefront was irresistible:
S&H GREEN STAMPS ACCEPTED.

In the merchandise-packed place of business, one of those rambling old
enterprises that smelled like leather and saddle grease and spitoons, every manner
of western regalia from ordinary cowboy boots to fancy belts slathered with
turquoise was on display and I had to herd Herman closely to keep him from
stopping and exclaiming at each bit of outfit. But I managed to navigate us to the
redemption desk at the back of the store, where the clerk, a bald man with a sprig of
mustache who looked more like he belonged in Manitowoc than Montana, poached
his lip as my pages of stamps counted up and up. Finally he pushed a catalogue
across the counter, fussily instructing us that we needed to shop through it for what
we wanted--I saw with dismay it was page after page of lawn chairs and the like--
and as soon as the item was shipped in we could return and pick it up.
“No no no,” for once I simulated Aunt Kate, waving off the catalogue as if batting a fly. “We’re not interested in mail-order stuff, we want hats.”

“Cowboys ones,” Herman contributed.

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

“That’s not fair,” I said.

“It’s policy,” said the clerk

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

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

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

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

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

The clerk was speechless, kept that way by Herman’s spiel about how I, favorite nephew accompanying him on one of his countless trips from Vienna to the land of Old Shatterhand and the like, had collected Green Stamps all the way across America with my heart set on obtaining cowboy hats for the two of us when we reached the real West, which was to say Miles City, and now here we were and being offered rubbish like lawn chairs instead. “I hope I don’t got to tell my million readers Green Stamps are not worth spitting on.”

I held my breath, watching the clerk shift nervously. “Mr.--uh, Herr May, let’s be reasonable,” he pleaded. “The problem is, it takes a special transaction