"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 corner 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."

change to
Sch name

"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 fiddly 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 going at it any old where and not have a pretty good idea what that piece of language meant, and to me pinochle's comparative lack of action fit canasta just as well. Come right down to it, accumulating seven cards to go out on seemed to me as ridiculous as taking that flying poke 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--next thing to being sentenced to the orphanage--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 Sparrowhead," 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 out 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 radiated colors of the rainbow, and while I gaped, 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.

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 choice except Aunt Kate, 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 ourselfs 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?"

"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

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 drifty 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--

had steadily petered out on me ever since I got off the dog busand into this loco household. 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, was that so much to ask? By evry sign, thanks to her I would go back to Montana at the end of the summer looking like a hobo. It is not a thought that lulls a person off into a dream, although it does take the mind in unprecedented directions.

That next day, with the arrowhead holstered in my pants pocket within easy touch for luck, I sat up to the card table determind to get the hang of canasta and spare myself Aunt Kate's pinched expressions, both facial and vocal.

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

Right away when she finished off dealing with a *hmm-HMM-hmm* hum, I stared at the random mixture of hearts and diamonds and clubs and spades I was holding, waiting in vain for luck or anything like it to strike. Instead, my would-be partner across the table did. "Now then, Don-al," she fueled up from the peanut brickle plate and gave me a look I could feel all the way to my shorts, "it's time to get serious." Multriple determination showing in her chins, she directed, "You draw first to start us off, and we'll pittypat right along, learning as we go so that we can show the girls"--how people named Herta and Gerda fit that, I couldn't imagine--"how the game should be played, mmm?" "

"Uh, sure, here goes nothing from nowhere," I said, mouth dry, as I reached to the waiting deck, a creeping feeling of doom coming with yet another card into the mittful I was holding.

Disaster was not long in coming, at least. Trying to get something going, after fumbling through a first few draws and discards back and forth, I managed to meld three sixes and then drew a fourth one. Now the top card on the discard pile was yet another sixspot, so by logic, 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 my partner across the table, whose own concentration seemed to consist of popping brickle into her mouth as if it was only the peanuts, that 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?"

Rollng 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 on 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 a lick of sense." 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 unciviiized 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 need to go and have my hair done, so we won't try any more cardsie-wardsie today." She fixed a look on me as I too readily tossed my hand 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 about endless 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 thinger. 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.

This was the point at which I darted my free hand as unobtrusively as I could into my pants pocket and rubbed the arrowhead in its skin of glove thumb. If it was going to be a lucky piece, there was no better time to start.

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? 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?

About then, Herman noticed my hand visiting deep in my pants and tut-tutted with a frown. "Donny, sorry to say, but this is not time for pocket pool."

Turning red as that seven of hearts, I yanked my hand out at that accusation of playing with myself. "No, no, it's not that, honest. What it is, I carry, uh, a lucky charm and it's got to be rubbed for, you know, luck." He cocked his head in interest at my hasty explanation. I still was flighty about letting anyone see the arrowhead. For the moment, I alibied insincerely, "I'll, uhm, I'll show it to you sometime it you want. After the canasta party, maybe."

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 Geographic*s, 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 bedime 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

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.

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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?

About then, Herman noticed my hand visiting deep in my pants and tut-tutted with a frown. "Donny, sorry to say, but this is not time for pocket pool."

Turning red as that seven of hearts, I yanked my hand out at that accusation of playing with myself. "No, no, it's not that, honest. What it is, I carry, uh, a lucky charm and it's got to be rubbed for, you know, luck." He cocked his head in interest at my hasty explanation. I still was flighty about letting anyone see the arrowhead. For the moment, I alibied insincerely, "I'll, uhm, I'll show it to you sometime it you want. After the canasta party, maybe."

Change? D shows it to him?

Herman's long face crinkled in a surprisingly wise smile. "Like I say, you are lucky boy. Now I know why." He turned back to Hoyle. "So, we are solving the hen party. Let me give a little think," he switched to in almost the next breath, running his finger down the canasta page black with rules. Silent for a minute, he then grinned a certain way, saying as if it was just our secret, "Hah, here is oppor-tun-ity. Hoyle don't say you got to put meld down any time quick." Reaching over, he grabbed up the cards I had melded and tucked them back in my hand. "Bullwhack the hens. Hide what you will do, yah?"

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 the twin cardplaying demons blindly discarded something I had at least a pair of and I could snatch up the pile and put together melds like crazy. ""Eye-dea is, surprise their pants off," he formulated, already tracing through the dense print for further stunts I could pull. I giggled. That would put them in the same league as the undressed womanhood peeking various parts of themselves out at me from card to card. Canasta Herman style was proving to be worth ever so much more close attention than that of Aunt Kate.

Amazed at the progress I had made, she praised my new powers of concentration and confidence and what she unknowingly termed a better feel for canasta, in our session next day. "That's more like it," she declared, celebrating with a chunk of peanut brickle. "Honeybun, I knew you could do it. All it takes is patience, mmm?"

That and whatever could be squeezed out of a lucky arrowhead and a French Bible.