

Gram came not by Greyhound, of course, that last dog bus to Wisdom having run its course, but in a purple Cadillac convertible with me by her side after Rags and I picked her up at the Butte depot.

Naturally, at first she was mad enough to chew my ears off, but there is no woman on earth Rags could not charm into believing night was day. By the time we swept into the ranch yard and she saw the cookhouse....he had her

which happened no longer ago that it has taken to tell this.

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

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

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

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

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

So it has been, that matter of staking out a place. I was merely a college kid overflowing with ambition when my first break came--you can bet that Rags Rasmussen put in a word with the hometown committee--and I was hired as announcer at the Wisdom Roundup, the annual rodeo taking place within sight of the willows where Herman and I jungled up with the hoboes. From there, my career as the voice of the cowboy sport led up and up. Back there in our

Manitowoc showdown, Aunt Kate was more right than either of us knew when she called me a storier, for at microphones from Wisdom to Madison Square Garden for decades now, I have told the tales of bucking horses that never were ridden and broncbusters who never were daunted, and of course the seenus joke a thousand times.

Television amplified it all, and still does. It also brings surprises such the one that brought this flood of memory. Those of us in the UltraSports Network crew had pulled in to Reno for its Cowboy-O-Rama three-day show of the circuit's top riders competing for far more prize money than Rags and his generation ever dreamed of. I had just stepped off the bus, in this case still a Greyhound but refitted into the luxury coach our announcing crew travels in, to stretch my legs before showtime when someone over in back of the bucking chutes called out, "Scotty! I mean, Mr.Cameron!"

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

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

So it was that I smiled back at her and produced a pen, saying, “Ready and waiting, angel.” That last word slipped out, but she only gave me a sparkling look. No woman I had met yet, starting with those in my own family, seemed to mind being called something heavenly. This one proffered an immediate hand that had known ranch work and introduced herself as as Melanie, the way young people do as if the first name is all. But then she looked at me curiously. “You knew my grandparents, maybe? Harvey and Letty Kinnick?”

“Did I ever,” I laughed. “They were a pair to draw to.” By her expression, that saying meant little or nothing to her, so I thought it best to let it pass. “What have you got for me to do some penmanship on?”

When she passed me a crumpled Cowboy-O-Rama program, I was somewhat let down. “You don’t have an autograph album?”

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

Still high-spirited, she made a pretty good pass at flattering me with, “Know what? You look a lot better than that Believe It Or Not! cartoon of you in the Rodeo Hall of Fame. Graduation trip, my folks took me there.” She couldn’t help teasing me a little. “Fifty years at this and never missed any of the big shows on the circuit? Really? How many hundreds of rodeos have you called?”

“Just about enough,” I sighed. Starting to write from memory, I said offhandedly, “Maybe you’ll make it to the Hall yourself someday.”

"I'm setting out to," she said with the total confidence of the young. "I start at Treasure State U in Great Falls this fall. Communications major." With her complexion, when she blushed, as she did now, it went to the roots of her hair. Peeking at me to make sure I wouldn't laugh, she confessed, "I want to be a big-time sports announcer, like you." Emboldened when I seemed to take her seriously, she nodded toward the deluxe Greyhound with a sassy grin. "Maybe have a rig like that of my own?"

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

DEAN OF THE ARENA

SCOTTY CAMERON

BRINGS YOU *THE WORLD OF RODEO*

AN ULTRASPORTS EXCLUSIVE.

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

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

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

Before I could get a word in edgewise, the confident racer breezed on. "Sure is. I call her that after my favorite band. *We are the champions*," she sang, doing a little dance, "*of the world!*" You know that Queen song?"

“No, but I knew one of those champions,” I said huskily, overtaken by the thought of Rags Rasmussen in purple glory atop a mean bronc. I could see him rub his jaw at Cowboy-O-Rama, where a rider sliding into the saddle with a bucking horse under him has to wait out the commercials sponsoring my television show. Some things change seemingly overnight in this spinning world, I reminded myself as every man since Adam has had to. While other pieces of the past timelessly go on, like the Diamond Buckle hatband that still adorns my Stetson and the black arrowhead I wear in the clasp of my western bolo tie when I’m on camera in the announcing booth. I don’t call it luck any more, but something that defies the odds drives those of us with rambunctious imaginations, change be damned. I could feel the ambition coming off this unlikely soulmate in her skyblue Stetson, in her flush of youth the princess of all that life had to offer, and I concentrated on penmanship that had to say something from my years to hers.

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

“You’ll see. I learned it from somebody wiser than me.”

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

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

When you take a look in your memory book

*Here you will find the lasting kind,
Old rhymes and new, life in review,
Roses in the snow of long ago.*

When I was finished and gave back the rodeo program, the barrel racer setting out to be a winner in life had her smartphone at the ready to capture the inscription, but stopped to read it over more than once, freckles congregating as she crinkled her nose at herself. “That’s really nice, even if I’m not sure I get it all.”

“Don’t worry, angel. Someday you will.”

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change Donny's last letter on bus to:

Herman carried in his wallet a little handout calendar from the coal company, probably so he could keep track of Saturdays and visits to the Schooner, and he used it to write the mailing date for Gus on each letter very tiny up in the corner where the stamp would cover it.

She's gong to take me to Indian Days just before school starts and I come home. It's a big deal because this is where Manitou walked, he's their Great Spirit, and there's going to be a parade and dancing and Indians of all kinds, even Apaches are coming...

“Good, good,” Herman said when he read that one over. “You have busy imagination...”

insert at Letty scene on bus, about Harv.

“He’s a piece of work. The strong silent type, a little hard to keep up with because he’s on the road so much, trucking here and there. But when he’s around, sparks fly.”

“Holy wow,” I said as if I knew anything about such matters. “He sounds like a real boyfriend.”

“Real as they come.” She blew a smoke ring. “We’re more or less engaged, or will be when that husband of mine gets it through his head to agree to a divorce.” Dabbing the ash off her cigarette, she mused, “Haven’t seen Harv lately, wherever he’s been. Had to leave word for him at the Buster that I’ve moved on to You-know where.” Then her grin came back. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all that, huh? Harv’s good at catching up on things.”

“I bet he is,” I endorsed him sight unseen, talented as he sounded in areas a little beyond me.

sub poem for her inscription:

*Life is a zigzag journey, they say,
Not much straight and easy on the way.
But the wrinkles in the map, explorers know,
Smooth out like magic at the end of where we go.*

“That’s pretty deep for me,” I admitted, so far from the end of my unwanted journey that I could not foresee anything remotely like magic smoothing the way. More like a rocky road ahead, among people as foreign to me as a jungle tribe. Still, I did not want to hurt her feelings and resorted to, “You really know how to write.”

“Learned that ditty in school, along with the one about burning your candle at both ends. Funny how certain things stick with you,” she mused as I

was reluctantly about to thank her and excuse myself to get up and leave. But then froze, staring fully into the autograph book. “What’s the matter, kiddo?” she asked offhandedly, her next cigarette on the way to her lips. “Did I spell something wrong?”

What had stopped me cold was her signature. *Letty Minetti*.

pick up: “The truck stop...

ranch description:

The boss house was in the practical Big Hole style with a metal roof for the snow to slide off, not in the Double W ranchin’ mansion fashion at all, and Rags had it to himself except for the kitchen and that usual eating arrangement, a sunporch off the kitchen where a long table could hold the entire crew. The cookhouse was out back, inhabited by Mrs. Costello, and Jones lived in foreman’s quarters off the side of the main residence in what must have been a carriage house in the early days. The outbuildings were run down, as evidenced by the blacksmith shop, but Rags’s rodeo earnings and Jones’s constant push to get things dne were fixing that, although haying took precedence over everything else for the time being.

*Creole
onscreen*

the crew in the bunkhouse

Midnight Fankie was from what he called Lousy Anna, and spoke with the *dem s* and *dosess* of a Creole accent. Shakesepeare's tale was one of youthful indiscretions, when he became adept at what he called dialing the treasury, which mounted to safecracking, and it drew him an education written on jailhouse walls and in prison libraries. Peerless had hit the road during the Depression, starved out of an Oklahoma Dust Bowl farm to the California orchards, where the miserable Okie migrant camps turned him into an agitator and OO, and he was not always wrong. Skeeter went farther back in the workeingman's struggle against the crapitalists, as he called them, when he was a participant in the Seattle general strike of 1919 that got beaten down. "I got this far from that suckerfish mayor," he still lamented falling short by an arm's length, "I ought've killed him then and there, done the world a favor." Fingy never brought his background out except once when Smiley, nosy as ever, asked, "How'd you lose them fingers anyway? She close her legs on you too quick?" Fingy gave him a look as if about to squash a bug and only said, "Two Jima."

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

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

So, life in the bunkhouse was much like an extended version of that last bus from Wisdom, crowded and crude and somehow companionable almost in spite of itself.

Donny: “You know what I wish? You’d tell them about that Hitler night and the Witch of November and tht kind of stuff.”

“No, Donny,” he shook that off decisively. “Is best to let them have their tellings and just listen. They need their stories, not much else do they have.”

Insert here? With one exception. The fly in the butter was Smiley. Established in the bunkhouse ahead of the rest of us, he had his own corner and proprietary attitude...

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on bus w/ sheriff & Harv:

"Can I ask him something?"

"~~Yeah, sure~~ Why not, take his mind off jailbreaking, for a change."

"Do you know somebody named Leticia? Letty?"

"Sure do."

on Crow Fair/Yellowstone icon, to be added early in that ch. or the next

I was discovering he always Germaned up “thinker” that way, and though I could not have said why I thought so, “thinkerer” did seem to add a little something to the meaning. At least I took it that way, and

my calls briskly told me Gram would be there in a minute, no mention of fetching her in a wheelchair.

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

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

"Geez, Gram," my voice topped out in relief that she was on her feet again and going strong, "that's really terrific--"

"That's not the surprise, though," she busted right in as if whatever it was wouldn't keep. "I've had the best news from somebody. You'll never guess who." She could not have been more right about that. "Letty. She called me the other day from Glasgow after work."

That confused me totally, the entire picture of the lipstick-implanted bus encounter scrambled in my head with the distant town that had spooked me when I half woke from that nightmare. "How come she's in Glasgow? What happened to Havre?"

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

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

"She thinks the world of you, anyway. Said you were real good company riding together." My pride started to swell at that, but Gram was not nearly done

spilling the surprise. "She's waitressing at the Glasgow Supper Club. Here's the big news. She can get me on as a night cook."

"There in Glasgow?" I asked dumbly. "Just like that?"

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

"We have it all worked out, there's an apartment right by hers. When you get back from Aunt Kate's after Indian Days, I know you don't want to miss that, we'll move there and be together under one roof. Doesn't that beat all?"

Yes, no, and maybe fought over that in me. There it was, imagination more or less coming true, Letty embossed into our patchy family as niftily as her name on her blouse. But why did it have to be in Glasgow, way out there on the gopher plains, all the difference in the world from Gros Ventre. The place had looked like to me an overgrown Palookaville if there ever was one. Where that dinky sheriff herded Harv onto the Greyhound and gave me such a bad time while he was at it. I would have to turn into a town kid there, like those skim-milk campers who thought hunting frogs was a big deal. All that was plenty to swallow, but beyond those was something that really brought a lump to me. Herman would stick out like a signpost saying ALIEN HERE in a town of that sort. So while Letty and Gram had hit the jackpot of my wishes, it came with a king hell dilemma.

The best I could fend into the phone receiver right then was, "That's--that's really some news."

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

phone, pretty please. Tell her I said what's past is past, I'd like to talk to her, sister to sister."

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

"I didn't quite catch that, the connection must have gone bad. Like a what?"

--uh, a gyppo, you know, those chainsaws gyppo loggers use that start up *hnngk hnngk*," my nose came to my rescue, I had to hope. "Anyhow, she's awful touchy about you, and I wouldn't want her saying something that would hurt your feelings and make the situation worse and all on account of me." I made a shameless play for sympathy. "I'd feel real bad about that."

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

"Oh yeah, she'll know."

“Havre.” The men looked at each other as if that was the bottom of the barrel.

Harv recovered enough to maintain, “Letty’d have her reasons.”

“Eh, her,” the sheriff scoffed. “The cause of all this. Isn’t that so, loverboy?”

“Only because you arrested me when I was on my way to go see her in Great Falls, before Havre came up,” the prisoner said, patient as paint. “I was hitchhiking just fine until I had to stop for a bite to eat.”

“For crying out loud,” his captor grouched, “I leave the office for lunch at the High Liner Cafe like usual, and there you come waltzing up the street, big as life. What was I supposed to do?”

“You could have looked down the street.”

“Oh, sure, let a jailbreaker run around loose, even if it’s you,” the sheriff shook his head in disgust. A mean little smile crept in after that expression.

“Anyway, this Letty sounds like she isn’t waiting for you, Harv old kid.”

“We’ll fetch up together, sooner or later,” the big quiet man in cuffs vowed calmly, and jailbreaker notwithstanding, I found myself pulling for that to be true.

possible change, sub Letty for Janie

--Harv is a truckdriver, cross-state hauls

--Harv is in the picture Donny dreams of, wrecking it by NMew plan

--on bus: Do you know somebody named Letty?

Sure do.

(Harv) Havre.

--" I'm gonna pop the question to her. She'll have to shed that husband of hers, but soon as she does, we'll tie the knot and head for NMex.

--Do you know someone named Letty?

Sure thing.

My girlfriend, yeah. Sounds like you...

She was on the bus...awful nice to me

lately.

I was on my way to see her in GF. We been kind of out of touch because

(

Yeah, you were in jail where you belong, knothed.

--in finale, Donny has to tell Harv that Letty is in GF?

--Harv: She can kiss like nobody's business.

D: Yeah, I bet she can.

I know. I mean,

finale: every so often postcard from NM, w/ something like OO in Letty's handwriting.

sheriff: You lovesick idiot.

H on bus: If you hadn't arrested me, you wdn't have to be doing this.

Sheriff: You broke jail, Harv. That happens to be a crime. What am I supposed to do when you show up big as life, give you the key to the city?

H: Could have looked the other way.

*1
I was only looking
a ride*

*hop out of a tank in
my plain sight*

Like Wyoming's Jackson Hole with the Teton mountains rising from the plains and Colorado's 00, the Big Hole had something. Places where the forces of nature were generous...

Jones could read men.

The Diamond Buckle was crisply run, When perturbed, he had a tongue like a cutting torch, words coming out of him blue and flaming. Consequently, with few exceptions he scorched us into doing things his way and no other. Early on, he lit into Highpockets and Midnight Frankie for the heaps of hay they were bucking onto the stacker fork, telling them buckraking was not some kind of contest to see how big a pile they could accumulate--which of course they were engaged in, unspoken or not--but to shape up and bring in smaller quicker loads. I was not spared, when Jones caught me being slow about clucking Queen and Brandy into action and turned my ears red by telling me this as no time for moonchasing. He never criticized Harv--this I found interesting--and Skeeter and Pooch he left alone, out of age and infirmity. And he went easy on Herman

Maybe it was those Diamond Buckle hatbands encircling our minds, but the crew took it from the foreman and grudgingly conceded he as right. The exception was Smiley, who perpetually threatened to quit-- out of Jones's hearing, of course-

with everything blooming that cd bloom

I

the

warming

change?

This was my favorite time of year, as far as possible from winter, warm weather
like a nice slow fire moving in to stay and green grass tickling blue sky. The best season, when ranch
work went from the round-the-clock mess of calves and lambs and colts dropping
from their mamas and needing tending, to the orderly pattern of haying, anywhere
you looked the rounded stacks standing out on distant mown fields like polka
dots. Ordinarily Gram ^{noon?} now would be dealing with the summer table, the added
length supported on sawhorses and oilclothed over to set places for the haying
crew joining the usual bunch of us at meals. Fresh faces of the mower men and
buckrakers and the stack man, always the most muscular, each hayhand bringing
a checkered life to the job and the tales in the bunkhouse. The past two summers I
had floated free and easy amid it all as the ranch devoted itself to the rhythm of
haying. But this one, I was caged up looking out at 00, and Gram was confined
much worse than that.

grain?

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

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

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

"Yeah!"

"One something is on my mind," he fretted, quite a change from his usual "Nothing to worry." Before he could go on, we heard Lon Ames say, "Hold on a sec, here's somebody you might as well meet and get it out of the way." He called across the yard to a limping man carrying a pan of feed to the chickenhouse. "New hands, Smiley, come get acquainted."

The choreboy, as I knew him to be and Herman was destined to find out, came toward us swinging ^{one co. A of 1/4} This was verging into strange Believe It Or Not! territory, Maybe they came in threes, like celebrity deaths and 00.

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

"One Eye will be handling the sickles."

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

The bunkhouse was about what was to be expected in those days, brown beaverboard walls, ironframe cots. Linoleum on the floor. I looked around real quick, concerned about the bunk situation, and saw there were two empty ones off in a corner. Highpockets told me merely with the shift of his eyes in that direction

was a
grumpy
00
changed
course 6