form to substitute anything for catalogue merchandise. It’s only done when the item you want is out of stock, but that doesn’t quite fit this--”

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

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

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

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

“Huh-uh, not quite yet,” I declared. Whipping out the autograph book, I laid it open on the counter, startling the clerk morosely compiling the paperwork of our transaction. All the cross-country letter writing had kept me too busy to hunt inscriptions on the bus to the extent I wanted and I was bound and determined to make up for it. Seeing what I was up to, Herman started to say something, then didn’t. “People have been putting stuff in it for me all during our trip, see,” I reeled off to the clerk staring at the spread pages in confusion, “I’m getting a real good collection, but I don’t have any Green Stampers in it yet, so can you write something?”
The clerk stood on one foot and then the other, as if he couldn’t decide even that much. “I’ve never been asked for this before. I don’t know what to put in it, except--” He dipped his head shyly. “There’s our song. We sing it at company picnics. Will that do?”

“Sure! Anything!”

_Oh, S&H, S&H,_

_What would I do without you_

_To stretch my wage?_

_To trade for stuff_

_page by page?_

_Everybody craves ’em,_

_I bet even Jesus saves ’em._

_Little green stamps, little green stamps!_

_Sperry & Hutchinson_

_Does wonders for my purchasin’._

_My book is full at last,_

_I better spend’em fast._

_I’ll get that lamp with the frilly shade,_

_I’ll fill the tub with free Kool-Ade._

_Oh, those bonus-givin’_

_Guaranteed high-livin’,_

_Super excellent little green stamps!_
My head still spinning at being turned into Minnie Zettel for a hen party, I was held captive as Aunt Kate got right down to business. The puzzle pieces were barely settled in the box before she was pulling up across the table from me and had the cards flying as she dealt a stream to each of us and to the absent partners right and left, humming something unrecognizable as she did so. Helplessly watching her deliver the valentines, as the poker game regulars in the Double W bunkhouse termed it, I felt unsure of myself but all too certain that turning me into a sissybritches canasta player was going to test the limits of both of us. And this was before I even had any inkling that a contest of hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades could become such a dangerous game.

While she was rifling the cards out, Herman wandered by the living room, took a peek at what was happening, sending his eyebrows way up there and his step quickening until he was safely past and out the back door. No rescue from that direction, so I cussed silently and kept stuffing cards in my overloaded hand.
Finishing dealing with a flourish, Aunt Kate slapped the deck down squarely in the middle of the table and sang out, “Now then, honey bun, the first thing is, we’re partners, mmm? So, you have to catch up a weensy bit by learning a few rules.”

“No, no, child, you can’t meld that card. Pick it back up, hurry scurry.” Topping over me like Mount Rushmore hogging the jigsaw puzzle, she forced a smile, the kind with teeth gritted behind it. The first hour or so of canasta lesson wasn’t up yet, and while her mind may have been set firmly as stone, mine was simply whirling. “Mistakes are life’s little ways of setting us straight, aren’t they,” she recited as if reading off a sampler on the wall.

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

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

Black, red, who cared? Since when wasn’t a three a three? My ruthless instructor paused as I sulkily picked up the threespot of spades off the table and stuck it any old where in my mess of cards.

“That rule is a teeny bit tricky,” she granted, then imperturbably took it back in the next breath. Plainly not to be budged until I either showed progress at canasta or perished from trying, she sat across from me like one of those Chinese dowager queens shown in a history book, her precisely arranged cards held like a fan, helping herself to a plate of chunks of rock-hard brickle, a peanut-butter kind of candy that I thought in no way deserved the name, kept handy for “nibbles to keep us going.” Crunching a bite of the brittle stuff, she thickly lectured through her chewing. “Learning the cards only takes concentration. It’s no worse than putting your mind to what your schoolteacher shows you on the blackboard, is it.”
I gave her a look meant to wither that comparison. Then when was recess? School was a breeze compared with this slow torture. I brooded as I tried to make sense out of a card game where threes of a certain color counted for more than aces, kings, or queens.

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

It was all I could do to hold fifteen cards—canasta was played with a double deck, fat as a brick—and I slopped a few onto the card table tipping them toward her. Where was prestidigitation when I needed it? Without saying anything, she tucked those back into my hand, drew a mighty breath and went into a long recital of which cards I should try to build on by drawing from the deck or taking from the discard pile, and which ones were natural throwaways, as she called them.

As much as I tried to follow her baffling instructions that deuces counted twice as much as tenspots and so on, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being caught up in something like a measles epidemic, only the spots were on the cards. In today’s era of more home entertainment than we know what to do with, canasta seems as out of date as a Civil War songbook singalong around the upright piano. But let me tell you, in any day and age the latest thing can get to be a craze, and the freshly conceived card game with the Spanishy name swept into the living rooms of mid-century America like a fever. This I knew only in the vague way a kid picks up on the odd doings of grownups, but it left the definite impression that canasta was something played to the fullest by dried-up old ladies with nothing else to do. Aunt Kate was the opposite of dried-up, for sure, but from her warnings that “the girls” would beat the pants off us if we didn’t play our cards right, I pictured an ominous pair of prune-faced sharp-eyed whizzes who ate, slept, and dreamt canasta. Even their names sounded mean: Gerda and Herta.
“Now then,” Aunt Kate finished a spate of instructions that had gone right over my head. “Anything you don’t understand, before we play out a hand?”

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

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

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

“Don-ny.” It’s always bad when an adult breaks your name in two. The doll-like eyes were fixed on me a certain way as she leaned across the table and enunciated further, “It won’t hurt you to do it one time in your life.”

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

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

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

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

“That is absolutely ridiculous. Why can’t you just eat?”

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

“It is not the same! Oh, you’re impossible.”

The one constant in the repeated quarrels was Aunt Kate holding her ground in the kitchen, while Herman retreated elsewhere waiting to scrap over toast scraps another breakfast time. Eventually, when it sounded safe, I would abandon the green leather couch and National Geographic --there is only so much “Forgotten Valley of Peru” a person can take in one sitting--and creep across the living room to peek into the kitchen. The remains of the daily toast war which might still be sitting there at lunch or beyond, I could not figure out. Sometimes on what had to be Herman’s plate would be nothing but crusts, other times a pale blob of toast from the middle of a slice that looked like something I almost but not quite recognized was the only morsel left over. In any case, I would face the inevitable and call out “Good morning” and she’d look around at me as if I’d sprung up out of the floor and ask “Sleep well, honeykins?” and I’d lie and reply “Like a charm” and that was pretty much the level of conversation between us.
I have to hand it to Aunt Kate, she was a marvel in her own way. To say she was set in her habits only scratches the surface. Regular as the ticks and tocks of the kitchen clock, she maintained her late start on the day, parked at the breakfast table in her robe striped like the world’s biggest peppermint stick as she dawdled over the Manitowoc Herald-Times and coffee refills, yawning and humming stray snatches of tunes, until at nine sharp she arose and clicked the radio on and one soap opera after another poured out, the perils of Ma Perkins and Stella Dallas and the others whom she worried along with at every devious plot turn afflicting them. The sudsy weepers filled the air until noon, always leaving the characters hanging in iffy circumstances at the end of the half hour. Myself, I thought the radio people ought to take a trip on a dog bus if they wanted some real situations, but Aunt Kate listened with both ears as she puttered away the rest of the morning, much of it spent in the sewing room with the Singer zissing softly under the radio voices.

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

“What do you know for sure, podner?” he would greet me, as no doubt one cowboy in a Karl May western would drawl to another. Actually, not a bad question, because the one thing I was sure of was what a mystifying place Manitowoc was, from toast fights to smoky portrait sitters inhabiting greenhouse windows to Manitou walking around dead to the strange nature of the neighborhood. I mean, I seemed to be the only kid for miles. As used as I was to being in grownup company at the Double W, now I apparently was sentenced to it like solitary confinement, with the street deadly quiet, no cries of Annie-I-over or hide-and-seek or boys playing catch or girls jumping rope, nobody much making
an appearance except a grayhaired man or woman here and there shuffling out to
pick up the morning paper or position a lawn sprinkler. It made a person wonder,
did every youngster in Wisconsin get shipped off to some dumb camp?

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

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

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

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

That was that, one more time. I pulled out a fruit box and settled in while
he went on currying the cabbages. Under the circumstances, with no other choices
except Aunt Kate or him, hanging around with Herman in the greenhouse suited me
well enough. Whenever he wasn’t pumping me about ranch life or telling me some
tale out of Karl May’s squarehead version of the West, I was free to sit back and
single out some family or man and woman in the photographic plates overhead,
catching them on the back of my hand thanks to a sunbeam, and daydream about
who they might have been, what their story was, the digest version of their lives. It
made the time pass until lunch, when I’d snap out of my trance at Herman’s
announcement, “The Kate will eat it all if we don’t get oursefis in there.”
After lunch, though, inevitably, the nerve-wracking sound in the living room changed from soap opera traumas to the slipslap of the canasta deck being shuffled and the ever so musical trill, “Yoo hoo, bashful,” and all afternoon I’d again be a prisoner of a card game with more rules than a stack of Bibles.

“No, no, no! “ She put a hand to her brow as if her mind needed support, a familiar gesture by now. “What did I tell you about needing to meld a full canasta before you can go out?”

‘Oh. I must not have heard right. Better wash my ears out, I guess.” Her pained expression did not change. With regret I picked up the five fourspots I had triumphantly spread down on the card table. Going out, which was to say ending a hand of the dumb game and giving me an excuse to go to the bathroom and kill as much time I could in there, was a much desired play if I could make it. “I was thinking about something else, excuse me all to pieces. It needs to be six of the one kind, right?”

“Seven, child. Try to play the game by its rules instead of yours,” said Aunt Kate pitilessly.

That got under my skin as much as sitting there being taught a hen party specialty I didn’t care a damn about learning. What stuck with me was something I’d once heard in the bunkhouse, one of the poker regulars responding when someone made the mistake of suggesting they play pinochle for a change: “Nothing doing. That’s a card game that can’t get a hard on.” You cannot be a kid on a ranch with breeding animals doing the thinger any old where and not have a pretty good idea what that piece of language meant, and to me pinochle’s lack of it fit canasta just as well. Come right down to it, accumulating seven cards to go out on seemed to me as ridiculous as taking the flying thinger at a rolling donut.
I couldn’t say that to the tyrant across the table, of course, although it was mighty tempting. What really made me boil, though, was that she kept calling me “child.” Wasn’t I going on twelve, the age-old stroke of midnight between childhood and adolescence or whatever it was?

Something else rubbed me the wrong way, too. I’d overheard her prattling into the pink phone to one of the others that their weekly canasta game was miraculously saved by substituting me for Minnie Zettel. That was bad enough, but then she said: “He’s visiting from Montana. My sister’s grandson.” That got to me. How about saying “My grandnephew” instead, which had some distinction to it, instead of making me sound like some shirttail relation she was holding at arms’ length? Talk about good manners not costing anything, my erstwhile instructor and canasta partner could have well afforded to speak better of me, couldn’t she?

Well, child or shirttail relative or last resort or whatever I amounted to in her estimation, I was enough of a somebody to have the urge to get even. It didn’t help matters to smart off, but I couldn’t resist. “I was in spitting distance of having a canasta, only a couple of cards short, huh?”

She gave me one of those looks, consoling herself with a brickle chunk before tackling me again.

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

I gave something between a nod and a shrug.

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

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

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

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

“Nothing much,” I sat up straight as a charge went through me, my imagination taking off in the opposite direction from those modest words. “I got bucked off in the roundup, is all.”
“From a horse?” She made it sound like she had never heard of such a thing.

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” I tried to backtrack. “Gram sees me with my nose in a book so much she says my freckles are liable to turn into inkspots.”
“Does she.” As if looking me over for that possibility, she scanned my earnest expression for a good long moment, with what might have been the slightest smile making at her jowls twitch. “All right then, toothums. Let’s see if that studious attitude can turn you into a canasta player.” Laying her cards face down, she scooped up those of the phantom Herta, drew from the deck, hummed a note of discovery, then discarded with a flourish, saying “My, my, look at that.”

A fourspot, what else. Reluctantly I picked up the pile toward melding my slew of fours, still short of the magical seventh card for a canasta to put me out and let me take refuge in the bathroom, and with total lack of enthusiasm turned to the job of spreading the new mess of cards into a rebuilt hand which would keep me stuck there for another eternity until Aunt Kate shuffled the deck for yet another lesson in what to keep and what to throw away.

Instead she did the last thing I ever expected by ceremoniously folding her cards and doing the same with our ghost opponents’ holdings while telling me, “All righty right, you’ve learned the hard way what a canasta is. Let’s don’t futz with it any more today.”

My ears must have stood straight out at that. Hearing one of Gram’s almost cusswords come from high-toned Aunt Kate shocked me all the way through. Sure, they were sisters, but in my view as different as any two living breathing human beings could be, yet alike as far as something like futz went? Wackier than that, even, I felt that barely clean utterance of hers somehow applied to me, too, as the other member of our haphazard family. Was it possible that when she and Gram were youngsters in the sticks of North Dakota, they collected dirty words the same way I was, except those would naturally be somewhat cleaner for girls? It was something to think about, that Aunt Kate had ever been a kid.

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

Wardrobe. I knew that meant clothing, and lots of it, and instantly I envisioned what must be awaiting in the sewing room. Homemade school clothes, what else? Oh man! Suddenly, something made sense. The sewing machine zinging away during the soap operas, her secretive behavior in holing up there while shooing me off when I tried to bring up the matter of the missing money--all this time, she’d been busy making shirts and the rest to surprise me with. Those baby-blue stares of hers sizing me up in the best sort of way, when I’d unkindly thought she was in the habit of eyeing me as if I was a stray left on the doorstep. What a relief. I wouldn’t have to go back to school in the fall looking like something the cat dragged in, after all.

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

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

“Ready?” she crooned, keeping up the suspense. “Usually I have a better idea of the size, so I had to guess a little.” Of course she did, unaccustomed to
making things for someone eleven going on twelve. “I bet it’ll all fit like a million dollars,” I loyally brushed away any doubt.

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s, it’s really something.”

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

Humming full force as she twirled this way and that in front of a full-length mirror that was barely big enough to accommodate her and the tent of fabric both, Aunt Kate was in her own world. Not for long, if I had anything to do with it.
“Gee, yeah, the moo dress will look awful nice on you,” I fibbed wholeheartedly. “And you know what, I sure wish I had any good clothes to go along with it at the card party.” I furthered the cause of a spiffy homemade wardrobe by angling my head at the sewing machine. “I wouldn’t want to look like something the cat dragged in, when you’re so dressed up,” I clucked as if we couldn’t stand that.

That took the twirls out of her in a hurry. She squinted at the reflection of the two of us in the mirror, seeing my point. My hopes shot up as she chewed on the matter, studying back and forth from the muumuu of many colors to me dressed dull as dishwater as usual. I cast another longing look around at the waiting sewing machine and stacks of enough material to outfit me twenty times over, but she was not going to be oufoxed that easily. “I just remembered, sweetums,” she exclaimed as if reminding me, too. “You have your wonderful rodeo shirt to wear, don’t you.” She smiled victoriously. “We’ll put on a fashion show for the girls, mmm?”

Miserably defeated again, that night I traipsed up to the attic as if it was a strenuous climb, weighed down as I was by the feeling that nothing in life was going right. Aunt Kate was blind as a bat to my concerns, Herman dwelled in his own world of greenhouse gardening and walking ghosts and goofy squarehead westerns, and I was left with an endless monotonous summer of hen party canasta and old *National Geographics*, with worse yet to come if Gram did not get over the complications from her operation. Undressing for bed with all that on my mind, I was a wreck, as who wouldn’t be? Even my imagination refused to come to my aid, circling further worries instead. What if the daily blood-and-guts argument over toast got out of hand and even this last-gasp household sheltering me broke up? What then? Oh man, could Aunt Kate and I stand each other if it was only the two of us, no Herman in between? Going at it like cats and dogs seemed to be
natural to her, and no less authority on human behavior than the tough little sheriff on the dog bus had called me feisty.

Some bedtime this was turning out to be, about like that of one of those fakir guys in India going beddie-bye on a sheet of nails. Alone and more afraid than I wanted to admit to, I was in the dark which had nothing to do with the blanketing Wisconsin night. Countless times Gram had told me not to worry so, warning that it led to cross questions and crooked answers. Yes it did, the only kind within easy reach, no matter what else I tried to grasp at.

Such a mood does not get a person very far toward sleep, so I propped up as best I could on the swayback pillow to thumb around in the autograph book, to keep my mind off the plaster sonofabitch of a prayer on the wall. Couldn’t hurt, could help, I figured, visiting that world preserved in ink. School, ranch, town of Gros Ventre, the travel travails and triumphs of my Greyhound journey, all lay in the creamy pages in Kwik Klik inscriptions to remind me of those times and places, softened by memory.

As if it had a mind of its own, though, this time the album flipped open toward the front to something I’d quite forgotten was in there, Meredice Williamson’s inscription right after Gram’s. When I went up to the boss house to ask her to write in my proud new possession, the mistress of the Double W fluttered and fiddled as usual, claiming she couldn’t think of anything worth putting on paper. But then she gandered around the big living room at the hide-and-head holdings of the Williamson men--she herself one of the trophies, according to Gram, a rich lawyer’s widow Wendell collected in California--and in her drift way came around to, “Oh wait, silly me, I do too. We skipped rope to it, when I was a girl in Beverly Hills.”
As you strive, may you thrive, the lesson ever thus:

Money talks, flat broke walks, and small change rides the bus.

Reading that over sent a chill through me that had nothing to do with the climate of the drafty attic. The inviting album in which people left something of themselves was supposed to be a memory book, each page a spot of time where the person existed in ink as the greenhouse figures did in glass and shadow. But staring me smack in the face were words of prophecy, a moony mind behind them or not, that seemed to fit me skintight.

So frustrated that I took it out on the album, slapping it shut like slamming a door, I hunched there against the limp pillow with my predicament throbbing in me like one of Aunt Kate’s headaches. Cusswords came to mind, but none covered the situation. No matter how I looked at it, my fortune—in more meanings than one; it still preyed on me that Aunt Kate only had to have gone through my shirt pockets before doing the wash and my money still would be talking—the fair share of luck we all want, let’s just say, had steadily petered out on me ever since I got off the dog bus. Or even earlier, if I really wanted to delve into signs of things going wrong, way back there on the Chevy bus from Gros Ventre when the hefty woman asked why I was squirming so and I had to alibi something about my good luck charm poking me in the pants even as I had to abandon the prized arrowhead into a coat pocket. Talk about a bad omen, that one was sharp and to the point, for sure.

Then something came to me like a tickle in the head. Eye-dea, as Herman would have summoned an inspiration out of thin air.

Random or not, the thought straightened me up off the pillow. People carried good luck charms for a reason, didn’t they? Carried the thinger that brought luck, that was the whole idea of making a charm work. Vaulting out of bed, I slipped into the beaded moccasins and went to my suitcase, anticipation bubbling in me.
For once, the embarrassing old suitcase was more like a treasure chest to be opened. There, nestled beneath a pair of socks, rested the arrowhead, blacker than coal and more lustrous than ebony. Remembering the sharp pokes in my pants, I picked it up very carefully, laying it flat in the palm of my hand so the bladed edges would not cut me. Catching the light of the bed lamp in a sheen as if polished and cool against my skin, the obsidian relic felt right in more ways than one, in my possession rather than grabbyguts Wendell Williamson having it. Hadn’t he spent his entire sparrowheaded life on the Double W without finding it? More than ever I felt that the arrow point rightly belonged to me, with me. Had found me as much as I found it. Rubbing it with a finger, I was back to being Red Chief, hunter along the creek rewarded with a wickedly beautiful weapon shaped by the hand of a fellow hunter in the olden time before Columbus. In the story everyone knows, Aladdin had his spellbinding lamp, didn’t he. Well, I had this. How could I not think that the luck which led to spotting in the stony creek bottom a finger-long dark glassy rock, waiting and untouched in all that time, was a natural quality of the magical article?

Keeping the arrowhead on me was a far different matter. I stroked its slick surface, trying to figure out how I could possibly carry it as a charm with getting my rear end gouged off. Wrapping it in a handkerchief wouldn’t be enough. I just about needed a leather glove to handle its lethal sharpness safely at all.

Or maybe the arrowhead needed the glove.

I sprang up, my mind racing to possibilities. Eleven going on twelve is an inventive age.

Inspired, I set the arrowhead aside on the dresser while I explored, turning first to the plywood closet at the back of the attic, where my jacket was stuffed in with stored-away winter clothing and such. I had to paw through quite a collection of what it took to survive Wisconsin in cold weather, but at last there was something
like what I was searching for, way at the back of a top shelf behind a fur muff. A pair of thick mittens. Leather on the outside, lined inside with fur. Probably rabbit—an added element of luck right there, I bet. Fondling the sizable mitts, I tried telling myself they were bound to be Herman’s, but knowing better. Something of his would not be stashed with the ladylike muff, and everything about Aunt Kate was big, including her hands.

That the mittens might as well have had HERs written on them made me think twice, but I didn’t stop there. Why not let the arrowhead settle the matter? Taking the mitts to the dresser, I ever so carefully tried slipping the arrowhead, point first, into the thumb of one. It fit snugly and securely. Perfectly.

That decided that. Now the next part. Mitten in hand, I cracked the door to listen for any sound downstairs. There was none whatsoever except that nighttime not-quite-stillness of the house holding people deep asleep. More luck! With my moccasins on, quiet as a shadow I crept down to the sewing room. I didn’t know what I was going to say if I got caught at this. Something would have to come. It usually did.

Almost the instant I entered the small darkened room, I blundered into the cot, barking my shin on the metal frame and causing a loud thump. Sucking in my breath against the hurt, I froze in place for what seemed an interminable time, until I was sure the sleepers had not heard. By then my eyes adjusted to the dark and I could dimly pick out objects in the room. What I was after had to be somewhere in here. I hobbled over to where the sewing machine was located, near the window. Next to it was a low cabinet to hold thread and so on. And scissors, surely?

I felt around in the cabinet drawers, encountering spool after spool of thread and attachments for the sewing machine, until finally my fingers came across a little curved pair of the type called buttonhole scissors. Tiny as those were, they would have to do. With just enough moonlight through the window to see by, I worked at
cutting the thumb off the mitten, the puny scissors pretty much gnawing through the leather and fur. But at last the thumb came off and I drew a breath of relief. Just one more step to be done: The incriminating remainder of the mitt and its mate I would have to conceal under the trash in the garbage can in the morning, but I’d be up early enough to do that, no problem. It seemed only fair, since that was where the Kate had tossed my shirt and money. As to what would happen when winter came and she couldn’t find the mittens, things got lost in closets all the time, right?

Who knows if luck had anything to do with it, but back upstairs, with the arrowhead ready and waiting in its ideal pouch, I slumbered so soundly that for once I would be telling Aunt Kate the absolute truth when I said I slept like a charm.

That next day, I practically floated through the morning and the household’s usual ruckus, one hope after another lifting my spirit to a new height. With the arrowhead holstered there in my pants pocket within easy touch, I could imagine the summer turning itself on its head, with Aunt Kate changing her mind about pairing my rodeo shirt with her muumuu for the card party and taking me shopping for a new wardrobe, and she and Herman growing tired of battling at breakfast every morning, shutting up about how to eat toast if nothing else, and best of all, a letter arriving from Gram saying he was recuperating so fast her doctor had never seen anything like it, and as soon as I got back to Montana, we would get on life just like she promised, good as new. Under the spell of such a streak of luck, maybe it was not impossible that I’d get the hang of canasta, even.

It was a lot to ask of a piece of rock.

So there I sat, when afternoon brought a deluge of hearts and diamonds and clubs and spades, staring at the mixture of cards I was holding, waiting in vain for luck or anything like it to strike. If canasta lessons from Aunt Kate until then had
been rocky, this afternoon’s was an avalanche. “Now then, Don-al,” she’d pushed up to the card table, deck in hand as if making it behave,”it’s time to get serious.” Right away I was caught off balance when she squared a score sheet next to the peanut brickle plate and declared we were going to play a full game against our pretend opponents. The first team to 5,000 points, she informed as she dealt the cards whizzing across the table, would be the winner. I was staggered. Pitch when Gram and I played it was a perfectly simple game of high, low, game, jick, jack, and the joker, and the first person to twenty-one won. Canasta’s astronomical number sounded like a life sentence at the card table.

Paying no heed to my stupefied expression, she finished off dealing with a *hmm-HMM-hmm* hum. “All righty right, we will show the girls”—said while tending to the piles of cards representing Herta and Gerda as well as her own mitful, multiple determination showing in her chins—“how the game should be played, mmm?”

After the first few hands, she and I now trailed those face-down sets of cards, 910 to 4100.

My frowning partner was pinching the place between her eyes more and more often, groaning at something I did or didn’t do as people who weren’t even there piled up the score against us. Commiserating with herself, she was popping brickle into her mouth as if it was only the peanuts. Myself, I was feeding on frustration, her constant coaching punctuated with impatient sighs that got on my nerves. I still say, her frame of mind from trying to play three hands of cards and still instruct me was as much to blame for what happened as my shortcomings as a canasta player.

“Donny, you have to think ahead in building your hand, this isn’t a game of roulette,” she reached the point of saying peevishly when my pattern of draw and discard, such as it was, did not suit her.
Peeved right back, I invented “Honest, I’m trying to prognosticate.” I had only a slippery grasp of the word, but I had heard Major Williamson use it when he seemed to be guessing about something, so I figured it must have brainpower to it.

Aunt Kate’s lips twitched. “You had better concentrate along with it, big talker.”

Trying to get something going, I had melded three sixes and then drawn a fourth one. Now the top card on the discard pile was yet another sixspot, so if I picked it up with the one in my hand and a wild card, I’d be well on my way to a canasta. That would show her I knew what was what in this damn game. With a vengance, I flashed those two cards before dumping them onto the table with the melded ones and was reaching to scoop in the valuable sixth six and the discard pile when the voice across the table rose like a siren.

“No, no, no! Wake up, child. You can’t take that without a natural pair.”

“Huh? Why not?”

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

At that, our eyes locked, her blue-eyed stare and my ungiving one right back. It didn’t help that the long suit of both of us was stubbornness. I more than matched her outburst with my own.

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

I know it is the mischief of memory that my outburst echoed on and in the room. But it seemed to. At first Aunt Kate went perfectly still, except for blinking rapidly. Then her face turned stonier than any of those on Mount Rushmore. For some seconds, she looked like she couldn’t find what to say. But when she did, it blew my hair back.
“You ungrateful snot! Is this the thanks I get? That sort ot talk, in my own house when I’ve, I’ve taken you in practically off the street? I never heard such—” Words failed her, but not for long. “Did you learn that filth from him?” She flung an arm in the direction of the greenhouse and Herman.

“No!” I was as shrill as she was. “It’s what they say in the bunkhouse when something doesn’t make any sense at all.” I was really, really tempted to let her have it again, by saying I wouldn’t futz with that kind of language if it bothered her so. But for once, I knew when to shut up.

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

She didn’t finish that, simply stared across the table at me, breathing so heavily her jowls jiggled. “All right,” she swallowed hard, then again, “all righty right. Let’s settle down.” If sitting there letting her tongue-lash the hide off me without so much as a whimper wasn’t what might be called settled down, I didn’t know what was. My tight lips must have told her so, because her tone of voice lessened from ranting to merely warning: “That is enough of those words out of you, understand?”

My face still as closed as a fist, I nodded about a quarter of an inch, a response she plainly did not like but took without tearing into me again. “That’s that,” she said through her teeth, and to my surprise, threw in her hand and began gathering in all the other cards on the table. “I have to go and have my hair done, so we won’t try any more today.” She fixed a look on me as I too readily tossed my cards in with the rest. “That gives us only tomorrow, because Saturday I have a million things to do around the house, and of course we can’t play cards on
Sunday.” Heathen that she obviously thought I was, I didn’t see why not, but I still kept my trap shut.

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

Naturally I resorted to Herman. As soon as I called out “Knock, knock” and sidled into the greenhouse, he saw I was so down in the mouth I might trip over my lower lip. Squinting over his stogie, he asked as if he could guess the answer, “How is the canasta?”

“Not so hot.” Leaving out the part about what went through the goose, I vented my frustration with crazy rules. “I try to savvy them, really I do, but the cards don’t mean what they’re supposed to in the dumb game. Aunt Kate is half mad at me all the time for not doing better, but I don’t know how.” I ended up dumping everything into the open. “See, she’s scared spitless her card party is gonna be a mess on account of me. So am I.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“French Bible,” Herman defined the fleshy collection with a shrug, scooping the deck in with the tamer one and shuffling them together in a flash.

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

Book open beside him to do things according to Hoyle, Herman got right down to business, with each of us drawing a card from the deck, melding any three of a kind we had, and making a discard. His eyeglasses glinting with divine calculation--or maybe it was a beam of light focused through a photographic pane of glass overhead--he instructed: "First thing after everybody melds, freeze the pile. Throw on a seven or a joker even, yah? Get your bluff in, make it hard for the hens to build their hands."

It meant parting with the wild-card seven featuring a sly-looking blonde skinnydipping in a heart-shaped swimming pool, but I reluctantly figured it was worth it to place her crosswise on the discard pile to indicate it was frozen. If I couldn't pick up a desirable card when I wanted, why should anyone else?

"Eye-dea," Herman announced in almost the next breath, running his finger down the canasta page black with rules. "Bullwhack the hens." He reached over, grabbed up the cards I had melded and tucked them back in my hand. "Hide, yah? Hoyle don't say you got to put them down any time quick."

It took me a few blinks to rid myself of the mental picture of laying into Aunt Kate and Herta and Gerda with a bullwhip--"Take that, you canasta fiends!"--and figure out he meant bushwhack. Then to grasp his idea of an ambush, by holding back meld cards so Gerda and Herta wouldn't have any clue to what was in my hand, until they blindly discarded something I had a pair of and I could take the
So the great Kate Smith, dressed in a peach-colored outfit that made her look like a million dollars, monumental in every way as she peered down at me with a perfectly plucked eyebrow arched, represented rescue, relief, reward, a miraculous upward turn in my circumstances. And I needed whatever I could get, ragged and snaggle-toothed as my appearance was. Her expression turned to puckered concern as she tallied my missing buttons, dangling pocket, and the rest of my shirt more or less torn to shreds. “Heavens, child, you look like you’ve been in a dogfight.”

Well, yeah, that pretty close to described scuffling with the pack of campers, and there was a story that went with that, but this did not seem like the time for it. I looked down as if apologizing to my shirt. “It got caught on something, is all.”

“We’ll have to get you changed”—she noted the heavy traffic into the men’s rest room, and frowned—“later.” A new note of worry crept in at my general disarray and the wicker suitcase which itself was looking the worse for wear, if that was possible. “You do have something presentable, I hope?”

“Sure thing,” I defended my and Gram’s packing, “I have a clean shirt left. My rodeo one sort of needs washing, though,” I prudently skipped past the syrup explanation.

“Road-ee-oh,” came a guttural expression of interest from her silent partner, up to this point. “Not ro-day-oh, hah?”

Paying no attention to that, she seemed to make up her mind to smile at me, the extra chin and the famous chubby dimples involved. She had the bluest eyes, which mine swam in guilelessly. “If you’re ready, honeybunch,” she was saying in that voice so melodious I was surprised she could pass herself off in public as Aunt Kitty at all, “we may as well go.”
I nodded eagerly. Herman--somehow I had trouble applying Uncle to him, without Dutch to go with it--insisted on taking my suitcase, remarking on the wicker, “Old-timey, from somewheres else, I betcha.”

Out we went, he and I trailing her as she plowed through the depot crowd, drawing second looks every step of the way. At the curb, I was glad to see, an idling bus that was not even a Greyhound was filling with the kids going to camp, the poor saps. If there was any justice, Kurt, Gus, and Mannie were in there watching and eating their weasel hearts out at my royal welcome.

Herman hustled ahead to the car, not the limousine I was looking forward to but a big old roomy four-door DeSoto, I supposed because someone the size of Kate Smith required a lot of room.

I fully expected her, and if I was lucky, me, to establish in the back seat, the way rich people did. But while Herman was putting my suitcase in the trunk, she drew herself up by the front passenger door and stood there as if impatient for it to open itself, until I realized I was supposed to be the one to do it.

When I did, she enunciated, “That’s a little gentleman,” but still didn’t budge until I caught on further and scrambled in to the middle of the seat. She followed, the car going down on its springs on that side under her weight, until Herman evened things up somewhat by settling himself behind the steering wheel.

Doing so, he slipped me a sly grin and I heard him say what sounded like, “Welcome to Manito Woc,” as if the town were two words, although it hadn’t been that on any of the signs I read from the bus.

I was about to ask if that really was the pronunciation when the Kate Smith voice hit a note of warning. “Schmidt, don’t fool around. Look at the time--we have to go to the station.”
“Yah, Your Highness,” he answered as if used to being ordered around, and the DeSoto came to life after he pulled out the throttle a little and the choke farther than that and stepped hard on the starter and did another thing or two.

Meanwhile, it was all I could do not to bounce up and down with delight at her pronouncement. The station! This was so good. The dog bus, that loping mode of transportation full of starts and stops and disruptions and tense connections, somehow had delivered me right in time for her radio show. “Kate Smith Sings,” all anyone needed to know about it.

I glanced at her hopefully. Maybe she even could slip into the program some hint that I had arrived, and Gram would hear it in her hospital room and know I had come through my harrowing journey safe and sound. I didn’t want to ask that yet, shy about bothering someone getting ready to perform for a national audience. I would not have been surprised if she exercised her vocal cords right there in the car, but the only sign she gave of impending performance was humminng to herself while she tapped a hand on the round rise of one thigh as steadily as a telegraph operator in a shoot-'em-up western.

I figured she was entitled to a few jitters. What had that first seatmate of mine, the stout woman on the Chevy bus, said? "I'd be such a bundle of nerves." And that was merely about my supposed journey to Pleasantville, nothing like facing a radio microphone and a live audience and singing for the thousandth time “God Bless America” the way everyone coast to coast was waiting to hear again. If I was a trouper like Joe Zimmerman had said, the famous entertainer sitting right here at my elbow was the biggest example imaginable. It must run in the family.

“How is Montana?”
Herman’s question out of nowhere jostled me out of that line of thought, and somewhat nervously--maybe it was catching--I responded, “In pretty good shape for the shape it’s in, I guess.”

“Yah, I betcha.”

His laugh came from the bottom of his throat, like his words. While his broken English came as a surprise, it didn’t really bother me, accustomed as I was to hired hands in the bunkhouse or the barracks at a construction camp who were called Swede or Ole or Finnigan if from Finland, and spoke more or less the way he did. Squarehead, was the catch-all term for such types. Admittedly, I couldn’t see any real resemblance between Herman, at his size, and someone like Dutch Pete, a longtime sheepherder in the Two Medicine country so squat and blocky he stood out like a stump, but I figured nationalities must come in all sizes and sounds. Literally over my head, Herman’s choppy voice now reached a wistful register as he declared, “Out in cowboy land, you are lucky.”

“Pretty please”--from the other direction came a prompt response with not the usual sweet intonation on that phrase--“don’t be filling the boy’s mind with nonsense.”

“No, it’s fine,” I spoke up, trying to sit tall enough to be a factor between them. “I’m around those all the time, see. On the ranch. Cowboys, I mean. I’d be there in the bunkhouse with them right now if Sparrowhead, Wendell Williamson, I mean, had let me be stacker driver on the haying crew like I asked to.”

It took them each a few moments to put that together, and I’m not sure he ever did get there. She, though, said as if thinking the matter over, “But instead you’re very much here, dumpling.”

“Yeah!” Only minutes before I would have had to fake this kind of answer, but landing in the spacious lap of Kate Smith, in a manner of speaking, I
had no trouble whatsoever being enthusiastic. “This is so much better than there, it knocks my socks off.”

Just then the DeSoto pulled off the street, Herman steering with his hands wide apart like the captain at a ship’s wheel, and I craned for the first sight of the radio station. But he had only stopped for gas, and went inside to use what he called the man’s room while the attendant filled the tank and checked the oil and wiped the windshield, whistling all the while as if he had caught the musical spirit from the great Kate beside me. Meanwhile, staring off into the night, she continued to hum to that fitful pitty-pat rhythm on her mound of thigh.

With only the two of us in the car, I couldn’t help feeling this was my chance. It was all I could do not to yank the autograph book out of my coat pocket and ask her to write in it, right then and there, in the greenish yellow glow of the gas station’s pump lights. Whatever she put on the page, it would be so good, I just knew. And of course I would want her to sign it *Kate Smith*, not something like *Your devoted Aunt Kitty*, to elevate the autograph collection toward true *Believe It Or Not!* territory as I kept adding to it. I bet she knew all kinds of other celebrities who would write their famous names in it for me, too. Talk about a jackpot!

Tentatively I sneaked a peek at the illustrious figure next to me. Speaking of writing, if she wanted there was enough room on her bosom to sew not only her name waitress-style but something like, *America’s favorite singer and sweetheart of the airwaves.*

Letting that thought pass, I cleared my throat to make my request. “Can I ask you for a big favor?”

She jumped a little at the sound of my voice, nerves again, understandably. Glancing down at me, she composed herself and said, not entirely clearly to me, “That depends on how big is big, doesn’t it.”
The autograph book was practically burning a hole in my pocket, but something about her answer stayed my hand. Quick like a bunny, I switched to:

“Can I call you Aunt Kate? Instead of Kitty, I mean.”

“Why, of course you can, adorable,” she nodded into her second chin in relief. “Most people do. It’s only that sister of mine who hasn’t got over childish names.”

Such as Dorie, did that mean? I squirmed at anything said against Gram, but maybe that was the way sisters were.

Herman returned, having paid for the gas and taken care of the other business, and went through the dashboard maneuvers and what else it took to start the DeSoto. “Home to the range,” he sang out, earning a sharp look from Aunt Kate.

As we pulled out of the gas station, I felt dumb as they come. Obviously I had the wrong night about the radio show. Now that I thought about it, back at the Greyhound terminal Aunt Kate most certainly would have said something like, “We have a surprise for you tonight, dear,” if I was going to be part of the audience for “Kate Smith Sings,” wouldn’t she. Sheepish, I fell back to the early bus habit of “Uh-huh” and “Huh-uh” as Herman tried to make conversation on the drive to their house.

It was dark by the time the DeSoto rocked into a bumpy driveway. The house, painted that navy gravy gray shade like in pictures of battleships and with a peaked roof and lit sort of ghostly by the nearest streetlight, appeared big as a castle to me after the cook shack, although looking back, I realize that only meant it had an upstairs as well as a downstairs.

As we went in, Aunt Kate instructed Herman to leave my suitcase at the foot of the stairs to be dealt with after dinner. Since it was pitch black out, I
deduced that must mean supper, another Wisconsin mystery like schnitzel and schnapps and going to camp with a bunch of boy hoodlums.

“You can change your shirt in our bedroom,” she told me, definitely more than a hint. “Just drop that and your other one in the laundry chute, I’ll do them with our washing in the morning.” Herman showed me the chute in the hallway. Oh man, these people knew how to live--when their clothes got dirty, they mailed them to the basement.

I stepped in to the indicated bedroom, adult territory where kids usually set foot at their own risk, and too timid to put the light on, swapped shirts as fast as I could. Straining to take in the exact place where Kate Smith slept, even in the dimness I was convinced I could see a telltale sag in the near side of the double bed.

Hurrying so as not miss anything in this remarkable household, I dispatched my needy shirts into the laundry chute and followed promising sounds into the kitchen. Fussing with cooking pots, Aunt Kate was humming promisingly when I presented myself, fully buttoned and untorn. “Now then. We’re having a Manitowoc specialty,” she beamed at me to emphasize the treat as she put on an apron twice the size of any of Gram’s, “sauerkraut and franks. I know you like those. Boys do, don’t they.”

Not this one, because Gram viewed frankfurters--weinies by any other name, right?--with dire suspicion whenever she was forced to boil up a batch to feed the crew toward the end of a month’s kitchen budget, convinced that the things were made from leavings lying around the butcher shop. “Tube steak,” she’d mutter as she plopped weinies by the handful into the pot, “you might as well be eating sweepings from the slaughterhouse.” Not the best thing to build an appetite for frankfurters. But my stomach and my hunger had no time to debate
that, as I was shooed out of the kitchen, told I was free to look around the house while dinner was being fixed.

Herman had immediately disappeared, saying with a mysterious grin he had a surprise to show me. Everything was, so far. Meanwhile I edged into the living room and onto a pea green rug so deep I left footprints wherever I stepped. It was like walking on a mattress. Intimidated, I crept across the room, studying the unfamiliar surroundings. A big long leathery davenport, also green but closer to that screaming shade of lime Kool-Aid, sat prominently in front of a bay window where the sill was crammed with potted plants. Pretty interesting, I thought, going over to the whopping davenport, that as funny green as it was, right here in Wisconsin was furniture made from cowhide or something like it. I laid my hand on the covering and sure enough, it had that clammy feel like the seat of a saddle when you settle into it on a chilly morning. So I figured at least a person’s fanny would be cooled down by plopping onto the davenport on a warm day, somewhat like Kool-Aid does for the tummy.

Continuing my inspection of the new and unusual, on an end table next to the arm of the davenport rested a phone, pink as bubblegum, of another type I had no experience of, with a cradled receiver and a circular dial full of numbers and letters. Whatever else this strange territory of the summer proved to be like, it definitely did not seem to be party-line country.

Across the room from all this, on either side of a fancy cabinet radio but some distance apart, bulked his and her recliner chairs, the kind with a lever on the side that tips a person back as if getting a shave from a barber. Over what was more than likely his site hung the picture of dogs sitting around a table playing poker that you see so many places, while over hers, cross-stitched in a way Herman no doubt would have called old-timey, was a framed sampler with a skyline of a town--largely steeples--and a ship on the lake with a spiral of thread
for smoke, and underneath those, a verse in red and blue yarn, MANITOWOC--WHERE MAN HAS BUT TO WALK, TO HEAR HIS BLEST SOUL TALK.

Unquestionably Aunt Kate went in for wall decoration, so I searched around for what I was eager to see, photos of her singing for the troops and overseas in palaces and such. Wouldn’t it be great if she went on one of those singing trips and took me along, to Scotland or somewhere! True, there was the consideration that these days Korea was where the troops were in worst need of entertainment, but I resolved, Mickey’s prediction of what could happen to a person’s behind notwithstanding, I fearlessly would even go there if it was with her. Search as I did for mementos of her singing career adventurous or otherwise, though, the other walls held only framed scenes of dairy cows and green countryside in what appeared to be plain old Wisconsin, so I concluded she kept those somewhere special, probably at the radio station.

Now what really had me interested was a cubbyhole room off the far end of the living room. The door was partway open and I glimpsed what appeared to be a day bed under a plain gray cover. Lured by hope, when I poked my head in and saw piles of cloth of different colors atop a table and spilling onto a chair, I knew at once this must be the sewing room, even before I spotted the shiny electric Singer machine by the window. Who would have thought Kate Smith sewed her own clothes, right? But everyone needs a hobby, I reminded myself, or maybe in her dress-size situation, doing it herself was a necessity. Any fat girl at school got teased about her clothes being made by Omar the Tent Maker, and while I felt guilty about that uncharitable thought, there was the big-as-life fact that Aunt Kate was a much larger woman than clothing stores usually encountered. Of greater significance to me was that day bed, just my size, really--I’d slept on any number of cots like that, jouncing through life with my parents--and I’d have bet
anything this nice snug room was where I was going to be put up for the summer, special guest in a special place of the house. Oh man, how lucky could I get?

Now that I was through taking in these new surroundings, something else needed taking care of, and I had to retreat to the kitchen to ask. “Aunt Kate? I have to use the convenience.”

Parked at the stove where the pot of supper—dinner, rather—was on, she gave me a funny look.

“Uhm, rest room, I mean. Toilet. Bathroom,” I finally hit on the word appropriate in a setting that wasn’t a Greyhound depot.

“It’s through there,” she pointed to the end of the hall. “Remember to wash your hands, won’t you.”

I most certainly did remember, and more than that, I made use of this chance to examine my chipped tooth in the mirror over the sink. Baring my teeth in a sort of maniac smile, I saw that the damaged one stood out menacingly from the others. A snag, in fact, the chip having left it as pointed as a fang.

Studying my reflection, I decided I kind of liked the snaggletooth sticking up that way. It made me look tough, like I’d been through some hard going in life.

My admiration of this new feature was interrupted when all of a sudden I heard singing. I went still as stone to make sure. Yes! Distinct as anything, from the direction of the kitchen. A solo, to keep the famous Kate Smith voicebox tuned up, I bet. And not just a song, but the song! Oh man, this was almost like going to the radio show!

“God bless America,
Land that I love.
Stand beside her
And guide her
Through the night with a light from above."

I tell you, that singing went right under my skin and raised goose bumps. The one-of-a-kind beautiful voice, the words every schoolchild--every parent, even--knew by heart. And here I was, the lucky audience to this performance by the most famous singer in America, maybe in the world. This settled it. I absolutely had to ask for the autograph as soon as the song was over, it was bound to please the performer in the kitchen as well as me. Out of the bathroom like a shot, I sped to where my jacket was piled atop my suitcase, grabbed out the album, and darted back to the kitchen.

Herman had reappeared, sitting at the table paging through a book and not even particularly listening, he evidently was so used to the glorious sound. Rocking ever so slightly side to side to the rhythm, Aunt Kate stood at the stove with her back turned to us, as if it was nothing to be pouring out the best-known song since “Happy Birthday” while cooking 'kraut and weinies. I stood entranced there at the other end of the kitchen, listening to her sing just for me. Then as the most soaring part rolled around again, the beautiful voice reaching its height--

“To the prairies,
To the oceans white with foam,
God bless America,
My home sweet home.

--she turned around, her mouth full of the half-cooked weinie she was munching.

For a moment I was only confused. But then when as I saw her take another bite, eyes half-closed in pleasure at the weinie taste or maybe food in general, the inside of me fell practically to the floor. Meanwhile the song played
on a bit more, until there came a burst of applause in the living room and a man’s silky voice doing a commercial for La Palina cigars.

When I recovered the ability to speak, I stammered, “You’re—you’re not Kate Smith? On the radio?”

She swallowed the last of the weinie, fast. “Dear Lord, that,” she groaned, frowning all the way down to her double chins.

“I telled you, too many sweets,” said Herman, licking his finger to keep on turning pages.

Ignoring him, she scrutinized me. “Where in the world did you get that idea?” she asked suspiciously, although I didn’t yet know about what. “Didn’t Dorie tell you all about us?” I shook my head. “Good grief,” she let out this time, shutting her eyes as if that would make this—and maybe me—go away.

Herman spoke up. “The boy made a notcheral mistake. It could happen to Einstein.”

“Another country heard from,” she snapped at him. Worry written large on her—there was plenty of space for it—she studied me again but not for long, her mind made up. Whirling to the stove, she set the pot off the burner and turned back to me, with a deep, deep breath that expanded her even more into Kate Smith dimension, in my opinion. “Sweetiekins, come.” She marched into the living room, killed the radio, planted herself on the davenport on an entire cushion and patted the one beside her. I went and sat.

She looking down and me looking up, we gazed at each other in something like mutual incomprehension. I squirmed a little, and not just from the clammy touch of the davenport through the seat of my pants. Dismayed as I was, she too appeared to be thrown by the situation, until with a nod of resolve she sucked in her cheeks, as much as they would go, and pursed her lips to address the matter of me.
“Now then, lambie pie, there’s nothing to be ashamed of,” her tone became quite hushed, “but has your grandmother or anyone, a teacher maybe, ever said to you there might be a little bit something”—she searched for the word—“different about you?” Another breath from her very depths. “Just for example, do you get along all right in school?”

“Sure,” I replied defensively, thinking she had figured out the shirt-shredding battle royal with the campers. “I’m friends with kids in more schools than you can shake a stick at, back home.”

“No, no,” her bosom heaved as she gathered for another try at me. “What I mean is, have you ever been set back in school? Failed a grade, or maybe even just had teensy weensy trouble”—she pincered her thumb and first finger really, really close together to make sure I understood how little it would be my fault—“catching on to things in class?”

I understood, all right, shocked speechless. She figured I had a wire down. Aghast at being classified as some kind of what Letty termed a mo-ron, I sucked air like a fish out of water, until my voice came back.

“Me? No! I get straight A’s. Honest!” I babbled further, “I heard Miss Ciardi”—my latest teacher, at the Noon Creek school—“say to Gram I’m bright enough to read by at night.”

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

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

“Notcheral, like I telled you,” his guttural assertion made us both jump a little. “Donny is not the first to find the resemblance, yah? If it bothers you so great to look like the other Kate, why do you play her music on the radio?”
“When I want your opinion, Schmidt, I’ll ask for it,” she flared, giving him a dirty look. I breathed slightly easier. If they were going to have a fight, at least that might put me on the sideline temporarily.

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

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

My modest admission, she rolled over like a bulldozer. “You mustn’t let it run away with you,” her voice not Kate Smith nice now. “You know why you’re here, because of Dorie’s—your grandmother’s operation. We can’t have you going around with your head in the clouds while you’re with us, we all just need to get through this summer the best we can.” Another glare in the direction of the kitchen doorway. “Isn’t that so, Schmidt?”

Looking almost as caught as I was, Herman protectively hugged the book he was holding. “Donny and I will be straight shooters, bet your boots.”

From the look in her eye, she was making ready to reply to that reply when I pulled the album out from behind my back. “All I wanted was your autograph when I thought you were You-know-who.” I knew to put as much oomph into the next as I could, even though the same enthusiasm wasn’t there. “I still want it, for sure. And Herman’s.”

“She see,” she said a little less dubiously this time. She certainly helped herself to an eyeful of the memory book as she took it from me, her lips moving surprisingly like Gram’s in silently reading that cover inscription, YE WHO LEND YOUR NAME TO THESE PAGES SHALL LIVE ON UNDIMMED THROUGH THE AGES. “So that’s what this is about,” she said faintly to herself in flipping to one of the entries, I hoped not the Fort Peck sheriff’s about keeping your pecker dry.
On pins and needles, I waited for her reaction as she dipped into the pages until she had evidently seen enough. "I need an aspirin," she spoke with her eyes clamped shut, pinching the bridge of her nose, "and then we are going to eat dinner with no more interruptions." That last, I sensed, was spoken as much for Herman's benefit as mine.

"Sweetie," once more she made the effort to be nice to me, handing back the autograph book before heaving herself off the davenport and marching to the kitchen, "we'll be sure to write in it for you, but it can wait. Now then, come to the table, we'll eat as long as we're able," she summoned the other two of us with an obvious lift of mood, improving with every step toward the dinner pot.

Dinner in Manitowoc made me homesick for supper in Montana. First of all, the table cloth was spotless white linen instead of oilcloth, and I was scared of spilling on it. Then there was the food itself, the sauerkraut so sour it actually made the weinies not bad in comparison. My stomach was finding Wisconsin to be a state of confusion. Aunt Kate piled into her meal as if she hadn't eaten in days and Herman did a job on his, while I worked my way to a polite clean plate swallow by hard swallow. Seeing me put down my fork, she started to pass me the serving dish of 'kraut and motioned Herman to do the same with the plate of remaining weinies, urging "Don't be bashful, darling, have more. A growing boy needs to eat up, mmm?"

"No, no, that's fine," I let out. "I've had an elegant sufficiency, any more would be a superfluous."

Aunt Kate looked at me as if I had sprouted another head. Herman guffawed. "Big talking," he commended, more on the mark than he knew. I relished big words of certain sorts, even ones I only half understood like my father's stomach-patting saying when he'd had plenty to eat. The longer the
better, generally, like Gloccamorra in the song--now that sounded like quite a
place. Prestidigitation as in card tricks seemed ever so much more sneaky than
sleight of hand. And so on, wherever the alphabet ran crazy that way. Chances
to use what Gram called dollar words didn’t come along any too often, but Aunt
Kate eyed me warily for any more I might pop out with. When none was
forthcoming, she said pointedly, “All righty right, mister dictionary, I hope
you’ve saved room for dessert.”

Lucky I did, because it turned out to be something I since have realized
was a classic sachertorte, chocolate-frosted chocolate cake with jam between
layers and a mound of whipped cream on the side. Pretty much a meal of sugar
and chocolate in itself, that was more my kind of eating, and when I praised Aunt
Kate to her face for her baking, Herman chuckled slyly and said Schultz’s Bakery
would be surprised to hear that.

“Hush, you,” she told him, but not as sharply as in her earlier exchanges
with him.

No sooner was dessert ingested if not digested than Aunt Kate declared in
a sweetened mood, “Chickie, you look tuckered out from your trip,” which I
didn’t think I did, but she topped that off with the message impossible to miss,
“Your room is ready for you.” The night was still a pup compared to the
Greyhound’s long gallop through the dark, but whiz, just like that, I was
bypassing the cubbyhole sewing room and instead trooping upstairs behind
Herman, with him insisting on lugging my suitcase—“You are the guest, you get
the best, hah!”—while in back of us, Aunt Kate strenuously mounted one tread at a
time. And as the stairs kept going, quite a climb by any standard, the suspicion
began to seep in on me as to where we were headed, even before Herman
shouldered open the squeaky door.
To this day, that ‘room’, up where the hayloft in a barn would be, is engraved in me. A slapped-together chamber cluttered with this, that, and the other that memory stands no chance in this world of ever clearing out. Aunt Kate could call it what she wanted, but I had bounced around enough with my parents in makeshift quarters to recognize that this was nothing more than the attic. Bare roofbeams and sharply sloping underside of the roof and probably mice and spiders, the whole works. Correction: no more than half the attic, with a plywood partition walling off the rest into a makeshift closet.

Trying to take in the situation, I had the weirdest sensation of slipping into the past, back to Gram’s cramped upbringing among shacks of the homestead days as testified by the voices of the departed that spoke through her in terms like You couldn’t cuss a cat in that place without getting hair in your mouth. That about summed it up for me.

As I tried none too successfully to sort out this hodgepodge that was supposed to be my home for the summer, the first thing to strike my eye was the frilly bedspread flowered with purple and orange blossoms the size of cabbages, instead of the cozy quilts Gram and I slept under every night of our lives, and pillows, pillows, pillows, the useless small square ones with tassels or gold fringe or sentiments stitched on such as IT TAKES TWO LOVEBIRDS TO COO. Peeking from the bottom of the pile was a depleted pillow of regular size, which I could tell too many heads had rested on before mine. The top of the cheap fiberboard dresser similarly was snowed under, enveloped in white doilies starched to a stiffness that defied a person to set anything down on them. A rickety straight-backed chair and a bedstand holding a lamp with a stained shade amounted to the rest of the furniture. The remainder of the space was taken up with stacks of storage boxes labeled in ways such as Xmas tree lights & curtain material and some stray outmoded suitcases, although none seemed as old and
well-traveled as mine, and the unmistakable yellow spines of many years’ worth of *National Geographics* shelved in a sagging bookcase. As to the clothes closet in the partition that closed off the area from whatever was in back of it, it was so crammed with winter clothing and coats and, I very much suspected, dresses that Aunt Kate no longer could fit into, that she grunted with the effort of forcing apart the solid wall of garments enough to scrunch in anything of mine worth hanging, with my shirts as casualties only my jacket at the moment.

But what made me gulp hardest while moving in, to call it that, was what hung above the bed. The thing on the wall, I immediately thought of it as, and still do. That dimestore plaster-of-Paris wall plaque no kid old enough to be acquainted with death wants to have to see the last thing before the lights are put out, the pale kneeling boy in pajamas with his hands clasped and eyes closed perhaps forever, praying a prayer guaranteed to sabotage slumber:

*Now I lay me down to sleep,*

*I pray the Lord my soul to keep.*

*If I should die before I wake*

*I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

That spine-chilling ode to death in the night, making it out to be no big deal as long as you got on your knees right before going to bed, unhinged me so badly that if someone had written it in the autograph book, I honestly believe I would have scissored it out. As things were, I had trouble tearing my eyes away from the praying boy as Aunt Kate crooned around the confined quarters instructing me where to put things, while Herman stood well back out of the line of fire.

“There now,” she said when I was installed to her satisfaction, “and you know where the bathroom is.” Yeah, about a mile downstairs. “Kiss kiss,” she patted her cheek in a particular spot. I kissed Gram good night every bedtime, but
Nor could I see any clear way out if Aunt Kate as my last remaining blood relative—I wasn’t sure what Herman, formerly Dutch, counted as—decided to keep me if Gram no longer was in the picture. Three perforated ten-dollar bills would not carry a person very far in running away, would they. I’d have to think about that a lot more, but for the time being, the only advice I could find for myself was that bit whispered from those interrupted existences Gram kept in touch with. Hunch up and take it.

Everything churning in me that way, I lay there like the corpse promised in the thing on the wall if Manitowoc did me in before morning, until finally the exertions of the day caught up with me and I drowsed off.

Only to shoot awake at a tapping on the door and Herman’s hoarse whisper:

“Donny? Are you sleeping?”

“I guess not.”

“Good. I come in.”

Furtively he did so, closing the door without a sound and flipping the light on, grinning at me from ear to ear. “Soldier pachamas, I see,” he noted my undershirt when I sat up in bed wondering as a person will in that situation, Now what?

“The Kate is in the bath,” he explained as if we had plotted to meet in this secret fashion. With the same odd glint he’d had at the Greyhound station, he scooted the chair up to my bedside, displaying the book he’d been paging through earlier, thumb marking a place toward the middle. “What I wanted to show you.”

This was a case where you could tell a book by its cover. *Deadly Dust,* with cowboys riding full-tilt while firing their six-shooters at a band of war-painted Indians chasing them in a cloud of dust. At first glimpse it might have
been any of the Max Brand or Luke Short or Zane Grey shoot-'em-ups popular in
the Double W bunkhouse, but the name under the title was a new one on me.
Recalling my earlier encounter with the kind of person who spelled his name with
a K, I asked skeptically, "Who's this Karl May guy?"

"'My' is how you say it," said Herman. "Great writer. All his books, I
have. Flaming Frontier. The Desperado Trail. Lots others. Same characters,
different stories," he bobbed his head in approval. "You don't know Winnetou
and Old Shatterhand?" He tut-tutted like a schoolteacher. "Big heroes of The
West," I could hear his capital letters on those last two words.

Maybe so, but when he opened the book in evidence, I saw it was in
squarehead language of some kind, fancy lettered like in an old Bible, not a single
word recognizable to me. That didn't matter a hoot to Herman as he proudly
showed me the illustration he had hunted down in the middle of the book,
translating the wording under it.

"On the bound-less plains of Montana," he read with great care, adjusting
his glasses, "the tepee rings of the Blackfoot, Crow, and Ass-in-i-bone tribes--"

"I think that's Assiniboine," I suggested.

He thanked me and read on. "—are the eternal hunting tracks of following
the buffaloes, the be-he-moths of the prairie."

Triumphantly he turned the book so I could not miss the full effect of the
picture, which looked awfully familiar, similar to a Charlie Russell painting seen
on endless drugstore calendars. It depicted Indian hunters in wolf skins sneaking
up on foot to stampede a herd of buffalo over a cliff, the great hairy beasts
cascading to the boulders below.

"There you go, hah?" Herman whispered in awe at the spectacle. "Such a
place, where you are from."
It took all the restraint I had, but I didn’t let on that right over there in my suitcase was a little something from Montana that may have slain many a buffalo. This Herman was wound up enough as it was; the night might never end if we got off on magical arrowheads and so on. I stuck to the strictly necessary. “Can I tell you something? It’s Mon-TANA, not MONT-ana.”

“Funny things, words. How they look and how they say.” He broke off, glancing toward his feet. Letting out an exclamation I couldn’t decipher, he reached down and picked up one of my moccasins. “I stepped on it!” he cried out as if he had committed a crime. “I hope I didn’t break it none.”

The beadwork had survived, I could tell by a quick look the decorative fancy dancer still had all his limbs, and so I reassured Herman no harm had been done, meanwhile scooping the other moccasin out of range of his big feet.

“Fascinating,” he said under his breath, pronouncing it *faskinating*, lovingly turning over and over in his hands the deerskin footwear he had tramped on. When he right away had to know what the beaded stick figure cavorting there on the toe and instep was supposed to be, I explained about fancy dancing contests at big powwows.

“Such schluffen!” he marveled, which I figured must be squarehead lingo or Manitowoc talk, of the *schnapps* and *schnitzel* kind, for dance steps, like shuffling or something. Still fondling the moccasin as if he couldn’t let go, he asked in wonder, “You got from Indians?”

“As Indian as they come.” This time I couldn’t resist. Before I could stop myself, I was repeating the tale I’d told the ex-convict about the classy moccasins having been made for a great Blackfoot chief, temperately leaving out the part about my having won them in a roping contest on a dude ranch and instead circling closer to the truth by saying Gram had lucked onto them on the
only reluctantly put my lips to where I was ordered in these circumstances. Gram always returned the kiss, but Aunt Kate wasn’t about to. “Nighty-night, sleep tight,” and away she went, clumping down the stairs one by one. Kate Smith would not have left me with anything that babyish, I knew with a sinking heart, but at least Herman came through with “Have a good shuteye” and another of those half cockeyed man-to-man glances as he followed her into the stairwell.

Bunkhouse vocabulary failed me as what looked like endless nights in this miserable excuse for a room stared me in the face.

How did I land in this fix, which made a bus seat seat look good? The Double W cook shack had been the opposite of elegant, and some of the construction site lodgings where I had lived with my folks could not be called much more than shelter from the weather, but never had I been stuck up under the rafters like another piece of the junk that collects there. It seemed unbelievably unfair. I had ridden the Greyhound halfway across the entire country like I was supposed to, doing the best I could with the limited resources a person eleven going on twelve has for coping with all kinds of utter strangers and unforeseen situations--a trouper, no less, whatever that stacked up to be--only to be stuck away in a condensed version of Palookaville.

In that foul mood, I undressed for bed, slung away the decorative pillows, tried to pound some life into the squashed one, positioned the moccasins at bedside for the middle-of-the-night descent to the bathroom, turned out the light, and slipped under the dank covers in my shorts and undershirt. Like my father, I was never a believer in dressing head to foot to go to bed.

There I lay, trying to stay as still as possible because the least little movement made the bed creak like it was going to fall apart. Every squawk of the springs made me yearn for the tidy sewing room and its day bed. Goddamn-it-all-
to-hell-anyway, I'd even rather have slept down there on the chilly-butt living room davenport than on this rusty old bunk. Sleep was a distant matter in any case, what with the commotion of both the bed and my head. Literally, what hung over me, nailed to the wallboard, would not leave my mind. The stupid plaster kid, perfectly happy to die because he thought he had a sure ticket to heaven. My guess was they didn't even give Green Stamps on that trip.

The more I thought about the thing on the wall, the more I stewed. Did people such as that, the sunny kid on his knees and whoever wrote the catchy verse, even know anyone who died? They ought to ask me. I could tell them how white crosses on the shoulder of the highway cost far more than any hey-diddle-diddle rhyme about heaven could ever make up for, and what agony it is to wait for the result of something happening in a distant hospital with a white cross out front. Already I was missing Gram so mightily I felt half sick every time she crossed my mind, the cook shack years with her a separate life beyond the inventiveness of even my imagination, not an easy existence in any way yet worth it to have one last guardian to put up with my redheaded thinking.

What was going through me, truthfully, was a new and different fear of losing her, if the day's operation proved not have turned out all right. Queerly, the overwhelming dread I'd had before parting with her there at the ranch, that one way or the other--death and the poorfarm went together in my mind--this troubling summer might take Gram from me by the time the dog bus brought me back to Montana, that original anxiety now gave way to one much more immediate. Ending up back there as a ward of the county and thrown to chance in the orphanage would be awful enough. Yet what if, instead, the only future I had was under jailbar-like rafters in Wisconsin? Captive to an aunt who not only was not Kate Smith, but thought I must be missing a part between my ears?
reservation. Herman did not need to know they'd been hocked at a truck stop by a broke Indian.

"How good, you have them. You are a lucky boy." Maybe so, if the rotten sort was counted along with the better kind, I thought darkly to myself there on the skreeky bed.

He ran his fingers over the beadwork and soft leather one more time and carefully put the moccasin side by side with the other one.

"So, now you know about Winnetou and I know about fancy dancing. Big night!" He grinned that horsy way and clapped Deadly Dust shut. Evidently gauging Aunt Kate's bath was about done, he rose from his chair. "We palaver some more tomorrow, yah?" he whispered from the stairwell as he sneaked back downstairs.

I sank onto the swayback pillow, wide awake in the darkness of a summer that was showing every sign of being one for Believe It or Not.
“No.” There in the parking lot dimly lit from the Inn, Herman still looked stricken but in a different way. “Something is tickling my mind. Quick, your book. Let me look.”

Blankly I handed over the autograph album, and peered along with him as he flipped pages to Reverend Mac’s inscription. With some kind of swearing in German, he put his thumb next to the signature, Isaac M. Dezmosz. “Should have seen. Dismas was the thief crucified with Christ.” It took me a moment to put together the initials with that pronunciation and come up with it: I. M. Dismas.

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

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

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

The driver opened and considerately asked, “Forget something, boys?”

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

The seat was empty. “Where is he?” I demanded, glaring at the rows of startled faces, none of them the right one.

“Who, the minister?” the driver called down the aisle to us, perplexed by our invasion. “He got off at Livingston, couple of hours ago. Said he had a train to catch.”

“Sunk, we are,” Herman moaned.

Retreating to the front of the bus, we laid out our situation to the driver, who could only shake his head and tell us, “Report it at park headquarters and they’ll get the sheriff in on it.”
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 ENTERPRIZES 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 were a minute ago, get ‘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 sashayed 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!”
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“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 swayve
and debonure, 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 rosinning 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 myself 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. There where the arena director and anyone else who counted in running the events could keep track of things at close hand were clustered several Indian men in snazzy beaded vests and the darkest sunglasses made, plus a lesser number of white guys in gabardine western suits, from the prosperous look of them rodeo circuit officials and livestock contractors who provided 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 seenus 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 precious 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 fullness of the day. Secretly, I would have given anything to be in those Diamond Buckle boots snugging 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 safely 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-ifle.”

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 poles. 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 recognition 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.
“Took. 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 Slewwfoot 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 you look more like watered milk than redskin.”

“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,” 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 run 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. “Besides, rigging you up as a fancy dancer would be a good joke on these Crows. They were 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 woolly leggings—“Them other kids can have their plain old goatskin, you get 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 Herman, 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 came halfway down to my eyes. “That’s better. Now we’ll 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 said 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 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 thought 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 the Crow cop and Sparrowhead, 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 on ragging 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 usefult 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 proclaim, “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—“Dance ‘em into the dirt,” 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 whoop-up hoopsters, like in the papers! 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 shit 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 trio 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 of 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. “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 slip the arrowhead, medicine pouch and all, into my pocket where 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 the 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.”
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I do for you to loosen your grip on poor old Andy Jackson there,” he indicated the
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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 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 thought 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 the Crow cop and Sparrowhead, 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 on ragging 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. Get 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 wihtout 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—“Dance ‘em into the dirt,” 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 hearken me coming. They jigged and jangled and jiggled and jingled—maybe other jittery j words, too, but I don’t know what those would be. These were wound-up kids. Nonetheless, I couldn’t help but be noticed as I tucked myself in with them. A taller, older kid with a jackknife face spotted me at once, my black and white feathers standing out amid their mere golden eagle ones. 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 kid, half a head 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. “You’re not from here.”

“That’s for sure,” I verified, and let drop: “Heart Butte.”
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“That’s for sure,” I verified, and let drop: “Heart Butte.”


The others, though, were as impressed as I’d hoped. “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 shit 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.

“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 at me, he called out to the leader waiting at the gate, a grown man 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 your best,” the 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 whirls and twirls 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 and his life-changing little thinks, danced for the soldiers fated to Korea and for Leticia the unbeatable waitress and the other traveling souls met on the dog bus and inscribed in the memory book, all of us who were doing our best in slumgullion lives.

So, I suppose I was me, nerved up to the highest degree, but in the moment I also was Red Chief, and who knows, 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 shrieks of *eeee eeee eeee* 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 Leggins. "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 Still hopping and writhing, goes out of arena and rodeo grounds in the pack of dancing kids. back out to the tepees.

Herman was waiting, and immediately gathered me in front of him. "Louie has camper out, you can change there."

And would you believe, I got his autograph and more.

"More to you than meets an eye.

"Are--are we gonna keep on?"

"You're not too mad at me for taking the arrowhead?"

"What do you want to see next?"

"Something without police breathing on us." "Notcheral wonders."
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.

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 slip the arrowhead, medicine pouch and all, into my pocket where 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 clear sighted. "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, there is. Dog bus is way 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 the 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 thing where

"Yeah, well, gee, Herman. What do you want to see next?"

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On the dust cloud raised by the pack of dancing kids, my moment of fame forever with me, I jigged my way of 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. "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
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
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The others "You play basketball?"

"Damn betcha. We shoot baskets for an hour after school every day. Everybody does, even Shorty the janitor."

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“We find out. Keep walking like you got no business but dancing fancy,
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“Bunch of crazy gunners.” “Yeah, they shot the shit out of you. What was that score, about 100 to 20?”

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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.

“Boys, The bleachers were packed

Drummer goes with them. Increases beat at Donny dances?

the arena minced up with hoofprints

Donny gets in the dance competiion, remembers steps and chant the Heart Butte mascot does at basketball games, maybe eagle screech of “hearrt”, arms out like wings, swoops. My dance steps were not elegant, but they were wild. I danced as if my moccasins were on fire. I outcrazied the other kids.
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The others, though, were as impressed as I'd hoped. "You play basketball?"

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Uh oh. That didn’t sound good. If I got kicked out, I was right back to being searched for 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 wasn’t having any. Pointing at me, he called out to the leader, a grown man waiting at the gate 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."
Like a stuck compass needle, Herman’s one-way mind pointed us in that single arrowstraight direction. To the Karl May territory of Indian knights and pistolero cowboys, if you were him. To anywhere out there short of ‘the other side of the mountains’ and a poor farm for kids called an orphanage, if you were me. To the west, or rather, the West, capitalized in both our minds as the Land of the Free where we could be rid of the Kate and her bossy brand of life.

Old gray duffel bag on his shoulder, my new companion of the road marched through the crowd in the waiting room of the Milwaukee depot without deviating an inch either way, the wicker suitcase and me trying to keep up, dead-ahead until reaching the long and tall wall map topped with COAST TO COAST--THE FLEET WAY. Over our heads loomed the outline of America which, I swear, seemed to grow as we stared up at the numerous Greyhound routes extending to the Pacific Ocean.

Our silent gawking finally was broken by a thin voice. Mine.

“So where do we start?”

“Big question,” said Herman as if he didn’t have any more of a clue than I did. I could see him giving the subject a little think. “Maybe takes some fingerspitzengefühl, hah?”
“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,” the leader intoned, simultaneously starting a rhythm with his drum like a slow steady heartbeat and the whole group of dancers with one exception—me, the straggler—burst into “Hey-ya-ya-ya.” I caught up, more or less, as we poured into the arena minced up with hoofprints, and each began to dance to the chant and drumbeat.

Donny gets in the dance competition, remembers steps and chant the Heart Butte mascot does at basketball games, maybe eagle screech of “hearrt”, arms out like wings, swoops. My dance steps were not elegant, but they were wild. I danced as if my moccasins were on fire. I outcrazied the other kids.

Announcer spiel. singles him out, calls him Leggings. “How about... Look at him go! as a Scotchman trying to sneak under the door of a pay toilet. Folks, these dances go back a long way...

Still hopping and writhing, goes out of arena and rodeo grounds in the pack of dancing kids. back out to the tepees.

Herman is waiting. “Louie has truck out, you can change there.”

And would you believe, I got his autograph and more.

“More to you than meets an eye.

“What do you want to see next?”

“Something without po-leece breathing on us.” “Notcheral wonders.”