

POLLY AND BERT—II

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by

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Your first thought on seeing our title has gotta be, “Talk about feeble! They must know (and be admitting) that their readership has sunk a little (below three).” Bert and I had been suggesting some truly bum-grabbing titles, even Bert’s (bum, I mean), and here are some:

P&B—Things Pick Up (Trust Me)

P&B—Gotta Be Better

P&B—X-Rated

Three guesses on who came up with the last, which rests at the top of Bert’s range (and is the best of the three).

But you know who assigned us the sure-to-attract-not-one-damned-buyer title. Right! That Dane fellow, who thinks he owns us just because he publishes (when he’s not out wrecking his sailboat and those of his fellow mariners) work that other publishers are dying to get their hands on. You’re wondering why we maintain this loyalty, given everything you know about us and Dane, who deserves all that is said against him and more. Well, I wonder, too. Ask Bert.

I am mulling over whether maybe all this isn’t connected somehow to Bert’s disability, his social anxiety disorder, touched on earlier. If you continue on in this saga (why? misplaced loyalty?), you’ll see that I soon ask him directly to expand on this illness, whose acronym you ought to consult for clues. If that doesn’t interest you, keep reading. Keep reading anyhow—this volume will surprise you with its revelation of hot spots in the upper-middle of our country (’tis of thee) and also of hots spots right here inside—never mind.

Now ordinarily, as you have come to recognize, a change of speakers is indicated by a row of asterisks, clumsy but mandated by that ass Kincaid, whom somebody put in charge of trivia, which is where he belongs, were he not unfit to be in charge of anything whatever. Anyhow, this one time the narrator role is

being transferred to Bert, without the asterisks. If you can't follow that, why don't you just leave.

I'm Bert. I know Polly is trusting that I'll have a lot of wooie things to say in hopes of enticing you to come right along with us, as it were, in our nice camper and buckle into our journey to who knows what and where. I do hope you will come. You'll like Polly a lot, and we'll be sure to visit good places. So, why not?

This is Kincaid speaking here now, the one defamed earlier, just saying that you should buy this book (full-price) and not just download it for free, as that compulsive goody-good Dane would have you do. I mean, we get little enough in royalties as it is from actual copies purchased by the masses from Amazon. So don't be a contemptible jackass— just go out and buy it. You'll feel good that you did, all warm and glowy, and will regard the cost as trifling in comparison.

And this is a completely neutral voice, just what you were hoping for, amidst all this partisanship and unruly shoving, grabbing for the mike. Truth is, you need no introductory frame. Just Polly and Bert. So, they're not always sweet? Well, just hang on.

CHAPTER ONE

July 5

This is still Bert—right here with you, as it were, inviting you sincerely to be with us as we continue. Polly said to tell you that things would really pick up, “both inside and outside the camper.” I’m not sure what she meant by that, though whatever it is you’ll be the first to know. Well, maybe not in the way you were hoping, as Polly is pretty prudish, seems to me, though she’ll not be happy that I said so. OK, that’s enough

Enough! Jesus on a bun, Bert. When we get to actual dialogue and into the damned camper, I’ll prod him—in an encouraging and sensitive way, mindful of his fucking special needs, of course. (I won’t apologize for the pointless profanity, as I’m trying hard to make it second nature to me.) Right now, we’re sort of talking about talking or something like that, addressing our many readers, enticing them to tell all their friends to rush out and buy it, the book. Don’t waste a minute! Guess who is forcing that charade onto us. Well, he keeps saying that without him we’d have no voice at all, no being. He thinks he has a point, which just goes to show you.

Anyhow, I actually do think you’ll enjoy what we are planning, me and Bert, as we move along. And “move along” is sure as shit what we should be doing, me and Bertram and you, as we leave behind this wretched idea of preliminary babble shoved on us by (you know), which he thinks is a cagey way to “make it difficult, nay impossible, for prospective buyers to pass us by.” He imagines all you prospective buyers (thousands) will be entrapped by these alluring opening remarks, as you thumb through us there at your bookstore, wondering and considering. Well, I promise to end all this right here with this very blessed sentence and get into what actually will interest you, “interest” being far too mild a descriptor.

(Reminder: the lines, unlike the asterisks, indicate only a change of some kind: a lapse in time, different location, that sort of thing. In this case it indicates the departure of that double-dyed %#@&*\$ Kincaid.)

“Hey, Bert.”

“I’m right here, Polly. What?”

“I’m glad you’re here, Bert, otherwise I’d have nobody to talk with, which is what I wanted to discuss with you.”

“What?”

“Exactly.”

(All this time, we were sitting together, parked, in our camper, the details of which you remember from the first volume. And now, I’ll set you all adrift: no more direct address, a device that we all learned in school was generally eschewed after the eighteenth century and wouldn’t be at all the thing now. Anyhow, bye-de-bye.)

“Well, Bert, are we now safe in the camper and talking to one another, not to mythical readers? Are we freed from that obnoxious, showy stuff, able now to relax into our usual charming focus on roads and places and, above all, our untouched-as-yet bodies?”

“If I follow what you’re saying, Polly, I think so—think we’re now really talking.”

“Not having other fucking show-offs move our jaws and lips. Right?”

“Fucking right!”

“Bert. Don’t do that.”

“OK. I said that just so you’d feel encouraged—you know.”

“It don’t matter.”

“OK. I seem to be in the driver’s seat. You want to switch so I can handle the maps and guides, the boring stuff?”

“So you can manage to control our every movement, you mean, you patriarchal prick!”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Yes, I am, so let me be the one to do the maps and guides and

your job is to—you say it.”

“Obey.”

“So, Bert, following your lead, I’ve been calling up idiotic things on Google.”

“My influence is always bad.”

“True. The saving grace, as they say in the best novels, is that nobody is influenced by you.”

“True.”

“Dearie, I was kidding. I am so sorry. And you’re grinning as if you’d won something. That allows me a second venture into new territory. So, fuck yourself, Bert.”

“There’s a cure for S.A.D.”

“Good one. Your top score so far!”

“A generous judge.”

“Enough of that, Bubbles. Anyhow, before we take off for more—where we going again?”

“Well, we’re up here in Wyoming, so... .”

“Right. All the bright lights of big cities here and then, eastward, right?”

“OK. That’d take us into the Dakotas, which would be nice.”

“For once, I agree, Colbert. Much that I know—you know—we know. But, before all that, I want to talk about something.”

“OK.”

“You don’t mind?”

“No.”

“You don’t care what it is?”

“Not if it’s you doing the... .”

“Stop right there, Stumblebert. I didn’t mean to feed you that line. Anyhow, kid, I did some reading on social anxiety disorder. Not a whole lot. I hope you don’t mind.”

He didn’t say anything, just looked at me oddly—maybe with dismay. I’m not very good at deciphering looks, so on I charged.

“Anyhow, Bert, I’m not being mean here—I hope. Just want to help or at least not, by god, torture you all across Wyoming and The

Badlands. I know you won't say anything now, but here's what I uncovered about the symptoms. I'll just read them off, though a harsh judge would say the list is too long, proud of itself, and repetitive:

- Fear of situations in which you may be judged negatively
- Worry about embarrassing or humiliating yourself
- Intense fear of interacting or talking with strangers
- Fear that others will notice that you look anxious
- Fear of physical symptoms that may cause you embarrassment, such as blushing, sweating, trembling or having a shaky voice
- Avoidance of doing things or speaking to people out of fear of embarrassment
- Avoidance of situations where you might be the center of attention
- Anxiety in anticipation of a feared activity or event
- Intense fear or anxiety during social situations
- Analysis of your performance and identification of flaws in your interactions after a social situation
- Expectation of the worst possible consequences from a negative experience during a social situation

I don't mean to hurt you, Bert. Just trying to understand."

He was quiet for so long, I began to wonder if he'd ever talk again, but then he did. "I know you're trying to help, Polly, and I think it's amazing how much you already have done for me—helped. I deep down see these things on the list, recognize what they say—and I'm guilty of all of them, pretty much. I know the problems won't go away all at once, maybe never, not really. And—you know how it is—sometimes you lose tomorrow what you got today. That can be good—or not. Still, you do so much, Polly, I mean—yeah, you do. Sorry to be so inarticulate."

"You're not, Bert. Tell me how I can help more—really help."

“Keep yelling at me, Polly, making fun of me. That’s wonderful, makes me almost think I’m—you know—normal. Don’t hold back.”

“I see. That’ll be easy to do, since you’re such a prize-winning asshole.”

He looked at me with the biggest smile. I tried not to return it.

Bert here, and enough of that, though I can’t begin to tell you what it is I feel for Polly—well, you probably know. (You probably know better than I do.) We took off, me driving and Polly shuffling through maps and guides. She was quiet for some time, so I just took it on myself to head back east a little ways, skirting Denver, and then roaring north on the 25, fierce-looking mountains to our left but the road flat and solid as my rock-iron abs to the east. (I think I’ll drop that tone—too much, too soon.)

“OK, Bert, first off, so you don’t get overloaded, just the cities where we’re settling in up there in Wyoming. You’ll understand that I had to carefully cull—“cull” means “select”—from a plethora of two worthwhile places to visit a list for us of six. That’s very witty, the way I put that.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Thank you—so we’re off on the right foot, Cuthbert.”

“You going to read some *Moby-Dick*?”

“Jesus in Fourth Period, Bert, I been reading about Wyoming’s towns and you might as well just say it—you don’t give a damn.”

“Oh, I do.”

“OK, then. I’ll overlook your crushing rudeness—with some difficulty, but we women are used to it. And so here are the towns I have chosen, in order: Cheyenne, Laramie, Rawlins, Casper, Cody, and Buffalo. That’s by no means everything, but it’ll exhaust you and me, bore us silly, leave us in an erotic daze, which is what we’re seeking.”

“OK.”

“I think we can probably make it to Cheyenne with enough time to inaugurate our joys there, given that we got such an early start and

the reckless speeds you're maintaining."

"I ain't about to slow down. Laramie, here we come!"

"Cheyenne, fool!"

"You know what they call a fool in England, Polly?"

"No."

"A plank or a bark."

She looked at me with approval. Unlikely, but so it seemed.

Finally, she took it up again. "There's about three-hundred-or-so things to do in the town and around it, Bert, but most of them are what you'd expect—tours of the state house, this here Cheyenne being nothing less than the by god capital of the state—and ever so many old houses, museums, and hot night life thingies. So as to keep you from being bored, we're doing only two of them—tonight a sizzling bar called Finn's Family Fun and tomorrow a rough and rewarding trip to a bison ranch."

I wasn't going to bite on the family bar joke, so just said, "OK, Polly. Your labors have paid off."

"Lordy, Bert, I must admit that I expected something more than that. But I guess that's just what you can muster. Therefore, big man, let me whet your appetite for tomorrow, since tonight, I will confess, sounds dismal. Here's what they say:

One of Cheyenne's most unique attractions! Take a tour on one of Tom's Bison Ranch's custom-built trains to see ostriches, camels, a huge bison herd, and actually hand-feed the bison! Tours are every day except Christmas Day."

"And that is better than tonight? Bison, camels, and ostriches? And tonight is worse?"

"Your job, you must remember, is to be supportive, Bert. Not every day you get to feed bison."

"Yeah, maybe they'll eat my knuckles."

She stared ahead, maybe pissed, but I don't think so. Anyhow, we got there to the town pretty quick, found a handy van park, thanks to Polly, and very soon got ourselves ready (seamlessly and with due regard to one another's privacy) for the bar, where we could at least

get dinner—if not drunk.

Soon as we exited our van, though, these guys suddenly approached, three of them.

The biggest one—they were all big—walked up to me, got too close, and sort of yelled, “You assholes from California, huh? Don’t say you aren’t. I can see. What the fuck you think you’re doing here? You ain’t wanted—here or no place else. No. So you’d better just move on, you ugly little turd-shrimp. Listen to me.”

I don’t think I could have said a word, though I knew I should, but Polly wasn’t about to let any insult pass, even to me, especially to me.

“We’re on a tour of the most miserable towns and people in the whole fucking country—taking pictures for *National Geographic*. You mind if we take your picture, butt-face? Primitives in their native habitat, you see. We can do it right now or maybe you want to work up your drool first, get your Trump signs out, draw your guns.”

Right then, I knew for sure we were in for it—and good. I first tried to get between Polly and these three idiots, figuring I could calm things down. But just as I started to say something sort of pacifying—who knows?—I felt myself being lifted up and, I guess, thrown onto something. All I could see was sky and dirt, seemed like. I wasn’t doing anything you could call thinking, just trying to brace myself and then find a way to get up—get up and make the pain go away and help Polly.

Then I heard this rough, oddly sweet voice in my ear—seemed like inside my ear, all liquidy and hissy—saying something about “yer girlfriend.” Took me a few seconds to tie that to Polly. Then my assailant—really a protector, female, too—made it clear to me that I was, first, to pretend to let her be subduing me (pretend?) and, second, to be at ease about Polly, who (I soon figured out) was starring in similar theater.

We must have been there for some considerable time, as I managed to absorb not only these instructions but to learn what must have been the whole history of this strange family—two sisters and a

brother—from birth. Here's a capsule summary. The sisters had raised the brother, pretty much from birth, both parents being stricken with a disease or were maybe lousy bums all along—I wasn't clear on that. Their brother was either on the spectrum or maybe just felt terribly threatened by life. In any case, he had been in and out of jail, they said, and was barely able to navigate a week without finding himself pounding somebody or other or getting pounded.

You know what I did? I asked her if I could talk with him. She was silent for a minute. I think she was silent—maybe I just didn't hear her at first. What I could finally make out was a mixture of, "Would you?" and "Are you crazy?" I really didn't care, figured anything would be better than staying in the dirt for the rest of the summer.

Somehow, I found myself on my feet, wavering a little but toe to toe with this unfriendly guy I had sought out for conversation. Where to begin? Rather, how to begin, without getting punched—or, maybe, before getting punched. What flashed through my head then, most uselessly, was the "Young Frankenstein" scene where Gene Wilder finds himself locked in a prison cell with the monster and says in this funny sprightly voice, "Hello, handsome!"

At least I did better than that, a little. I closed the space between us, a matter of inches, and more or less grabbed his hand, being careful to keep eye contact. "I'm Bert. That girl there, just now getting up, she's Polly. Don't worry. We mean you no harm." Wonder where I got that? Sounds like what the genocidal Europeans said to the Natives.

I had read somewhere that autistic people did not respond well to soft touch, so I decided to take no chances. You guessed it. I not only avoided soft but more or less hugged him tight. Oh boy!

But you never know, do you? Instead of ending my days right then and there, he laughed, told me (whispered in my ear that) his name was Basil and then apologized. I am proud to say that I made no comment on his name, just pulled my head back some, smiled, and asked politely about Polly.

“Oh, I am so sorry. I am so sorry. Believe me. Is her name Polly? Did I hurt her?”

“Don’t be sorry,” I said, “Yes, Polly is her name. She’s fine. You did not hurt her.”

Of course, I had no first-hand knowledge of Polly’s current state, but was figuring the job at hand was keeping this friend, Basil, from exploding again on either of us.

But I was so flushed with my success—was it a success?—that I went on, like an [you supply the term]. “You know, Basil, Californians are not all so bad. Now, I grant you that some may be arrogant, but they’re those shits from San Francisco, not at all like us from—er—the South, where we’re, you know, cool and unassuming—which can, in itself, be annoying, but”

Even I could see that I’d gone badly astray—could hardly have been worse—and turned to what had worked, firm contact. I hugged him real hard again and then said, “Is it OK to get Polly?”

“Polly?”

“The one under there.” I pointed to the adjacent pile, guarded by the other sister, where Polly was safely (I hoped) submerged.

Just then, the pile of two began rumbling and, sure enough, Polly came out, looking fine. I figured she’d soon start punching away, but she was smiling, even laughing, apparently in the midst of something shared with her sister-conqueror. Holy shit.

I sort of edged a little away from the brother, who was now looking blank—blank was good—and, before I knew it, we’d both managed to achieve separation, Polly and me, had said our hasty farewells and were heading off to the Bison Ranch.

Bert was so hot on this ranch, I decided to read just a little more on both the place and then on buffalo, which I soon discovered were located in Africa, all of them, the beasts here in North America being known as bison. So there, Buffalo Bill, you misnamed turd.

Turns out the place was—well, what I had read out earlier.

“So, the good news, Bert, is that there is a tour, as you knew before, and we get to see these animals cavorting and having brutal times in their natural habitat. It’s all of it, as they tell us, “most unique,” even for Cheyenne. And it’ll be explained to us—in detail.”

“Uh-huh. You really want to get slobbered on by a bison? Get kicked by a camel?”

“Now, Bert, we all know what a wild adventurer you are. I’ll speak a word to the guide, and he’ll have you not only hand feeding but riding and taming them.”

“They really are not friendly, you know that, Polly?”

I’d figured as much but was so pleased to hear Bert initiate something, even something dumb-assed, that I played along. “No, I didn’t. Not friendly, are they? Really?”

“Yep.”

So much for that. I was just sitting there, though, Bert knowing somehow where we were, where Don’s was, and how to close the distance. I used the time profitably, getting some information for us on bison, suspecting that truth would be in short supply on this upcoming tour.

Don’t worry. I’m not going to reproduce yet another list, this one on “Little-Known Facts About America, Bisons, and Their Interactions With—.” I’ll just summarize: bison are stupid, unpredictable, and not in the least friendly. You can tell a bison’s mood by its tail: down is good, up is bad—generally, though not always, so don’t assume anything, I guess. Theodore Roosevelt, who spent a couple of years slaughtering them, spent even more heading efforts to save them—and now, it says, they are in all fifty states, which seemed to me complete bullshit—bison roaming in Rhode Island?—until I mentioned it to Bert, scoffing as I did so, and then he said, “zoos,” which cut me off at the pass—wherein you sure don’t want to meet a bison. And that is enough of that.

So, we got to Don’s and a woman guide for our tour. There were several other tourists in the oversized jeep with us, all unfriendly and none with kids, either, so we were left to our natural state, me and

Bert, just cracking jokes and nuzzling—I wish. I guess I wish. I don't know why I say such things—or maybe I do.

When it came to the feeding part, obviously Don's much-valued highlight, I wasn't paying close attention to the instructions, which Bert later told me included some warnings about how to nourish the hairy, smelly, very big shits without making your fingers part of the fodder. Anyhow—you guessed it. I was trying to find a cute little one, but none were either of these, so I just stood there carelessly and—you already know. Didn't lose any fingers, wasn't much more than a nip, but I tried to milk it for sympathy, which worked until Bert forced me to show him the wounds and couldn't find any.

CHAPTER TWO

WYOMING—MOVING ALONG SLOWLY

July 5-7

[I tried to pass this narrator-role back to Bert, but he said he'd done more than his share of the last chapter, which you know is bull-shit. Still, things being what they are, I figure it's my job to carry the load, since the alternative would seem to be a lapse into silence. That's not what we're getting paid for. And yes, we are salaried—quite handsomely—negotiated it all with that ass—. You don't think we'd do this for fun, do you?]

"You sure you're OK, Polly?"

"Nice of you to ask, Bert. The truth is, what used to be my finger is changing color and... ."

"Can I see, Polly?"

Of course he could, since that meant grabbing my hand, even if it did also mean seeing that nothing was damaged all that badly—any.

"I think it's getting better, Polly, but do you want to find an emergency place, get a tourniquet and a splint?"

"Well, maybe a major hospital."

"Really? You know best."

"I'm just shitting you, Bert. It's fine. As you know. Wasn't anything to begin with and now it's less."

He just looked at me, the way he does. Wish I could read it.

But then he did speak. "Since you're driving, Polly, I can get to that list we always consult after we construct it, one of the things we do that has proven to be useful. I mean, starting tomorrow, you know, acting on this particular things-to-do list, as it's getting on in the day. So, for now, perhaps we should just find a spot and rest up, you think? And, since our recent experience with shows and theatre and that sort of thing has been what we regard as unencouraging, I will stick for now to the outdoors in my list of proposals, assuming we can do card games and that sort of thing at night, starting tonight—first go out to eat, and then... . But maybe that's all a set of bad ideas, Polly. Is it? I

mean, are they?"

"No, I agree, Bert. I may not understand, but that's my fault. Right down the list. Proceed for tomorrow and beyond."

"OK. I know we said not to mock the locals, but let me read you the categories they offer on the website under "Outdoors," Polly, unedited. There'll be a test, so you can't just let them wash over you."

Was this Bert? Fooling around? About the last thing I would have expected from him was this—whatever it was—and it sounded confusing. But of course I didn't say that. Instead—"Go for it, Wilbert."

"Archery, ATV/ORT, mountain biking, bird-watching, boating, bouldering, camping, canoe and kayak fun, cross-country skiing, fishing, geocaching, hiking and nature trails, horseback riding, ice boating, ice fishing, paddle-boarding, picnic areas, sledding, snowshoeing, technical rock-climbing, and wildlife viewing."

"OK. Sounds to me like they're counting a lot of things twice and trying to disguise the fact that they got hills and water."

"And birds—wildlife."

"I kind of like that wildlife viewing. They mean zoos?"

"I really don't think so, Polly. The stick-figure accompanying the item shows a girl—I think it's a girl—looking through a viewfinder thing—maybe, though, it's a pocket telescope?"

"OK. I hope there's things to see other than buffa—bison."

"Squirrels, they say, maybe rabbits, possums, chipmunks—rats."

"If we're lucky."

"Yeah."

So, here's what we at last came up with, after our detailed, sometimes heated discussion of many other alternatives. We finally decided to stick to the no-evening-adventures rule, at least for now, and find something terrific, or not too lame, to occupy the daylight hours on the morrow and afterwards, probably. And that meant the following: The Cowgirls of the West Emporium this afternoon, dinner at someplace tonight, and then, tomorrow, maybe a little bird watching

or mild climbing (not technical, whatever that might be), and some more scenic stuff on the way out of town, namely, The Ames Monument, about which we will have much to say when the time arrives. Be patient.

I hope you don't think we're becoming too picky, which you will point out is just another form of the sneering we pledged to abandon. You'd be quite wrong to think that, you would. I suggest strongly you go back and just read along. Abandon Being a Fucking Judge All Ye Who Enter Here. That's our new motto, spiced up by my own new-found range of profanity.

So, we pulled into Best Little Horse House in Wyoming (a trailer park thing) and secured our place, asking the very friendly proprietor there about eating-out tips. The guy was resting his arm on Bert's—just being hospitable, Wyoming style—and told us the finest bar-b-cue was to be found... Well, I'd had enough of that dish for the whole summer, so we decided (with a quiet nod—no need to be rude) just to find a bar that'd let us in and see what they had.

It was only after we were back on the road into town, having wiggled free from the proprietor, that Bert translated the name of the trailer park for me. "Polly, god—Horse House is a joke on some old musical from the 20s or something—Best Little Whorehouse in Texas."

"Aha. How do you come to know that, Bertram?"

"Well, Polly, there's not much worthless information I don't have."

I wish I had contradicted him—corrected him. But I didn't know how to do that and still be encouraging, extend the conversation—things seemed so convoluted. He did look hurt—I think.

Polly looked puzzled, kind of sad. I'm no better at reading her looks than at asking directly. Wish I could have helped, but I had no idea if she really did feel that way—or why. Anyhow—wait a minute—

[Just got a note from that Kincaid globular urging us to move a little faster—he put it more rudely, of course, worried about us losing “impatient readers.” Polly says—and I don’t disagree—that we have no readers anyhow, so we think we should just please ourselves in this regard, and in all others, too. Yes! Still, I will now leap ahead to the activities of the afternoon and then—if you can believe it—an evening of rousing card games, followed by a good night’s sleep, all of which you will have to assume—no descriptions available. Not from me, though I see, looking ahead, that Polly filled it all in. And I didn’t even warn her, knowing that Kincaid would never notice—or remember his reprimand.]

Anyhow, we got to the Cowgirls Museum too late for their luncheon—which had what looked like a very interesting speaker, but you can’t do everything, as Polly said, only much more colorfully. We did latch onto a nice guide, though, who told us how so many women had worked not just side-by-side with but “ahead of” (wasn’t clear what that meant) the male rustlers and so forth. She said the popularized romantic version of the West had shown an easy, care-free, glamorous way for women. “Nothing could be further from the truth!” she said, looking at me, as if I’d authored that myth. But she was smiling as she did so and actually seemed a gentle sort—though I guess she wouldn’t thank me for saying so. Turns out their lives of these women were wearing and horrible, though I noticed there was no mention of the native people they were taking an equal part in exterminating. Odd how that gets ignored—even when they’re using terms like “Cheyenne Territory,” as if... . Oh well, it’s a tired story and not one you’ll want to hear (though you should).

My favorite part of the museum was dedicated to women of rodeo fame, trick riding and so forth. I guess all that was just a way to disguise what was really going on, making it seem daring and fun, when it was really routine, grindingly demanding, and homicidal.

I hate to add that a second woman came up to us just as the first guide left and asked, the second woman did, in this odd angry voice if either of us had any questions. Of course, I didn’t and was sure glad

Polly didn't either. But then this second woman said, "Oh, you learned all there is to know about these exploited women and the wild west, eh?"

Well, what do you say to that? Actually, Polly did have a ready response. What she said was, "Go straight to hell. You don't know the first thing about us!" Polly's never at a loss for words.

But I am, and all that reporting makes me tired of talking—even if I haven't said much. So, I'll hand it back to Polly, who is eager for her turn.

My turn? Jesus, Bert, you hardly said a word. I do notice you are a little more ready to speak to the page than to me. Do tell me—when you read this (in thirty seconds) how I can do something to make you feel easier. You know.

(He just smiled, said not a peep. A winning smile, I guess you could say, but not what I was hoping for.)

I decided we'd spend the evening hours in intimate surrender. What a phrase! I mentioned it to Bert and actually got some words in return. "Is that an old song, Polly, or just some sweetv words you put together—gathered from personal—you know—experience?"

I wanted badly to keep him going and sort of knew that bit about "personal experience" was just his way of filling out the sentence. Still, it somehow bit into me, made me respond stupidly, shutting him up just where I intended to grease his jaws. I hate to tell you exactly what I said, but I guess I should. "Fuck you, Bert! You know what I said about personal experience and me having none. It's really not very nice of you to... ."

That was childish, you're thinking. I agree, but shut the hell up. You're as bad as my parents in the predictability line. What he said was, "I'm sorry" or something like that. That made things so bad, so "lugubrious," as some teacher said about a student poem, that I decided just to get out the games, the sandwiches we had hidden away for an emergency, and some beer.

I don't know if it was the beer—I doubt it—or the rousing games or my undoubted body appeal, but after a short time, Bert burst forth. “You know, Polly, it's sure not your fault that I talk so little. Hell, I talk way more around you—**to** you—than I ever do usually or ever.”

“I feel so bad, Bert, when I lay into you—after I do. Seems like I cause it, the problem.”

“Just the opposite, dear. You treat me as if I were normal. It's when I can sense people tip-toeing around that I clam up even worse.”

Did he call me “dear”? Must have been a mistake, but it shut me up as completely as if I had Bert's disorder.

Anyhow, we somehow managed to get through the evening, our hilarious (only it's not) undressing rituals and safely into bed, all ready for a morrow of something indescribably lame, such as bird-watching (whee), hiking (no!), and the Ames monument (or Encounter—I forget), which Bert had insisted on so vehemently it must be a true authenticated glory.

July 6

For some reason—just possibly because we went to bed so very early—we were up at the crack of dawn, almost, and were so hungry we had two helpings each of our granola and vanilla yogurt with blueberries breakfast. (I report that because it's truly essential information for you to have, and also because that Kincaid buffoon told us to add more “topical detail,” by which he meant things such as exactly how we dressed up our granola.)

Bert had found us a proper hill to climb, one with views, though not, so far as I could detect, views of interesting wildlife or flora. There were a few birds, I think, but they remained unmolested by any effort of ours to name them. It was—to drop my impressive cynical tone—a really beautiful walk, though. Not all walks are the same, I have discovered, some being quite monotonous, others treacherous, some tiring. I didn't know any of that before, so I can chalk up all this to “Things I Learned Last Summer” and use it for Essay #1 when we're safely right back there in school.

One odd thing about the walk was that it opened some spout inside Bert and he talked a good deal. He didn't really pour forth—which that “spout” metaphor may have suggested—but there it was.

“Polly, I was just thinking, you know—you ever wonder why it is people go on hikes?”

“Not really, Bert. Now that you mention it—exercise?”

“That’s just it. And maybe so. But maybe they tell themselves that and feel some self-satisfaction in that quarter. But I think it’s really more to feed their curiosity.”

“Because they’re bored?”

“Not exactly. Sorry, I didn’t mean to contradict. I didn’t mean boredom is the wrong answer. I meant that maybe there’s something more positive: they seek out what they don’t know and haven’t experienced, not to find answers and close off territory, check things off a list, but to feed something like an area of ignorance and possibility that is always in some danger of shutting down. They want not to know, to expose themselves to a world much larger than any capacity that would cage it with understanding. Not knowing—that’s important and always in danger of disappearing.”

This was so unlike Bert. I’m not talking about the number of words here, not just that, but the idea itself, something about it. I didn’t want to close it down myself by throwing out some routine thing, like saying I knew what he meant or wow, wasn’t that something. I took my time and finally said that I had never been there before but could now apply for a pass—something lame, I know, but it seemed to apply.

“Yeah. I shouldn’t have said so much about it, since we’re on just such a walk now. But I was trying to use words to keep from knowing, Polly, if that makes any sense.”

“I think I see—kind of through a glass darkly, like that movie we saw. I can kind of feel what you say, Bert, more than understand. Do you think it’s sort of why we don’t talk too much on hikes, realize that words aren’t necessary, might even prohibit something?”

I really wasn’t just talking for the sake of talking. I thought I was

following his lead.

But maybe I had fucked things or maybe that was that. Anyhow, all Bert said was, “Yes.” And we were off walking in silence.

Maybe a half-hour later, out of the blue. “Polly, why do we dress and that sort of thing with our backs to one another—as if we were kids.”

I kept myself from pouncing on the “as if we were kids” stuff and even squelched some unfunny jokes about butts and undies. I just let fly with the truth. “I really have no idea, Bert. I have thought about it a lot, but to no useful end. For some reason, I was afraid to bring it up. Glad you did. You think it might just be habit of some kind?”

“You think, Polly? I keep my back turned and eyes averted because, I tell myself, I respect you and it would be wrong to peek. Maybe it’s that word ‘peek.’ You suppose?”

“I do, Bert. I hadn’t thought of it that way, but you’re right. Maybe if we’d started out all casual, you know, just doing it—undressing and stuff—it’d seem like nothing. Like girls in gym class. You say Wendell was shy, but I bet that’s unusual—even for boys. With me and you, I also think it’s because we are so fucking attracted to one another—or I am, for sure—that we dare not look lest we start—you know.”

What a thing to say—and what a way to say it! But there it was, right out on the table like a fresh corpse, and I didn’t know how to rebury it.

Bert didn’t say anything for a minute. Then he stopped walking—he’d been in the lead—and waited for me to catch up. Then he moved toward me and put his arms around, and then kissed me, really he did. This isn’t porn—not advertised as such—so I’ll just say that. No more. Well, I’ll also say that I kissed him back, more than once, and that we then stopped—the kissing, I mean—and started off again on our hike, me in the lead.

I think Polly handed the story back to me, imagining that my

raging hormones might bring on a rush of words. No, I don't. She's neither stupid nor cruel—and that would be both.

Anyhow, I right away switched ground, I did, and just acted like nothing had happened and there was no need to discuss it or carry on. I was showing what a versatile guy I am—and what a fool.

So, that evening we returned our attention to future adventures. You remember, I hope, that we were now in Wyoming. Anyhow, we are. We were on our way next to Laramie, which brings to mind—well, what? Rodeos, hot bars, fun-fer-teens like us, open and fun types? Their website says, “Go where hip and happening meets historic and homespun. There's something for everyone in Laramie, Wyoming”.

Maybe the hip and happening is there, but not for me. I lock on Matthew Shepard and a great film called “The Laramie Project.” I knew there were several versions of the story, an ABC one claiming it was all about drugs. As I read more, I decided—and I would know—that the original, purely homophobic explanation was the most convincing. I mean by what I just said, that the gay-panic energy was what was really in play: the two young boys beat Matthew Shepard to a pulp in a hateful, frightened rage and left him way out of town, stuck to a fence and with no way to stay alive.

First, I directed Polly to the site of the murder—very hard to find, so here's how you should go to get there:

From I-80 take WY Exit 316, “Grand Avenue / US-30W.”

Follow E Grand Avenue / US-30W approximately 0.5 mile.

Turn Right (E) at Pilot Peak Road and go 0.8 mile to the Snowy View Road intersection.

You should go there if you're ever in Wyoming just to see for yourself what the locals have managed in the way of commemorating the tragedy—damned near nothing at all. What a community! Here's what my source says about the shameful, cowardly place:

Many local officials and community leaders expressed outrage at the time of the tragedy but have stubbornly resisted efforts to erect a suitable memorial there. Residents of this neighborhood have been especially anxious to bury the past and even petitioned local government to change the street names in order to confuse pilgrims to the murder site.

Even Annie Proulx, who did that great *Brokeback Mountain*, becomes gutless when she gets to this tragedy and Wyoming whoopee:

Although there is generally a live-and-let-live attitude in the state, there are also bigots, mean people, haters, drug addicts, poachers, wife-beaters, kid-neglecters, embezzlers as in every other place in the world. Wyoming also has the highest suicide rate in the nation, especially among elderly, single men. The state is hardly perfect and we should not pretend it is some noble utopia. It is a complex place in its geography and its residents' psychologies, both tolerant and intolerant as all of us are.

There you have it, folks, "hardly perfect." Of course she's right about hate crimes knowing no boundaries, but whoever thought fucking Wyoming was a "noble utopia." John Wayne? I bet even he was more honest than that. Anyhow, what a rotten dodge: all you need to assert is that it's "complex," just a "live-and-let-live" happy place, made up of reg'lar folks like "all of us."

Anyhow, what happened afterwards was that there was a trial, where Shepherd's parents, gallant and noble almost beyond belief, asked that the two cold-blooded killers not be put to death by the state, that their son's heart was large enough to embrace even his murderers. And that was what they were awarded—life terms for both.

I laid all this out for Polly.

"I'm with you, Bert. Yes, I am. I wonder if you aren't a little hard on Annie Proulx."

"No, I'm not."

“OK.”

I don’t know if she was convinced or just didn’t want to ignite me further. She seemed willing enough to watch the great Moises Kaufman documentary, which made her cry—and me, too.

July 7

Despite our earlier descent into necking, we got to bed last night without further excursions. I think we both felt—I don’t know—drained by the Matthew Shepard talk, felt that abandoning ourselves to pleasure might be a profanation or at least just silly.

We did talk a little more, not much.

“Bert, I looked it up, about our human tendency and need to find things to hate. Turns out that attitudes and actions are so much better among the young in all these areas—so much more flexible and tolerant. I think that’s reassuring—a little.”

I wanted so bad to say something positive, at least agree. Surely I could do that much. Polly was trying so hard.

“But when they grow older? And even the young. We know something about cruelty with kids. Just think of recess, schoolyards, all the cruelty and violence toward the weak—even making fun of teachers. I just wish we didn’t need to hate anything, Polly. It sometimes seems to me we just switch targets from time to time.”

“Yeah.”

Nice job of getting us all positive. Since that didn’t work the way I’d hoped, I’d waited until Polly was asleep before plunging into Wikipedia to find out what happy things we could do in Laramie next day, ways to find—well, something rousing or at least soothing. As I was doing that—ever so quietly—I realized I’d not devoted even a word to the Ames Monument we saw late today on the way out. Well, now I have. And that’s what it deserves as far as we’re concerned.

Anyhow, as for things to do. I crossed off a celebration-of-something parade—great God!—as well as a lot of places devoted to a plaque or a stone marker of some sort. Then I started to find sweet stuff: a planetarium, farmer’s market, summer concerts, the territorial

prison (NO! What was I thinking?), a visitor's center, rodeo days (NO again, idiot!), a walking tour, a hike, a—Jesus. Maybe just turn around and go back home?

Then I saw it—turns out we were right in time for the heart of “Jubilee Days.” Now, that’s more like it—so I hoped. As I read the first part of the come-on, my heart sank: yet more rodeos, cattle roping, celebrations of Indian killing (might as well have been)—but then, ta ta!, a carnival, a beauty contest (open to all—just our thing), lots of free music, an arts display, and a brewing fest. There was also a university here that might offer some stuff to do, but I figured one day trying to evade the shadow of Matthew Shepherd was plenty and that we should hightail it out the morning after.

Just then—maybe I let out a wee squeak of excitement at finding “Jubilee Days”—Polly said, not all that softly, “Bert, you miserable asshole, turn off your phone and get your ass in bed—after undressing slowly and completely, right over there by the night-light where I can see.”

So I did—get in bed.

And all that was last night and we’re now (just so you don’t get disoriented) where I said we were some time ago, that is, July 7 and on our way to Jubilee Days—or Day. The Jubilee was easy enough to find, turned out, as everybody seemed to be going there, cheerily enough, not as if they were forcing themselves into the dreary museums commemorating what they ought to be ashamed of. And maybe they were.

“Hey, Polly?”

She seemed as surprised as I was at this outburst. Nothing for it now but to continue.

“Yeah, Bert?” I could tell she was working at not sounding too inviting, too surprised, trying not to apply pressure.

“Do you think the local citizenry may be as repulsed—or at least bored—as we are at all the shit—sorry—demanding that they all look back on their past with pride?”

“That’s interesting, Bert.”

Was it?

She didn't stop there. After a beat or two—"They probably are focussed on just getting by, you know, envying or despising the way the neighbors keep their lawn, wondering what they'll have for dinner, how to get through the evening pretending they're enjoying themselves, whether there's any point at all to any of it, whether... "

"God, Polly."

"Sorry, Bert. Some of them probably have elevated thoughts, too, of course they do. I doubt that they think of the fucking pioneer past any more than they do—you know."

"Matthew Shepherd."

"God, Bert."

"Sorry. I'll try to keep up. As for the town: what I'll bet is that they depend on college kids spending money—at least in bars. Things must be pretty lean around here in summer."

"So, Laughy Days is a way to get through, somehow make it to September, when the drunk college kids are around to plunder."

"Uh-huh. It's Jubilee Days—oh, you know that."

"Sorry, Bert. About the gloom, I mean. Let's eat some more of this fucking oatmeal, which will prime us up for the jubilee of our own uncowboy lives. Where do you suppose that term comes from?"

"Lives?"

"Ha ha, asshole. Your condition doesn't make you stupid, or funny, so get on your phone there and type in 'jubilee.' It won't do to just go wading in without knowing what we're getting into."

"OK, Polly. It comes from an old term—which you knew—meaning ridding oneself of the burden of virginity."

"Bert!"

I think she was genuinely shocked—as was I. What in hell was wrong with me? I tried not to apologize, which would make things worse. I almost managed it.

"So—Jubilee has something to do with ram's horns."

"Something Biblical, right?"

"Yes, Polly."

“Say na more. Say na more.”

So I didn’t and we headed off to the event, ready for whatever it held—lunch, first off, I hoped.

And now It’s more than time that I handed this off to Polly

Thanks, Muthbert! Lunch was next and turned out to be—well, not worth mentioning, so I won’t. But the Jubilee was—let me just start at the beginning. We managed to get there during one of the manhood-proving events, this one for kids, who seemed none too happy at being tested, riding these enormous and angry-looking bison and other stuff that was not meant to be mounted, for sure. So, why do it? So parents can be proud, is my guess—a yokel form of Little League.

I asked Bert.

“I think so, Polly. These kids seem miserable. Notice how they try to look all tough, paste on smiles. I swear some of them fall off as soon as they can manage it. I think they don’t so much mind flunking the test. They did what they could—or that’s what they can say.”

“Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”

I figured he’d ask me to explain what I meant by that, and, just as I was scurrying to invent something, here came these teen kids, about six or so, mixed genders. They were so good looking, all of them, my first thought was they must surely be LGBTQ.

I wasn’t ready for them to announce it, though, but that’s what they did. “Hey there, you and you, we’re the centerfolds of Jubilee Days, the Queer team, ready to rope those cattle, ride the steers, twirl them lassos.”

I was so surprised I didn’t think about what I was saying, not that that’s much of an excuse. “You guys suicidal?”

They looked at me, smiling, didn’t relax their merriment, not one degree. It’s clear they’d thought about it all, knew what they were doing—or thought they did.

One of them, this really pretty bi-person (my guess) just laughed

and told us there were few places safer than Wyoming, at least Laramie, at least in a crowd. They said there was more chance of a hate crime in San Francisco or Greenwich Village than here in wide open Wyoming.

“I’ll be damned!” Bert said.

Without missing a beat, another of them said, “You’re way too pretty for damnation, brother. Both of you are. Didn’t you hear? Jesus is trans and God is—well, all things—get it, ALL?”

Bert laughed and—get this!—hugged all round. What the hell! I wanted to keep up, be sure not to get out-gayed. So I did some hugging, too. I expected ass-pats and tweaks but nothing of the sort. These kids were way too kind, too respectful.

“Nah—the part about Wyoming is true—at least the stats—though I think it’s partly because the average space between individuals here is eighteen miles. Too far to shoot—or hug.”

Without being invited, Bert and I started walking along with them, found ourselves going along with their performance, even imitating their happy greetings to one and all. I don’t want to make it seem as if we were all courageous; it was more like we had caught an infection from these kids—a sweet one.

After about an hour, one of them said they had to break off and go to Benny’s house to eat. Wasn’t clear who Benny was, but it did seem clear they were saying goodbye. Had we asked if we could come along, no chance they would have refused. But not refusing is not the same as being invited, so we went our way to the carnival area, with glad hugs from Bert and me all around—though not for one another, damn it all.

The carnival was like all carnivals, I guess. I had really enjoyed them once, as a kid. But once was not now. That last sentence is lifted from *Great Expectations*, where it is profound—as it is here, too. Just think about it—a farewell to carefree youth and all that. Poor me. I also think we’ve used that line before. Several times? Another sign of lost youth—getting forgetful.

As we were strolling through the carnival, I mentioned all that

to Bert, asked him if he ever felt nostalgic for his lost youth.

It was as if I had turned on a faucet. “That’s really interesting, Polly.” [It did occur to me that his saying as much was a little insulting, a slap at the quality of my more-usual subjects-for-reflection—but now was not the time for that.] “I was thinking of that, too, about nostalgia and whether there’s an approved age for its exercise. What do you think?”

I wasn’t about to let him pass to me. This seemed like a chance to get him going, so, “I don’t know, Bert.”

“Yeah. It’s like the ending of *The Great Gatsby*, right, the sense that everything we prize has already slipped behind us. It all seems so cruel, also the way adults push us into imagining that we’d better take photos of everything, freeze the time, like I say. My parents even talked about that, about how adults want to play out their lost times through their kids—only not really that, wanted to play out their lost times as LOST, you know?”

“I think so, Bert. Maybe.”

“I think maybe what they want is not to return to the fucking senior prom, which they didn’t much like anyhow, as glory in the loss, the fact that it’ll never come again. What I wonder is whether it was like that for them as it happened—you know, vanishing before their eyes?”

“I doubt it, Bert. What you say is really interesting, but I expect the actual senior prom was more taken up by wondering if she would sleep with him later on in the evening, whether if she slid her foot to the left he’d stop stomping on it, whether she could safely exit to the women’s toilets and while away twenty minutes with her real friends.”

“Yeah. Polly, will you go to the prom with me—I mean, next year?”

“Yes, I will, Bert. Yes, I will.”

As if the conversation and walk had been orchestrated by a Hollywood Director (Oscar-winning), we were now at the end of the carnival and close to where the shuttle would take us away from Jubilee

Days—for this year, anyhow—and back to our van, yessir.

Once there, we—I was going to tease you and pretend we had ripped clothes off in a hurry, thrown back the covers, and... . But you know better. What we did was pick up a long-neglected *Moby-Dick* (after trying to learn two new card games and failing) and reading into the night, until we could read no more—almost.

This whole book seemed to be full of traps. Here were some chapters on things like how whales had been misrepresented in pictures and stories—that sort of tedium. The only good part was that it was Bert who was reading, inviting me to lean over—way over—his shoulder and see these monstrosities. Closer—and yet closer.

But then we got to Chapter 58, on “Brit” (whatever that is) and one of those passages where Melville lures readers in, closes the door behind, and then—

Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!

Enough terrifying ways of considering. To bed, to bed, said Sleepyhead. No wait, said Slow. Put on the pot, said Greedgut. We'll eat before we go.

CHAPTER THREE

July 9

Somehow, during the night, Polly managed to shove the narrating onto me. Fair enough. I've done less than my share, and I do find it easy enough—too easy, you're thinking, to babble onto the page. I can hear you telling me, "It's just like speaking out loud, almost... ." But you also know how that's not quite true. And anyhow it's getting easier for me. Just to prove it, I started up a heady conversation over breakfast.

"Polly, listen to me now, cause I got something to say. Stop looking at your fist and attend."

"Well, you got something to say, Yiddlebert, you don't want to hold it in. No, no. You know better than that."

"I do. Been considering, Polly, how old shit nostalgia is not such a bad thing, and these are valuable thoughts, so you should certainly empty your mind of all else and attend."

"Yessir, Mr. Boss-Man."

"I know it's obnoxious as—anything—when parents and so forth get all gooey, worse when they tell us things are now as good as they are going to get and that all that's ahead is in the bleak midwinter."

"Sorry, Bert, but what a phrase. Where's it come from?"

"I'm surprised you don't know, Polly, less surprised that I don't. You look it up while I continue with my lesson."

"Yessir."

"Now, you gotta feel free to interrupt when it shines forth on your phone, Pol-Wol."

"Don't know if I can stand you so sprightly, Bert."

I could see she was immediately sorry she'd said that, though I didn't really mind at all, somehow. I guess I'm on a roll. Roll on—thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!

“Well, that’s the new me. I guess that’s one way top put it, though it scares me a little. Anyhow, despite all the down-sides of the blanket of nostalgia adults lay on us, there’s also this: when they are in that mode, they are at their kindest, the ‘we were all kids once’ mode, which makes them feel good about being tolerant, winking at our excesses.”

Nothing. Polly seemed to have taken a vow of silence. OK by me—right then.

“Thing is, too, even their pretending to know what it is we’re doing and feeling is really pretty sad. They don’t know, have no idea about us, and they sort of know that, because, you see, they also have no idea what it was like ‘back then.’ Fitzgerald has it wrong: people don’t reach out for a past that eludes them, recedes before them. They know, without exactly realizing it, that all that is gone, empty, that it never was. Nothing.”

It was easy for me to shut up then.

I was hoping he’d say more—I think. Maybe not. If being released from silence meant this sort of nihilistic rant, maybe I should find ways to keep him quiet.

But I didn’t really want to do that. Besides, I agreed with him—more exactly, he was teaching me what I could almost grasp. Maybe if I reached out, tried a little harder... .

But here I was back in the driver’s seat—here in this narrative and in the van. (You notice I avoid the word “literally,” for reasons you’ll understand. If not, go away.)

It did occur to me that we needed to get moving—on the narrative and, yes, literally. Next stop here in Wyoming—we’re still driving cross-country, you should remember—is the town of Rawlins, to be followed by Casper, Cody, Buffalo and then back east into South Dakota. (You’re thinking we should not be doing so much westward movement in a trip designed to take us east. You’re right.)

“Why are we going to Rawlins, Polly? I forget.”

"I been wondering about that destination too, Bert. They were home to a cattle rustler named Big Nose George Parrott, also a high-wayman. He was lynched, it seems."

"Uh huh. There a museum about him?"

"No."

"A monument?"

"Doesn't look like it. I guess he just lives in the hearts of the townspeople. No—wait. His skin was made into a pair of shoes, after he was no longer breathing, let's hope, and his jaw became an ash-tray."

"I just gotta see that, Polly. Big Nose Plaza."

"No, but wait, there's another notable, one Lillian Heath, one of the first women physicians west of the Mississippi."

"The first? Wow."

"One of the. They don't say she was head of the line, but a pioneer for sure. Here's how important she was. She was given the skull of Big Nose George and used it, too, as a door jamb and a pen holder."

"At the same time?"

"Doesn't tell us."

"And that's it?"

"I'd say so."

"Maybe I made a mistake about Rawlins, Polly. Maybe just go on to Casper, where attractions abound."

I'd just noticed that Casper had managed to make one of those snarling Facebook lists, this one of "The Most Miserable Cities in the Country," but I kept that to myself, figuring one deflation was enough for now. In any case, we were headed there full speed ahead, quite a bit of speed being almost mandated in this hyeher state.

"Hey, should I tell you why Casper made the most miserable cities list, Polly?"

"No."

"Right. It says this, slightly edited for comfort: Casper has the lowest income growth in the country and the crime rate there is about 16% higher than the national average. That means that if you move

there, you'd have a one in 34 chance of becoming a victim of some kind of crime."

"Well, I'm just by god set on moving here, ya see, so those odds don't scare me. I live on long shots. After all, what were the chances that you'd choose me as your summer's floozie?"

"Oh yeah, you're right—those were astronomical. I had to work way down on the list."

"Asshole!"

"I know you want to know what to do in Casper, since we're stationed there by default, so give me a minute here."

She was quiet—which I of course took as eager assent. So, I dug into the listings for Casper joys. I knew there'd be endless hikes and that sort of thing, but my own opinion—Polly's, too, I believe—was that we hadn't taken this trip just so we could tramp along hills and valleys (mostly hills) that resembled nothing so much as one another. [Another sentence for the ages.] So, I went for "special events and festivals" and discovered we had hit, as if by plan, the very time for The Beartrap Summer Festival, located up on Casper Mountain, bring your own lawn chairs.

"Ain't it interesting, Bert, how all these half-assed, most miserable spots in our land seem to ignore their ratings and just charge ahead as if they had something to celebrate, a glorious history and an even brighter future."

"Yeah, better that than that Frost poem: 'Nothing to look backwards on with pride and nothing to look forward to with hope.' Something like that. What a prick he was."

"And why is he foisted on kids—the best American poetry has to offer? These crisp, easy downers? Why not have 'em memorizing Whitman or something more—you know?"

"Uplifting, Polly?"

"Yeah. You know... ."

She sounded somehow undefended or something like that—so unusual for her, as if asking for something. Something I sure didn't have, but I could try—

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the
soul.

“Yeah, Bert, remember memorizing all that?”

“I do remember that, Polly. And pretending to engirth all them girls, who would not let us off until we responded, yes sir, went with them to the supply room.”

“I bet you were the first to discorrupt those beauties, charging them full with the charge of your—ah—soul.”

“Yep. You know very well that all your friends were soul-filled with Bert engirthment.”

“So they said. I always felt left out, so ignored.”

I sure didn’t know where to take this, so I dropped it. “So, as to Beartrap Festivities and our missing lawn chairs. I know I am able to sprawl on my—rear, but I’m not sure about you, Polymer.”

Polly looked back at me in a way I just couldn’t decipher—which didn’t make it different from all of her looks. Was she angry, offended, hurt, commiserating with my pathetic condition? Who knew? Figured it was a good time to pass the baton, so I used our signal, which maybe only I knew, so often was it ignored. But—

Oh, boo hoo! Ignoring your signals! Stick it where even I can’t get to it. I am so busy worrying about your fucking SAD that... . Just massaging your dick, Luthbert. I know one way to make it all worse is to mention it—or is it harder for you for me pointedly to ignore it. And I hope you appreciate my new-found freedom with raunchy talk: not just a well-worn “fuck” but a daring reference to a dick, and not just anyone’s.

Anyhow, that Kincaid ruffian is telling us we need “more

externals,” which he defined as “less about you two, about whom we care, and deeply—but there is a limit. We need events, too, sites visited, friends made, narrow escapes, daring plunges, car repairs—that sort of thing.”

Not sure what he meant by daring plunges and sure wasn’t going to ask. Better just to head straight off to the Festival, which really was at a beautiful spot, at the crest of this pretty mountain—all mountains are pretty, those where we’re from (LA) being made less pretty than most by being sometimes on fire and generally, when not red with flames, kind of brownish—and without our camp stools, as we mentioned.

No sooner had we squatted—Bert a good deal more gracefully than I, damn his little waist and flexible ass—than this group—well, three—sat with us, without so much as a how-de-do or a request. As they seemed to be about our age and friendly (and pretty—even the boys, though naturally not quite up to Bert’s exalted level—stop it!). Right away they started asking questions—and answering them.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

“Damn, Lenny, you fucking know they’re not, idiot!”

“Yeah, Lenny, you suppose cool kids like this would land in Casper—or not beat it the hell out if their parents trapped them here.”

“So, Lizzie, and why don’t you leave, you so liberated?”

“That’s my plan, Tommy, and I ain’t stopping for you on my way out of town.”

“Like I’d be dumb enough to let you get me caught.”

Finally, a pause, long enough for Bert to say, “Hi,” and for them then to apologize for going on and on and being so rude, and for me to ask them about the Festival.

I figured we’d get back the predictably frenzied stuff about how stupid it all was, the Festival, and how not one of them would be there were there anything else anybody but an idiot would... . But they said nothing of the sort, even when they wormed it out of us that we were from LA. “That must be great!” they said, but didn’t start apologizing.

I made a mental note to talk with Bert about all this later, about

these kids and their ready acceptance of where they were and whatever it gave them—if acceptance was the right word. Despair? Sophistication? Mature accommodation? And maybe Casper did not really belong quite at the top of the most miserable cities list.

Be that as it may (as my parents say when they want to be especially annoying), for now, our job was to avoid the party they'd be sure to force us into that evening—once the obligatory listening to all the country/western star singers was completed. Somehow, though, we found ourselves accepting just that invite, and it wasn't Bert who did it. Go figure. I guess I jumped in with a "Sure!" because I was curious, because I liked these kids, because they were hot, because I was worried Bert would say no, or—. By the way, believe it or not, I even liked the music. Maybe I'll just ship on out here to Casper once my high school triumphs are completed.

Anyhow—we saw these kids loading up on food at the Festival, so we took that as a sign that the party was liquid and did likewise. Somehow, not too long later, we found ourselves in somebody's basement, miles away from wherever our camper was and trusting to Bert's infallible navigational skills—ha!—to see us homeward later.

I figured I'd better stay pretty much sober—Bert, too, since sexual preferences were uncertain and sexual desires were sure to be raging. Turns out, though, I was wrong, top to bottom, as it were, and the party was as tame as the old churchy gatherings my parents allowed me to attend back then. (And they were far more racy than Ma and Pa figured, even then, went so far as—well, dirty jokes.) Anyhow, these kids didn't do much more than talk, not even any jostling that I could detect. I wonder if I were disappointed. I didn't bother to ask Bert later, when we were back in our van.

But I did bring up that earlier topic, how these kids seemed to, you know, not be kicking against the traces, whatever that meant.

"Bert, why aren't these kids kicking against the traces?"

"What?"

"It means kicking against em, being all desperate to escape their ghastly surroundings and conditions that constrain. It's a metaphor

drawn from pioneer days, I believe.”

“Oh. That’s interesting, Polly. Maybe they are having rich and fulfilling lives, lives of the mind, as those teachers say.”

“Teachers who are themselves trying to compensate for having no lives of the body.”

“Unlike you and me.”

“Shut up, Bert. Or shut up about that. Return to the initial topic.”

“Yeah. About those kids being happy: that’s interesting. Why aren’t young people like them flocking to cool places as soon as they can travel on their own? Why do they stay in Wyoming—or, I guess, almost all places? You’re saying it may not be because they lack bus fare but because they like it where they are, right?”

“Right, Bert. What do you think?”

“They like one another, maybe, have—what’s that word?”

“Networks.”

“Yeah—but you know what, Polly?”

“No.”

“Those networks not only feed but trap. That’s why Casper and these other shit-piles have any population at all.”

I was stunned, I guess, not that I thought Bert was wrong but that I couldn’t find a way to dig out from under that cynical pit.

So, off to Cody and off to you, Bert, narrator now, whether you like it or not.

CHAPTER FOUR
A TINY BIT OF WYOMING AND THEN—

July 10

Bert here, the new Bert, refueled and refocussed, as Polly would say—only she wouldn't. Anyhow, we've been told to keep our eyes (and pens) on the action and stop being so richly articulate about issues and ideas and one another. Only they didn't call it "richly articulate"; they called it, "verbose and boring." Anyhow, I have always been one to listen hard to well-meant criticism. And off to Cody we go.

"Why is it we are we going to Cody, Bert? We could just shut up. The only way they contain us is through our words. Silence would give us the key to our blessed release. But for now, maybe drive to Minneapolis or Chicago, say, and then, like you say, bust free after that."

"I thought of that, too, Aunt Polly, but taking off now would disappoint all our Wyoming readers."

"Zero."

"True, but... ."

"But what?"

"Nothing."

"OK, I'm persuaded. Let's get right to Cody."

And so here we are. I was surprised that Polly—I was driving—spent the time compiling just the sort of list she had so ridiculed when it was me who... . But I was pleased she was learning from me. Of course I knew better than to put it that way.

"I see you have a list there, Polly. Or am I wrong? Don't want to presume, but I know you are—how shall I put this?—too large-minded to reject ideas just because they originated with—well, no need to say."

"Bert, as they say in church, stick it up your ass—and then, when

you're settled and comfy, listen to the list of Cody wonders. Actually, whoever wrote this things-to-do list I'm consulting and abridging is a lovely person. I know that doesn't mean s/he's right. But here goes. I'm omitting the sites sure to ignite you—Buffalo Bill things, Monuments to gallant and much-missed Indians, jeep tours, Japanese Internment camps... .”

“Really, Polly. Anyhow, we read all about those in school—an erased part of our history.”

“Not well-erased, if you... . Never mind. Let's do it.”

“But the rest of the list.”

“Oh yeah—The site we're depending on says, ‘Calling all Wanderers: 21 Reasons to Wander to Cody, Wyoming.’ Nice prose—and don't worry: I'll shorten it, and here goes:

1. Old Trail Town, for a tale of scandal
2. WW2 Interpretive Center, on Japanese Internment
3. Raptors Experience—at the outdoors zoo thingy
4. Singalong with Cowboy Dan Miller

Polly was suddenly quiet, but I knew there was more to come, lots more. I'd peeked over her shoulder as I was driving—she was next to me in the front seat thing—and saw a list of 21. I was absolutely sure she'd chosen at least a baker's dozen—that's 13 for those of you not raised by a baker—and was just catching her breath.

“And—?”

“That's it. Entirely!”

“OK, do they tell us what the scandal is?”

“No, we gotta go. Meanwhile, what's your guess?”

“She married her brother, their daughter was a cattle rustler, the gold mine they sold shares to was a fake, when they... .”

“Whoa!, Stumblebert, I meant but one guess, not twenty. And, deeply as I've researched it, I am as lost as ever. Here's the summary, Bert. Maybe you can figure it out.

William Gallagher and his friend Blind Bill were killed on Meeteetse Creek below the old town of Arland in mid-March of

1894. Both men were about thirty years old. In 1893, Gallagher became involved with Belle Drewry. Later, in 1994, Belle began seeing another man, Bill Wheaton. Gallagher flew into a jealous rage and threatened them at gunpoint. In retaliation Wheaton shot Gallagher in the back, killing him. In a failed attempt to avenge his friend's murder, Blind Bill was also shot and killed. Both men were reburied at Old Trail Town in 1978.

"I have an apt question, Polly?"

"Was Blind Bill truly blind?"

"That's a fine query and, it goes without saying, not the only one, right? For instance, it occurs to me to ask, 'Who the fuck was it who shot him? Maybe Belle herself?'"

"You are free to think so, if your perverse imagination leads you there. That's the true glory of stories like these, Bert."

"Really? Accuracy! I am a stickler for accuracy, no loose ends. I am sure you agree, dear Polly. And you know, all this reminds me of a poem my dad loved, and since you want to hear it, I'll go ahead and say it, not sing it, though I believe it's a song. Ready?"

I took her silence for assent and let fire:

Jesse James was a man that was knowed through all the land
For Jesse he was bold and bad and brave
But that dirty little coward that shot down Mr. Howard
Has went and laid poor Jesse in his grave.

"Wish you'd sung it, Bert, make it penetrate. But, before you tell me, Bossman, I figured out from those touching lines that Howard was Jesse's alias and that the coward saw right through it and gunned him down for the reward money, or just because he was a righteous law- and God-fearing guy who never deserved being called a dirty coward, much less little—but such is the stuff of legends, right?"

"Right, Polly, and now that we have that pinned down, how about the Interpretive Center?"

“Sure.” And we toddled right on off.

Our heads were so filled with Jesse James, I think we forgot to ask the nice woman at the Interpretive Center about Blind Bill and his assassin—or maybe just failed to register it when she explained. Anyhow, we find ourselves unable to fill in that gap.

The Center was mostly about Japanese Internment and the terrible nightmares visited on these Americans out of racist panic. Turns out those entirely innocent imprisoned citizens were robbed of their assets—a portion of which may have been reclaimed by them in restitution, but not a lot. We did know some of this because of a class trip to Manzanar, but the smug viciousness of it all hadn’t sunk in, I don’t think. Not for me. They had a special section here on what it was like for the kids, suddenly ripped away from friends and school and all they knew and planted roughly among people they often didn’t even recognize. Hard to imagine, but seemed as if we had to do it.

They said a few were forced there because they were reported by others who thought they “looked Oriental.” I think they had to “prove” they were something else in order to get out.

The woman leading the tour was pretty young, a college volunteer, I figured, but she didn’t invite us to a party, even though we lingered behind, trying to signal that we were free.

It was too late by then for a romp with the raptors, so we settled in, me and Bert, in our sweet home-away-from-home, and, on demand, I read more of Melville. Here we were, half-way through the novel and no white whale at all. But there were sharks, and this great bit on sharks biting even when they were dead:

They viciously snapped, not only at each other’s disembowelments, but like flexible bows, bent round, and bit their own; till those entrails seemed swallowed over and over again by the same mouth, to be oppositely voided by the gaping wound. Nor was this all. It was unsafe to meddle with the corpses and ghosts of these creatures. A sort of generic or Pantheistic vitality seemed to lurk in their very joints and bones, after what

might be called the individual life had departed. Killed and hoisted on deck for the sake of his skin, one of these sharks almost took poor Queequeg's hand off, when he tried to shut down the dead lid of his murderous jaw.

"Queequeg no care what god made him shark," said the savage, agonizingly lifting his hand up and down; "wedder Fejee god or Nantucket god; but de god wat made shark must be one dam Ingin."

"Lord, Bert, that's sweet atheism—but even Queequeg is infected with that bigotry toward natives."

"Yeah—the very bottom of the list. Let's go to sleep, Polly."

"OK."

July 11

Me and my companion slept the sleep of the blessed, a phrase my parents disliked and hence one of my favorites. I was the one first awake, for a change, and decided to award Bert with twenty more minutes of sleep and then a breakfast loaded with a week's worth of calories.

"This is good, Polly."

"I'm glad it suits you, Bert, though you could be more eloquent."

"Sorry."

"Shit, Bert, I was just joking, you know, making fun of that pretend ailment that didn't exist anyhow but I cured you of."

He just looked at me.

"Oh, shit, Bert, has it...?"

Again, he just stared, maybe flinched, though I couldn't tell. I do wish I could read him better, but I don't seem to be improving at all.

"OK, buddy, we still have half my list remaining—gotta get a move on. First up is the raptor experience and then a sing-a-long with Cowboy Clint, I think it is—no, Cowboy Dan Miller. Anyhow,

sounds like we might give the singing a miss for this section of our trip and just go on to Buffalo—after the raptors claw us into unrecognizable messes.”

Bert smiled—I think. Suddenly he was back to where he was when we started—maybe worse.

The raptor experience thing turned out to be pretty close by, so we got there in time for the first education program and were the only ones attending to this pretty woman official and her several scary-as-hell birds. I think to make them less repellant, they had given them names, these birds—Amelia the short-eared owl, Kateri the eagle, Salem the kestrel. I thought they’d be in cages. Not only were they not, but we were forced to be close to them, hold our arms out while they flew in a circle and then landed, not to peck our eyes out but to sit there, claws not really digging into our arm guards but looking fierce. I kept thinking of Ishmael’s sharks. Damn.

Anyhow, once we were free of the vicious birds, I didn’t bother to ask Bert about them or about Cowboy Dan, just took us off for Buffalo, the manly man at the wheel. I fed him the directions and then settled in to read about Buffalo and Johnson County, hoping we could bounce into something, then away, and then get some miles behind us on the way to South Dakota and—well—almost modern civilization.

“Bert, I have narrowed down the list of Buffalo attractions that would appeal to us to—well, less than one. God, all these towns seem the same—cowboy museums, rodeos, and some pathetic monuments.”

I have no idea at all why, but I paused, got back a “Yeah” and then proceeded.

“Buffalo, you’ll be relieved to hear, does have a museum dedicated to a pharmacist, one James Gatchell, known to his friends—they say the whole damned town—as ‘Jim.’ The museum is—let’s see—filled with old drugs and—no, wait, it has displays of Jim’s collection of gifts, such as guns and ammunition, people gave him over the years. Most of these came from Indians, they say, Jim having been

raised by the local Lakota tribe. Anyhow, these gifts not only testify to Jim's popularity but mark a kind of history of the county, they say, so important that when, in the 90s, the museum was struggling financially, the rest of the county, in bad shape themselves, just... ."

I was getting so bored, I stopped right there, accepted Bert's silence and just looked out the window at the suicidally flat landscape floating by.

Sure enough, the museum was what they said, and after a token affirmation of just that and a silent hurrah to our guide we wheeled round for South Dakota, and—we had no idea.

Suddenly, just as I was least expecting it, Bert broke out of his nightmare—a little.

"Deadwood, Polly. I'm pretty sure it's around there somewhere. You know that series, right?"

I had no idea at all what he was talking about, sure hadn't seen any such series, I was pretty sure, but wanted to do anything to keep him going, if I could. So I had no hesitation in lying: "I think so, Bert, but I'm not sure. Was it about cowboys, Bert?"

"Not really, Polly. About the town and the awful stuff going on—murders on the hour, just about, but some shining people, too—Calamity Jane, Wild Bill Hickok. Remember?"

I couldn't convincingly pretend that I did and could think of no more prompts, so I did the next best thing. I told him I would drive east, while he found out about how to get to Deadwood and anywhere else he discovered that looked "what you and me might, you know, be... ."

"OK."

That was all he said, no more, but somehow I thought we had turned some corner.

I just read what Polly wrote. We're not supposed to do that, but I couldn't help it—and what a dear person she is. I knew that before, but damn. I sort of knew she didn't know Deadwood from Detroit,

but I think she'll like it—if it exists, I suddenly thought, and isn't just an invention of that damned old television series.

But there it was—right on the map and real close to Rapid City, where I figured they had lots and lots to do—maybe something other than cattle rustling museums and falcon flying. So, into our guide books I dug.

And produced a list, greatly abridged from the things-not-to-miss-in-Rapid-City site.

1. Watiki—a huge indoor water park—bathing suits required
2. Black Hills Escape Room—I'll save the description so as to amaze Polly
3. Outdoor Campus West

Then, on the way (I think) to Deadwood, there's the Crazy Horse Memorial—with nary a glance at fucking Mt. Rushmore.

By this time, it was almost dark and, wouldn't you know it, there up ahead was a place welcoming vans and trucks and busses—and us! So, in we went, Polly did.

“So, Bert, what do you say to pizza for dinner?”

I knew she didn't give a damn whether it was pizza or plum pudding or piddle pie we had for dinner, and I also knew she was hoping I'd talk some more, even about dumb stuff like food. I was feeling a little less paralyzed, maybe, so I tried to let go.

“You remember that great spaghetti sauce you made way back in June, Polly? How about that—doing it again? I can do the pasta and make garlic toast—salad, too. There's probably a grocery store somewhere close—do you suppose?”

“Let me Google it, Bert, or we can ask some of the people nearby. Lots of them look like long-termers.”

“OK.”

She just sat there, waiting for me to go ask. She trailed behind, but there it was—go ask or starve. So—I did just that, went and knocked at the nearest neighbor, a camper even bigger than ours.

“Hi! We just pulled in and find ourselves needing groceries, were wondering if you knew of a good store, you know, a store,

grocery store, nearby, so we can fix supper.”

“Hi back, handsome,” said this woman who looked like my mother. She was wiping her hands on her apron, came out and stood with us, looking at Polly while addressing me—unless she thought Polly was handsome—which maybe she was, though I thought... . Shut up.

Anyhow, on she went. “Don’t even think of buying grocers for supper. Good heavens, what were you doing entertaining such thoughts? I was just telling Harry that we needed an army battalion or two to help us eat all this food we got fixed. You are our salvation, that’s what you be. I can’t tell you how grateful we are!”

“Thank you.” That was so lame, but it was all I could think to say. By the time I got the words out, this woman was right on to Polly, who turned out to be no better than I was at extricating us from an evening with old Harry and, it turned out, his wife Angel. Odd name, and it may have been a nickname. We never did find out.

Harry turned out to be an even more gracious (and loud) version of Angel, and the evening seemed to go by so fast it just evaporated. I don’t remember now what we ate or talked about, but they were sure a cure for whatever ails ya, as my grandpa said. I’ll just give you a sample of their way of turning everything back on us—and in such a lovely manner.

“Speaking of asparagus—and do take some more, just for the sauce which is so fine it makes even asparagus not so god-awful, and don’t you agree, young Bert. I’d ask Polly, but you and me know how women are, right?”

What could I say to that? But I did find something, and then here comes Angel with an extra barrage of fun, including some jokes she must have memorized on line. “Fred was hit by mustard gas in the war, and then he got pepper sprayed several times in hippie protests. You might say he was a seasoned veteran.”

I may make them sound overbearing, but they weren’t that way at all. They did have a sad side, even, turns out, though we didn’t discover it until late in the evening. They told us about a son,

estranged, it seems, only they couldn't figure out why he kept so completely apart from them—not only maintained physical distance but wouldn't connect with them in any way. We could tell, Polly and me, that they really were mystified, weren't hiding some history of abuse or anything like that.

You know what I did, yeah, me? I volunteered to call the guy on the spot. "Would you?" "Sure." "That's so kind." "Don't mention it." "I don't see how it could hurt." "Right. What is the number?"

There followed this gummy soap opera so completely unlikely and corny I'll just try and summarize briefly. Turns out the kid, who seemed friendly enough even when I finished the long explanation of who I was, had kids of his own who he regarded as "troubled" and felt so bad about that, given his own idyllic childhood, that he couldn't bring himself to face.... I know that makes no sense, didn't to me, and I told him so. It was as if I were some fucking genius, and he said so. Bullshit. Anyhow, I also told him he was hurting his parents. Genius again. He then asked to speak to them, and when I turned the phone over, we seized the opening to escape, me and Polly, assuming all would now be well—or as well as we could make it, after our heaven-sent intervention. So, we beat it back to our camper, where we fast doused the lights and went to bed fully clothed—at least I did.

Only not really. That plan—dousing the lights and hiding—would have been wise and prudent, but here we were reckless youth and not very cagey, so we set up a board game and started rolling the dice and playing, listening to music, too. Singing, even. I wish you could have heard us doing duets—bring tears to your eyes.

As if that were not enough—and no comments are invited here—we then turned to *Moby-Dick* and, at long last, maybe the fucking white whale—ha! Like you'd believe that! No chance. Instead—

Desecrated as the body is, a vengeful ghost survives and hovers over it to scare. Espied by some timid man-of-war or blundering discovery-vessel from afar, when the distance

obscuring the swarming fowls, nevertheless still shows the white mass floating in the sun, and the white spray heaving high against it; straightway the whale's unharming corpse, with trembling fingers is set down in the log—*shoals, rocks, and breakers hereabouts: beware!* And for years afterwards, perhaps, ships shun the place; leaping over it as silly sheep leap over a vacuum, because their leader originally leaped there when a stick was held. There's your law of precedents; there's your utility of traditions; there's the story of your obstinate survival of old beliefs never bottomed on the earth, and now not even hovering in the air! There's orthodoxy!

Thus, while in life the great whale's body may have been a real terror to his foes, in his death his ghost becomes a powerless panic to a world.

Are you a believer in ghosts, my friend? There are other ghosts than the Cock-Lane one, and far deeper men than Doctor Johnson who believe in them.

"Damn, Polly! There's orthodoxy! He never misses a chance, that Ishmael."

"Good for him. Wonder what my parents think of this book."

"Yeah. I guess people can read stuff and just not notice? Do you think? I suppose that's not so unusual—but it also seems kind of stupid. Not to say your parents are stupid or anything."

"Bert, are you insulting my genetic line, my heritage, my mommas and my papas?"

"Plural, huh. You are a wonder, my Pol-Pol."

"And I'm glad to see you are back in form—I guess."

"Thanks. Now, tell me about the Cock-Lane ghost and Dr. Johnson."

"No. We covered all that in fourth grade. You should retain things better."

"True. Nighty-night, Polly."

"Nighty-night, Bert."

“See ya in da mornin, hun.”

Did I just call her hun? Yes, I did. She didn’t punch me, though—nor did she melt into my arms.

Our plan was to get up early, which we didn’t manage, so we’d be out of there and to Rapid City before they could throw breakfast at us. Well, good luck with that—as you’ll see soon, the very next chapter.

**CHAPTER FIVE
SOUTH DAKOTA**

July 12

Breakfast was so perfect I won't report it, as you'll not believe me, the old folks—not so old, really—being so good at everything, even not loading us down with thanks. I guess we can say we left them happier than we found them, a first for the summer, I imagine.

So, here we are, in what all the signs say are the Badlands, on the way to Rapid City to engage with our list of promising fun things, enumerated way back in the last chapter, though there's no need for you to look back, as we'll be a-doin them in just the order you remember—or don't.

But even Bert didn't recall—not accurately, so I read them out again—for him and for you:

1. Watiki—a huge indoor water park—bathing suits required
2. Black Hills Escape Room—
3. Outdoor Campus West
4. The Crazy, Horse Memorial—(outside of Deadwood)

“Bert, I see you put in that comic little note about needing bathing suits. Did that inspire in you relief or disappointment?”

“I know you are a nudist from way back—get it, way BACK?—but I am more discreet when it comes to flaunting my remarkable body parts, on which many have remarked.”

“How could they?”

“How could they what?”

“Remark on them if you never put them out there in the open?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Gotcha!”

“No, Polly. You fell for a trap I set so as to get you to tell me

why it is that you, like many of your gender, hide body parts only to tease, to suggest that if one (let's say me) could only lift the curtain—the blouse or skirt or waistband or trouser leg—why then... “

“It'd be the Second Coming—get it, Coming?”

“We ought to go on some tv show for comics-in-the-making, Polly.”

“But Bert, you do have a point. Women's clothing is so often designed so you want to see not it but what it covers—so very badly. And what's ‘badly’ is how I said that.”

“No, I know. But I guess men's clothing can be that, too, or used that way, as in sagging, an extreme way, I guess, to say, “If you like this, just imagine if I keep on going!”

“That's great, Bert. There's not much difference, I suppose, just a myth—like the myth that women outspend men on clothes.”

“They don't? Really? I'll be damned. Not that I doubt you, you know. My parents are always bitching about how much stuff costs. And not just shoes, Polly.”

“Right, Bert. And then there's the question nudists have every right to ask—about why we spend so very much on what we don't need, when people are starving. I mean, what we don't need apart from dealing with winter weather and all that.”

“I'm with you, Pol. And I'm convinced. We're nudists from this very minute. You go first.”

“Have you seen me nude, Bert?”

“Damn, Polly. I thought we were joking.”

“We were—and still are, if you like. To set your mind at ease—I hope—I have not—seen you, I mean—nude, I mean. Not even close.”

“Ultra-articulate there, aren't we, Ms. A-student? Sorry. I know what you mean. Maybe we can proceed by stages, Polly, start by sitting around in our BVDs.”

“Fine by me. Bert, what are BVDs anyhow? I mean—you know.”

“I do, Polly. They are tee-shirt things, and jockey panties, and

what are known in locker rooms as shorts, though that's confusing, as the term is also used for outer wear also known of as shorts. That's just the way it is. I bet other languages make a distinction there, though I'm too—what's that word? mono-something—to know for sure."

"Mono-indecent. And I'm too proper to ask if you wear them—that brand, I mean."

"I don't, as it happens, am a J. C. Penny briefs guy, always have been. And that's enough about me. Now... ."

"Whoa, Bertram. I know you were about to descend to your observations and questions about my—tee hee. But before we leave BVDs behind—ha ha—let me tell you what I discovered about the origin of that name, which, without this knowledge, makes no fucking goddamned hellish sense at all. So, in capsule form, here it is: The brand was founded in 1876 and named after the three founders of the New York City firm: (Joseph W.) Bradley, (Luther C.) Voorhees, and (Lyman H.) Day (thus B.V.D.)."

"Which still evades... . Never mind, Polly. I apologize."

"Don't, Bert. Here."

He was driving, as I guess we didn't say, which allowed me to stand up right there beside him, take off my shirt and pull down my shorts. I can't believe I did it, but once I was on the way it wasn't difficult. Bert did look over, for what seemed like the briefest of seconds, as if it would seem impolite not to, but he looked back around right away.

He didn't say anything but turned several shades of red, kept his eyes straight ahead.

"Oh, Bert, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you. That was so thoughtless."

He turned to me for a second and grimaced, trying to smile, I figured. I knew I had to rescue everything and right away. Trouble was I didn't know how to do so. If I made a joke, he'd feel bad for not being able to go along. If I turned all serious, it'd be worse. I don't know if I decided to wait, exactly, but that's what I did.

Finally, after a long time. “Polly, I guess I can say this much. You did not do anything wrong. You were being so sweet and kind—like you always are—and I was—well, you know.”

“I do, Bert.”

“Only you really don’t, Polly. It’s hard for me to see you taking your clothes off, you know, because... .”

The pause was even longer this time. A whole lot longer. I knew I had to try and help.

“That’s OK, Bert. Because it’s so banal, so men’s magazine-ish.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Polly. I loved seeing you undressed.”

“Oh.” Why did I feel embarrassed at him saying that, especially after flashing him?

More hours, seemed like, of silence.

“So, Bert, it’s because... .”

“It’s because I love you, Polly.”

All of a sudden, it was easy for me to talk.

“I love you, Bert.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah.”

There didn’t seem much more to say, so we lapsed into silence, made our way into Rapid City

Before we knew it, we were there at Watiki, emerging from bath houses in our modest bathing suit attire.

“Haven’t seen you this unclothed, Bert, since ... when was it”

“Last night’s peeks.”

“Oh, yeah. Tell me, Bert, do males peek at one another in the changing room, compare... you know?”

“Sure. Only it’s not peeking. We cuddle up, stretch em out, give prizes for smallest, cutest, most expandable... .”

“Bert, please. That’s awful.”

“You asked, Polly. Anyhow, you look beautiful.”

“That’s the start of a joke, right?”

“No.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

There’s something about a water park that made it—I don’t know. Anyhow, it never seemed quite as fun as a regular old swimming pool. It was as if we couldn’t create our own games—lots of splashing and touching—but needed them handed to us.

Still (just to contradict what I said), what a time we had, me and Bert, sliding down things, getting water sloshed on us, playing tag. It was as if we were—I was going to say kids, like we were now on the wrong side of seventy-five or something.

We also talked, even Bert—especially Bert.

“You know, Polly, bathing suits are something we take for granted, but the technology behind their design is nothing short of...”

I knew he was searching for a word, so I kept myself from saying something smart-assed, like “boring.”

Finally: “quite advanced.”

“Is that right? I never thought of it, though I can see that they need real sophisticated support systems, right?”

Silence.

“Sorry, Bert. I don’t know what I meant by that.”

Silence. I had to do something.

“You know, supporting—ah—breasts, sometimes big ones, along with, you know—boys materials.”

Materials? But Bert didn’t make fun of me—for a few seconds. Then he laughed a little, but started talking anyhow.

“In my case, they use the same heavy materials used in sustaining skyscrapers.”

I can’t believe I did this, but I reached over and down, grabbing for those very materials.

I think I found only leg, but I didn’t have time to explore, as another swimmer, this really young girl—I think she was, young I mean—burbled out, “Maybe get a room? Gawwwddd!”

I dived back so fast it’s lucky I didn’t have hold of anything. I paddled sideways then, so I could see her, plead innocent or

something. I wasn't sure what, so embarrassed was I by then.

Before I could apologize—or deny or something, she swam sort of into me and giggled, really she did. “That’s OK. My turn next.”

I knew Bert would be stricken dumb, only he wasn’t. “Glad you’re here. Take a number. Get in line. Invite your friends.”

I think we both then realized we were talking to a really young kid, maybe barely a teen. But what could we do now? Escape was the wise thing, but the kid, introducing herself as “Mary” seemed to want to hang out with us, so what choice did we have, apart from leaving the Watiki altogether? Punch her, I suppose, or gently tell her to get the hell lost.

At least she didn’t invite us to a sleep-over, just went on and on about her school and teachers and parents and getting her braces off and the boy she was angling for, and... . Finally, as we were wrinkling from the long immersion, we told her we had to depart and get to the hospital for emergency appendectomies, one each. Nah, but pretty much.

On our way to the escape room—a fitting title for us—Bert raised the subject bothering both of us. “Polly, why do so many young kids—younger than us, anyhow, align with us, you know?”

“Because we’re hot.”

I meant it as a joke, but he took it seriously. “Yeah.”

As I had no way to keep that subject alive, I moved on. “You been to an escape room, Bert?”

“I think so, Polly. That one over in Venice Beach. You know?”

“I don’t know, Berty Boy, and I hear they are no place for virtuous females such as I, not if they wish to retain their virtue.”

Bert was driving, turned and looked at me oddly, which made it on a par with all his looks.

The experience was terrific, actually, funny and wildly inventive, with attendants who magically appeared to help, if you were stymied by a room, which happened to us only three times (out of four rooms). Can’t brag too much, though, as we had considerable help from those trapped there with us—no, not young teens this time,

but this older-than-hell couple, who were almost (not quite) as inept as we.

I caught myself wondering if these seniors were there by mistake—the old codger actually had a cane, though his much apparently much younger and very beautiful wife seemed to know what was going on and kept her hubby (if that’s what he was) from capsizing or having a stroke. And I realize I’m being ageist—sorry.

It was late afternoon by the time we emerged and we hadn’t had lunch, but our next stop, the many exhibits and giant aquarium and classes to take at Outdoor Campus West beckoned.

“Oh, wait, Bert. They close in thirty minutes. Maybe we should—you know... .”

“What?”

“Postpone Outdoor Campus West.”

“Yeah, Polly. I agree. Outdoor Campus West, whatever that is, can wait a day. So now we get a big early dinner, Rapid City style, then go back to our camp site and... .”

What a set-up line he dropped in my lap, but I’m proud to say (I guess) that I let it pass—and off to the campsite we went. We cleaned up and changed clothes—I guess we did, or at least I did. Then a dinner at a great place located next door and just the thing for gourmet trailerists—and maybe I can be more of a snob-bitch.

“Bert, before I have a prelude before reading—I mean, before plunging into *Moby-Dick* and harpoons as deadly as your tongue—whatever that means. I thought I had a witty or at least apt simile there, but it escaped. Anyhow, do you think it’s odd Melville could get away with all the atheism and no sexual hints at all?”

“That’s interesting, Polly. You think there’s no sexual allusions? I guess so. He did have Ishmael and Queequeg rolling around under the covers, but that’s different.”

“You ever do that, Bert, thrash the covers to threads with another rollicking boy?”

“Yes. You?”

“Not with a boy. I don’t think. Sorry. I know you were just using

shorthand. No, I didn't have sex with a girl or, as I know you don't mean sex, exactly, I talked about sex all the time with friends, and bodily stuff, but never touched in forbidden areas, I don't think. Nope. So, what sort of fun stuff did you do?"

"Not much, and it may have been accidental. You know Brad, Brad Dorian?"

"Yeah."

"We had a sleep-over. Bunk beds. But I woke up with him on my level, the lower, pressing into me with his—you know."

"Erection."

"Yeah. I didn't know how to handle it, said something like, 'What you doing?' You know what he said?"

I thought about making a smart-assed remark about handling but I was anxious to know, so I just said, "What?"

"First he said, 'What do you mean?' I forget what I said. Something embarrassed like, 'You know!' And then he said, 'Oh, sorry.' Then he said he got up to pee and crawled into the bottom bunk by mistake and... I almost told him to go ahead humping, since that would have been better than listening to him make an ass of himself."

"I think it would have been better all the way round. It sounds great—and Brad is hot."

"Yeah, you're right, Polly. What the hell! I wish I'd done that. But I was too immature."

"Not immature, Bert. You just knew instinctively that, fun as the humping might have been, would have been, you'd have to deal with the aftermath, whatever that might be. I mean, what would you find to say to one another after it was all over. I have done that sort of thing, you know? Sort of writhing around in some mild way with a date and stopping it very early on, just because I knew good lines to use then and wasn't sure what lines I'd use later on. That seems odd as fuck, Bert—sorry about the 'fuck,' only I'm not—that I wasn't worried about getting pregnant or something reasonable but about not knowing what words might fit."

I sort of realized it as I was babbling, knew that me talking on

and on was a certain way of shutting Bert off. And I couldn't help myself, and it did shut him off.

"Bert, when I go on so long and leave no openings—as I do every ten minutes—how can I reignite you?"

He glanced over at me, smiled, and then went right back to playing with his shoe-strings. Should I stay shut up or did that increase the pressure? What the hell. "If I stay shut up, Bert, does that help or—you know—fuck things up worse?"

"Well, Polly, I'd say that for most people, slight pauses would be definitely be good. But for you, slight pauses are as rare as trickle reductions at Niagara Falls."

"Oh, ha ha, Mr. Girl-Wrestler. Now that we've settled it, take off your pants and read Melville."

And you know what? He did—both—making it terrible hard for me to attend.

It was a humorously perilous business for both of us. For, before we proceed further, it must be said that the monkey-rope was fast at both ends; fast to Queequeg's broad canvas belt, and fast to my narrow leather one. So that for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake. So, then, an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed.

So strongly and metaphysically did I conceive of my situation then, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two; that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death. Therefore, I saw that here was a sort of interregnum in Providence; for its even-handed equity never could have so gross an injustice.

And yet still further pondering—while I jerked him now and then from between the whale and ship, which would threaten to jam him—still further pondering, I say, I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die.

“Bert, that’s wonderful—‘a joint stock company of two’—like us.”

“True, Polly. If you, as an inferior woman driver, crash, it’s not just you what pays.”

“So, what do you say, joint stock-holder, to necking for an hour or two.”

“If we started, Polly, you know very well we’d be screwing within ten minutes.”

I don’t know if it was that word ‘screwing’ or the look on his face after he’d said it—so sad and apologetic—but it was clear then we’d just go straight to sleep—and we did.

CHAPTER SIX
YET MORE S.D.—AS YOU FIGURED

July 13

Bert again. You may have forgotten there were two of us on this trip, so long did Polly hold onto the baton. Jesus! Nah—it was her great kindness gave me such an extended break. She understands so much and so deeply, and she knows just what to do. Finally, though, she looked over at me, as if to say, “You finally ready, Mr. Limp-dick?” Which I was—and no jokes about the accuracy of the obscenity, either.

We’re now, you recall, reporting on getting ready in the morning, a momentous time today, as we both strutted around nude for some time, getting dressed in a fashion much slower than “leisurely.” Nah. I did bring the subject up—again. Asked Polly why we were respecting a privacy neither of us wanted to maintain.

“I think, Bertilly, it’s because we get more of a zinging charge out of discussing our nudity than in witnessing it. Words, not flesh, is our porn medium of choice.”

“Yeah, well, I think that was true back in our young western days, but now we’re fucking half way across the country, surely we can wave goodbye to such pre-teen silliness, eh?”

“You want to go back and start over, hun? OK by me. And here’s a beginning.”

Polly then just dropped her shorts and took off her blouse, damned if she didn’t. Right there. I was so mesmerized I didn’t think to follow suit for a minute. Just dazed, not embarrassed. She didn’t seem to mind, I think, just stood there, but then I did just the same as she. I figured we’d then go all the way—undressing, I mean—but Polly laughed and said we’d better save something for Alabama. Maybe it was because we both had on white undies, like little kids or something, so that proceeding would have seemed improper—though

what bullshit that is. Anyhow—

“We aren’t a-goin’ there, Maisie. Alabama ain’t our aim. Oh, I guess that’s your point.”

“I don’t think I really had a point, but maybe we had better re-clothe and get to our next spot, lest we’re still talking about sex and not doing it come Christmas.”

“OK.”

“OK.”

So, I motored us on over toward Outdoor Campus West, “a really famous place with ‘educational programs for youth,’ which is us, youth, that is. I can’t tell what time they start or what they are, so that’s a plus. They also have a 4600 gallon aquarium.”

“Wow, that sounds giant-sized. Any fish in it or just the water. Odd they’d advertise it that way.”

“Yeah. Maybe they haven’t got funds for the live things yet, though it’ll be fun just to see that many gallons, right, sweetums?”

“What in hell’s got into you, juicy boy? Sweetums! That’s getting pretty fresh.”

“Yes.”

The place, Campus West Whatever, turned out to have lots of instructional zeal, though most of it demanded our presence there for extended periods: six weeks, say. They did have one-hour possibilities, too: intro to fly casting and game-calling.

“Let’s do game-calling, Bert.”

“OK. You know what that is?”

“No, I don’t. but I assume they do, and we’ll know, too, at the end of that hour.”

So, we signed up and joined this group of eight (counting us).

“You know what game-calling is, kid?” That came from another group member, possibly three years older than me, at most. For some odd reason, I resented his tone—or something—and just turned away, after directing a superior sneer his way. As soon as my back was turned, though, I began regretting the whole thing, feeling sure I’d soon be feeling the full force of a punch or a boot on my ass.

Instead, a hand gently patting my shoulder and, “Oh, shit, I’m sorry, buddy. Not like I’m an expert—and I really am stupid about game-calling, too. And there I go again. Didn’t mean ‘too,’ as if you were stupid. I’m the one who’s stupid, for sure.”

Of course I right away melted, confessed that we were brothers-in-ignorance and turned with him (and the others) to our instructor, a small and pretty young person who turned out to be named “Larry” and used “they, them” personal pronouns. Fine by Polly and me, though it drew some audible huffs from others among us.

But curiosity outweighed the joys of bigotry even here and we soon were all ears, learning that what we were innocent of until then was “animal communication.”

Larry started right in: “Have you ever wondered how ants follow what seem to be invisible trails leading to food? Why male dogs mark their territory by peeing on bushes and lampposts when you take them for a walk? What birds are saying to one another when they chirp outside your window? If so, you’re in the right place! Initial questions?”

Thank Jesus and His Twenty-Odd Apostles there were none, and Larry went on to give us an hour’s worth of really fascinating stuff. At the end, the group faded away, but Polly and I both felt the need to get more out of Larry, so we approached.

“Hi,” they said, waiting for us to explain why we had blocked their way to the guide’s lounge or some such.

“That was wonderful. Are you a faculty member someplace? I mean, how did you learn all that?”

Guess which of us emitted that eloquence.

Larry laughed. “No, I’m just a lowly student here at USD, probably about your age.”

Polly looked at me but then took up the burden when I didn’t respond, let Larry know that we still had another year of high school.

“Really! I figured you guys for at least—oh—thirty or so.”

Larry didn’t proceed to invite us both back to the lounge or to a party later on, so we parted amiably and Polly and I just took off on

the hike, all 1.5 miles of it.

By then it was late enough to justify lunch, so we made our way to a nearby gourmet shop, bought upscale fixins' (sandwiches) and ate at a handy picnic bench on our way south to Deadwood.

"You watch that series, Polly?"

"In secret—the whole thing. My parents, of course, detested it, tried a bit of the first show. 'Why, they never spoke that way! Like Shakespeare—as if. And so violent! And not a church in sight!' I was going to tell them our Lord did make an appearance, by way of the sweetest character ever, if demented. Sorry, Bert. Did you watch it?"

"Yeah—with my parents, which dulled the shine—though not totally. They knew some of the actual history of the place. I really loved Wild Bill and, most of all, Calamity Jane. I asked my parents if she was really like that. They said, "Oh, yes, indeed!" But I could tell they said that, pretended to know what they didn't, just because they knew how I loved her. She was so tough and so dear at heart. Like Jo's epitaph for his father, 'Remember, Reader, He Were That Good in His Hart.'"

"I'm sure you Wikipedia'd her, Bert. And I love you for it. What was she really like?"

"Rough-spoken, tender-hearted, fierce, and loyal, really, Polly, just as they portrayed her in the series. As far as I can tell, they were accurate. God, I wish I'd known her. Only... ."

"Only what?"

"I was going to say you remind me of her."

"Oh, Bert, oh Fuck!"

She smiled at me in a way that almost cured forever my damned condition, were it curable.

Anyhow, turns out we were just in time to do a couple of "must do's" on our list before witnessing, as luck would have it, the annual "Days of Deadwood" parade, or so I thought, actually announcing it to Polly before realizing it was two weeks off.

"That's OK, Bert, better than OK. We had enough of that outside of Denver, right? One more parade and rodeo and recreation of a

fabled past that we could write about ourselves, as they're all the same."

Pure kindness. But I did then locate some possibilities, crossing off a trail that extended for 50 miles, a cemetery (where you can visit the graves of ... and who cares!), and such like.

The first item on the list, "A Walk Down Main Street," seemed as if it would be just the thing for discriminating tourist like us, only it wasn't. There was no escaping the shops, which were OK and pretty predictable, and the many "professional" actors—another roamer of the streets assured us they were, "oh yes, professionals, every one—holding these authentic-as-hell gun fights right under your nose."

I figured we'd slip past this helpful guy easy enough but he fell into step with us, seemed harmless. As did Ted Bundy, I imagine.

"You guys here with your parents?"

Which led to detailed explanations, followed by exclamations of astonishment and approval, more questions, and more applause. Finally, he shut up, only he didn't. "You interested in going with me to The Broken Boot Gold Mine? They have tours regularly, and you can pan for gold. Really, you can. I have a family pass."

I could tell Polly was about to worm us safely out of all this, but before she could the guy laughed and said, softly: "No, I'm not a roaming molester. My kids absolutely refused to go, said they'd just hang out—play with their phones, I guess."

He seemed so defeated, I sure didn't want to be the one throwing the final shovel of shit on his head, so burst in with, "Sure, we'd love to go."

I tried to avoid Polly's look, failed, and couldn't decipher it anyhow—luckily, I'm sure.

The guy turned out to be pretty much OK, as was this tour, told us all kinds of things I for sure hadn't guessed about mines and the lives of those betting everything they had and more on finding gold. Surprise was that a good many did indeed find it but not that much to make a great deal of difference, or so said our guide. Imagine giving up everything to come up to Deadwood and the gold and end up with

about what you'd have been making back in the coal-holes of West Virginia.

We were talking about this melancholy truth, the three of us, when the guy up and said, "At least they tried. And maybe the hardships were different. You know?"

I wasn't quick to grasp, but Polly was: "Yeah, here they were where at least the failure had different terms and a new setting."

I kind of got it then, what she had said. "And there was promise here, the unexpected. Going into the coal mines was never going to yield anything at all. And here—it's sort of like poor people going to casinos or playing the lottery instead of investing their \$2 a month in an account and ending up with diddle anyhow."

I thought the three of us were going to hug, maybe, but we just ended the tour and parted. Polly did say to him, "Your kids are lucky. And down deep they know that."

The guy's eyes got watery, but he just smiled and squeezed our hands.

Can't believe Bert held onto the reins for so long, but it's clear to me he's getting a little easier. I hope that's it, familiarity breeding not contempt but some kind of relaxation. Right? I did know better than to ask.

"Well, Bert, you were awfully nice to that guy. He seems like he's in some kind of mourning for his lost kids."

"Yeah."

"You suppose our parents feel the same way?"

"Pretty much, Polly. Not to the same degree, but pretty much that. I have thought about it, wondered if there wasn't something I could do. I try to be nice to them—sometimes."

"I'm sure you are."

"But even that seems a little like a trap. It can't go anywhere. What they once were they can be no longer."

"Yeah. Mine, too. I mean, I see that in my mom and dad, too—

and in me. But I do think we're still lucky, Bert. Hell, they sent us on this trip almost as much for their sake as for ours."

"That seems cold, but... ."

"But?"

"You're right."

"And for that male concession to female authority in matters domestic, I will treat you to dinner tonight at the finest in Deadwood, where we can not only stuff and drink but get straight on tomorrow's plans."

"That seems only fair—if minimal. So, the list I have recommends places for fine dining, at least an experience that will be, maybe, hygienic. I must say, though, sweet Polly, that the local taste seems to run to the meaty."

"I can always get a salad."

"No, you can't. They won't let you."

For a wild second, I really thought he was serious, that they'd maybe just hold my jaws apart and shove cow or bison down my throat. But then... . I shouldn't have let fly, but I did. "Bertram, you ass you. I'm not used to you joking."

"Neither am I. Thanks, Polly."

It was like we'd just declared something. At least I was smart enough (or something) not to ask directly what it was.

So, we changed clothes—not dressing up, as that didn't seem to fit Deadwood style—and walked over to the place Bert chose. Nothing was too far away from nuthin' else here in the downtown of Deadwood—and got ourselves to the restaurant without being interfered with.

"Polly, you always wear those mini-panties, what are they called?"

Not only out of the blue, but the waiter was right there and listening, I swear—couldn't help but hear I think he meant to be charming in saying what he said, but he wasn't.

"I think you got it, buddy. Mini-panties, if I'm not wrong."

I wasn't going to fold—blush or blubber. "They're string-

bikinis, for the smallest size. And that's the end of the lesson for tonight. You order for me, Bert. Please."

The waiter snapped back to being impersonal and all attentive, staring at Bert, pencil at ready for the order.

Bert complied, got me a salad, enough to feed the whole damned twelfth grade back at school, but not a knee or knuckle in sight. And a beer, sloshing around in one of those steins they want you to believe was being used in the Kaiser's Germany or something authentically Deutsch. And why am I being snarky, just because Bert blurted that out about underwear, OK, string bikinis, which I didn't wear, didn't own, so why hadn't I told the truth—and who cared a—fuck?

I gave myself a kind of mental shake and we got back to our meal and a fun discussion about school and teachers who tried too hard to remember what it was like back in 1920, when they was young, and—well, nothing about sex or clothes or what we were really thinking of.

When we got back to the camper and were ready to settle into more of Melville, I pretended I was Bert and just came out with it. "I know we've talked about it endlessly, Bert, but tell me again why we find the talk an end in itself, better than the thing itself?"

"Finish taking off your sweater thing, Polly, and I'll tell you."

As I wasn't wearing a sweater—it was July, by heaven—and wasn't taking anything off, it took me a minute.

"Oh, I see, Bert. You're right."

"Great."

Truth is I didn't see one damned thing, had no idea what he was right about, but figured it was too late to retreat and clarify, so I smiled a knowing smile and kept my clothes on, snug and safe, and started in on the whale story where no whales had appeared or were on the horizon. I was reading away, more cetology [doncha love that word!]. All at once I came upon a great little gem—as so often happened in this great nook.

"Read that again, please, Polly."

And I did:

Is it not curious, that so vast a being as the whale should see the world through so small an eye, and hear the thunder through an ear which is smaller than a hare's? But if his eyes were broad as the lens of Herschel's great telescope; and his ears capacious as the porches of cathedrals; would that make him any longer of sight, or sharper of hearing? Not at all.—Why then do you try to “enlarge” your mind? Subtilize it.

“Wow, Polly honey, I don't think I ever heard that word before.”

“Me neither—subtilize.”

“Makes me think of Dr. Markels again.”

“Julian.”

“Yeah. That's what he's been saying. Don't try to encounter the whole breadth of—say, literature. Take a fantastic three sentences like those and let them work on you, subtilize you.”

I don't know if it was that talk of whale's eyes and ears of just our usual habit, but we seemed to know that was that, as far as the evening was concerned, and turned out the light and got into beds a few feet apart—though it might as well have been the vast Pacific Ocean separating us. [Note: I am lying, infected by Melville's prose. Truth is, we did indeed get in separate beds, but only after a long kiss or several dozen.]

CHAPTER SEVEN EASTWARD HO

July 14

Polly here—still reporting, but not for long, I expect and hope. Bert seems to be so much more easy, though I try not to show that I think so, or bank on that, realizing that he could be knocked backward so very easy. Hard to find a balance, so I kind of go on minute by minute, which isn't as bad as it seems—isn't bad at all.

We had had such a fine time in Deadwood, I started to imagine that life in South Dakota might be just the thing. And maybe it is. Not that we knew a damned thing about it, really, but... . Anyhow, my map searches and Googling suggested (to me) that we ought now to put some miles behind us and get to—where else, Pierre.

Bert was driving along smoothly, got us to the Interstate and was humming away—seemed easy and ahppy. I should have been giving him directions, finding hot spots up ahead, massaging his —, but I was so taken with his humming. I knew better than to say anything, lest he stop, so I did the next worst thing, started humming with him.

I tried to keep it soft, but before you know it, we were both singing away:

I can see the stars all the way from here
Can't you see the glow on the window pane
I can feel the sun whenever you are near
Every time you touch me I just melt away
[Then I forgot the words and went back to humming—until—]
Nobody's perfect but it's worth it.

Bert stopped all of a sudden, just kept driving, seemed upset. No! I hoped I was wrong, but had to ask.

"I'm sorry, Bert, did I do something?"

"Oh, no, Polly. The song did. That line."

"Oh." I had no idea what he meant.

“You’re perfect, Polly.”

“Oh Jesus, Bert.”

Sweet silence for a minute or two, and then we went back to directing, driving, and keeping our chastity where it remained, squirming wildly but still caged.

“Polly, I hope you know I didn’t mean to make YOU feel uncomfortable. Here I am, this fragile piece of doo-doo you are so very careful with, and it’s like that gives me license to be as blunt and careless as I want—not that I want to hurt you.”

“Oh, Bert, I know that. I do. And I’ll just say right out that I love you and understand what you’re saying—that I’m perfect in your eyes.”

“In my heart.”

We were quiet for a bit, almost as if we had moved to new ground and had no idea what it held or how we might navigate it.

Finally, I decided to dip down to the mundane. “Well, Megabert, I think I’ll be of service to the cause by tackling and fulfilling two onerous and necessary tasks that males are too busy muscle-flexing to undertake.”

“Let me guess, Polly. Give me a second. Now I got it: feminine hygiene and shopping.”

“Oh, you vile lout you!”

“Nah, wait a second. Let me revise that: you will analyze the stock market and forecast for me the National League pennant race—at least the divisional champeens.”

“Buy Playtex stock and, as for baseball, the divisions will be won by St. Louis, Chicago, and... .”

“And?”

“Pittsburgh.”

“You may be right about Playtex, since I happen to know you are saving up to buy a year’s supply, but those teams you mention are all in the same division, so... . Plus Chicago is lousy and Pittsburgh even worse.”

“Ah, yes. You think I didn’t know all that? I was just testing you,

Babe. I like those two teams because they have the sweetest mascots—bears and pirates. Right?”

I looked over at him to see how he was and could tell, even with his eyes focussed on the road, that he was trying hard not to guffaw or something. But all he said was, “Right.”

I was enjoying all this so, but didn’t want to press too hard, so I turned straight back to dear *Moby-Dick*, despite our recent stop here, settling on a really strange chapter called “The Prairie.” I read the ending of it twice, hoping Bert would tell me what it meant.

But how? Genius in the Sperm Whale? Has the Sperm Whale ever written a book, spoken a speech? No, his great genius is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it. It is moreover declared in his pyramidal silence. And this reminds me that had the great Sperm Whale been known to the young Orient World, he would have been deified by their child-magian thoughts. They deified the crocodile of the Nile, because the crocodile is tongueless; and the Sperm Whale has no tongue, or at least it is so exceedingly small, as to be incapable of protrusion. If hereafter any highly cultured, poetical nation shall lure back to their birth-right, the merry May-day gods of old; and livingly enthrone them again in the now egotistical sky; in the now unhaunted hill; then be sure, exalted to Jove’s high seat, the great Sperm Whale shall lord it.

Champollion deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man’s and every being’s face. Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable. If then, Sir William Jones, who read in thirty languages, could not read the simplest peasant’s face in its profounder and more subtle meanings, how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale’s brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can.

“Ho, Polly. You want me to explain? Holy shit—sorry—but I

remember Julian Markels talking some about this, about physiognomy and the notion that all our secrets are written in our faces and that someone need only have access to the right language in order to read it all."

"Yeah, I see, Bert. And we still cling to that a little, right? We still think we can read faces, that they can substantiate or even reverse what the words coming out of our mouths seem to be saying."

"Yeah. We all imagine that. But I love what Melville says there, that physiognomy is like every other human science, a passing fable, not just a mere fable, but fleeting, doubly insubstantial, passing before us and gone almost before we can decipher it them."

"That's beautiful, Bert—and terrifying. All our certainties are melting away even as we try to clutch at them. Even the most solid of foundations are gossamer wisps that won't be there by evening."

"I think we could spend years on this book, Polly, and never get to the end of it, what it's saying to us."

"Holding out before us, saying come and get it—if we have but wit enough to know how to take hold of 'it.' "

"That's great, Polly—and maybe what it's giving us is as fleeting or as blank and mocking as the whale's brow."

"I guess I see, Bert."

"Yeah. I'm sure you do, Polly."

"You're a biased barometer of that, Bert."

He looked over at me so long I started worrying that we'd wreck—but not worrying much. Right then—

"Bert, do you remember that great Keats poem part about dying? I'm sure you do."

"Huh? No, Polly, I don't."

"Oh, yeah—sorry. Let me look it up. In a minute—OK. It's in a poem called 'Ode to a Nightingale.' "

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,

To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain.

“Seems rich to die—God, Polly.”

What had I done? I had to find something more—and there it was, right there in the poem, too.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Bert didn't say anything, and I didn't want to look over—I'm not sure why. Maybe I was worried that I'd made him cry. Maybe I was worried that he'd see I was doing just that.

After a bit of silence, though, Bert took it up, the poem. “When that song found its way to Ruth's heart, do you suppose it gave her relief, somehow charmed her?”

Truth was, I had no idea, really thought myself that the bird's immortal song was there to show us the terrifying contrast, show us how horribly mortal we are, its song so unlike Keats's own beautiful and so brief melody. But what did I know—nothing. So I gave it a try. “I think it gave Ruth relief, some kind of power. I think, too, that even those of us who've never been within miles of a nightingale can hear it right there in the poem and find a kind of—I don't know, relief or grace. It does not last, but for that brief time... .”

“Yeah.”

I had no idea how close we were getting to Pierre, but I figured now was a good time to escape from whatever melancholy was trailing us and went plunging into our guide books.

Within a few miles, I was ready to think—if you can call it that—out loud. “Well, Octobert, which is definitely—listen to me now!—what you should name your first born and she’ll thank you for it, or he will, I think I have a nice little list here, starting, you see, with lunch and then, after that, a rich afternoon. More exactly, first, lunch at the Zesto shop.”

I was all set to proceed, but Bert cut in.

“Zesto? That South Dakotan for bar-b-cue?”

“Close. It’s large amounts of ice cream real cheap, which we can justify, since we don’t do something like this every day, thus shaming the predictions of our parents and all of their generation: you let them kids loose and they’ll just eat ice cream for every meal—that and... .”

“Fuck.”

“Right, Bert, that’s what our parents are telling all their closest: ‘Them two kids is just going at it like rabbits, halting every fifteen miles to fuck—or at least we hope so. Otherwise, what’s the point?’”

“Polly, I am so sorry. I didn’t mean it. That word just popped out. You know how I am.”

I kept myself from saying anything about something else popping out, just issued what I hoped was reassuring, without going too far.

“I do know how you are, Bert—the kindest and most sensitive being on the planet—apart from Teddy Knowles.”

He did laugh [and perhaps here I should let our multitudes of readers [ha] know that Teddy Knowles was this rich kid bully who fit perfectly your idea of an asshole].

So, to our list—after we have lunch and are braced for South Dakota history:

1. State Capitol
2. South Dakota Historical Center

3. Flaming Fountain—though the flame may or may not be ignited

4. And then there's... .

“Oh wait, Flaming Fountain, with or without the flame, is erected to fallen soldiers and such—one more sanctimonious monument that disguises what we do to military kids.”

“Right, Polly. I absolutely agree. Just cool down and strike it off the list—with vigor.”

Was this Bert? Anyhow, I laughed, did so, and proceeded with a revision. “So, let’s replace that with a new Number Three, Oahe Dam and Power Plant, where they give tours and explain how to pronounce Oahe and... . Oh, wait a minute, the comments say it’s very pretty but there are no longer any tours of the plant, so screw that. I know you were yearning so hard for the plant and its mysteries. It still offers a nice picnic spot, they say, so long as you don’t topple into the water—and have something less easily liquified than the ice cream we’ll be toting, so... .”

“I think what you’re suggesting is we just do the Capitol Building and the Historical Society?”

“Are you mad, Bert? Why, it says right here no visit would be complete without The South Dakota Discovery Center. Oh wait, that’s a children’s museum, so make it, instead, La Framboise Island, which we can walk to across a causeway, unless it’s closed.”

“This place is loaded with heartbreak, Polly, promising and then withdrawing, like teen fashions for girls.”

“Ha! So says Mr. King of the Saggors, Tease of the Month Boy, Glimpses But No Prizes.”

“Polly, you are obsessed. Just tell me about La Framboise Island, where the palm trees grow.”

“The reviews say it’s a great place to archery hunt.”

“Oh, great! Damn!”

“Nah, maybe not that, but it seems we can rent bikes and go across this causeway—don’t you love that name?—and, you know,

bike, like we do back in wild old Santa Monica.”

“Can you bike, Polly?”

“I think so.” Actually, when I did start thinking about it, my biking experience and abilities, I wasn’t so sure about that. Had I really biked—I mean, since the age of eight? Oh well, as they say, it’s something that, once you master, is yours for life.

Only it isn’t really, not in the least—for me. We decided to do the biking first, since the other two excitements had late afternoon/evening activities, tours I guess they will be.

The guy running the bike rental place turned out to be a roly-poly fella, quite unlike the slim ’n trim others we’d mostly seen in this state. I had mentioned it to Bert, who seemed profoundly uninterested—didn’t even grunt.

“You two try to stay out of the water, at least on the bikes. It’s not deep—no more than twenty-thousand leagues, like they say—but the currents are quite rough, and then there’s them sharks. It’s tuna season, you see, which of course draws the sharks, irresistible, but they do prefer humans when they have the choice, young ones especially—more tender and all. Women are their entree of choice, and ...”

I think it was this asshole’s endless drivel that made me take off so fast—way too fast. Anyhow, I found out almost immediately that the old adage about bike riding was about as valid as old adages usually are. Once we were about fifty feet or so from the rental shop, my wobbles were so bad, Bert was moved to speech.

“You’re doing fine, Polly. It’ll all come back to you. Just don’t worry and trust to instinct.”

Probably good advice—for most people. In my case, however, though I did trust to instinct (what the hell else could I do?), I soon found myself ass over tin cups, as my grandpa says, somewhat literally: I was pinned kind of upside down under my bike, unhurt but still humiliated. I mean, what was I, some five-year-old needing training wheels?

“Just stay as you are, Polly. I’ll unpin you. Just don’t... .”

Don't what? Truth is there wasn't a damned thing I could do in the way of moving, apart, I suppose, from wiggling my fanny. How embarrassing to have it up there/out there in the open. Of course it could have been worse: could have been wearing a skirt.

Of all the times to have synchronized thinking! Here came Bert with: "I know you were planning on wearing that flowered skirt today, Polly. Should I run back and get it? I'll help you change."

For some idiot reason I am ashamed was there, my feelings were hurt: "Bert, that's cruel."

Right away I wanted to take it back, knew I'd set off a flood of guilt in him, issuing in a bigger flood of apologies. But no, fuck it all: "Oh, just stick it, Polly. If it were me, you'd be taking pictures, texting them to one and all, drawing funny faces on my cheeks."

He was right, and I tried to recover. "You're right, Hun. I'm a little rattled because I chose this day, of all days, to go commando."

"Polly!"

I couldn't tell if he was genuinely shocked or just immobilized. In any case, I suddenly found myself upright and back on the bike, feet in the stirrups, or whatever they're called. And off we went.

Sure enough, within a bit, I got better, enough to stop worrying about knocking myself or Bert into next week.

Polly handed this reporting job off to your truly, counting on me to be decent enough not to circle back to another view of her blatant ass-waving there at the bike spot. OK by me, as you can doubtless picture it for yourself—and I'm very sorry I wrote that, as it's so macho voyeuristic. Polly deserves so much better than that—than me.

Anyhow, the island turned out to be very pretty, probably about what you'd imagine from islands you've been on yourself. This one, though, was sort of crowded, not that anybody engaged us in talk, and that was fine—and maybe I can be super boring.

What turned out to be far more interesting than you'd ever suppose was the State Capitol Building and Cultural Heritage Center,

especially the latter, which was built into the side of a hill for some reason I didn't catch but was very nice all the same—as if that makes any sense. Anyhow, what surprised us/me was all the direct emphasis on native people, mostly the Sioux, and the openness about the way they had been exploited and shoved into corners—and worse—by white people. I guess it's the same old story, but it is good that this Cultural Center puts it front and center.

I mentioned all this to Polly, who first said that such acknowledgments were as carefully tucked away as the people themselves, then looked hard at me and changed her tune: “No, you're right, Bert. The more the tragic tale is told, the better. Period.”

Yeah, but we didn't see any other tourists there, so the story is probably not spreading very fast.

It was fairly late by the time we finished—taking longer than we should have out of some idiotic feeling that we were making up for the general neglect of the place, I think. By the time we got back to our hook-up spot, we were filled to the gills with knowledge of South Dakota but not with food [and there's a sentence for style manuals!]. So, we picked up some burgers and settled in at our folding table, luxurious as it is handy.

“It just occurred to me that it's odd we haven't been eating fast food much, Polly.”

“I guess it is, Bertram—and even these are gourmet-ish compared to, you know, McDonalds. So, what you really wanted to discuss, Bert, was not our meal but our biking trip, right?”

“No, Polly, but what preceded it—only joking.”

“That's OK, Bert. Joke away, direct your wit at me. I'm the one should be apologizing and then some, being all huffy just because my ass was put on display for several hours so all could see.”

“You know what I most regret about all that, Pol?”

“What?”

“That I didn't charge admission, could have laid up enough for tuition—at Harvard.”

She looked at me funny, scrunched up her face, as if she were

going to cry or laugh or yell at me—I couldn’t tell. Finally, she did none of those things, just said, real serious, “Would you like to recreate that scene, Bert?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, minus the bicycle?”

“Oh, Polly. I see. You know, I think I’d rather have your face before me, and that way I can really... .”

“That can sure be arranged, dear.”

And it was—and we did.

CHAPTER EIGHT
ON THE WAY OUT OF SOUTH DAKOTA AND INTO THE
LAND OF LAKES

July 15, 16

The next morning, we managed to rise, shine, eat, and get on the road in something like record time, not for any reason we could put a pin in but just because it worked out that way.

I was driving and was hoping we'd sing and babble away the hours to someplace or other—who knew where? Or cared. Last night was so much fun—though that's a stupid way to put it and also the best I can manage. And don't suppose I can elaborate or... . And anyhow, let's switch ground and elevate ourselves some. Ready?

We're now into the center of July and nearly half-way through our time, a fact I didn't mention to Bert, lest it foul his mood, our mood.

"Where we headed, Bert? Is there more to South Dakota—I mean, more we mustn't miss—or should we just get to whatever is east and right across the border, Chicago or something?"

"Actually, right across the border is Nashville, Polly, unless we veer east a little and down to Dallas."

"Ah, so does that mean there's really nothing left for us in the land of Deadwood?"

"Sure, there is. I mean, what city comes first to mind when you think of this state?"

"Call me stupid, Bert, but not one damned thing comes to mind—apart from what we've unearthed the last few days."

"I'd far rather call you buxom, hun, but let's push all of that aside for now and concentrate closely on just where we're going. I'll offer you an excellent hint: three hours and thirty-five minutes will see us at the outskirts, if traffic's not too thick."

Suddenly a name came to me, so I blurted it out: "Sioux Falls"?

Bert actually leaped from his seat and came up behind me, embraced me in a rather unseemly way, and licked my ear, all of which I'm sure I should have resented or pretended to—but didn't.

"Just a wildly lucky guess, Bert, really."

"Sure it was. Like I don't have ample reason to know better, Pol. Next thing you'll be telling me is that you don't know the sixteen best things to do there."

"Well, let's see. I'll bet there are walks, a museum or two, maybe a restaurant?"

"I'll report back in less than an hour, see if your uncanny abilities really do stretch that far."

In a mere sixteen minutes, Bert was all ready with a complete catalogue of primary attractions (with detailed description of each), a list full enough to occupy us (profitably) for the next six or eight months—or is it minutes. Anyhow, I'll let him speak in his own voice about these.

"Well, Polly, here they come, the Sioux Falls goodies, leaving out religion-traps and bicycle things:

1. Falls Park—which does look pretty in just our style of pretty
2. Sculpt Aquariumure Walk and Wall of Dreams Monument—don't ask
3. Butterfly House and Aquarium
4. Washington Pavilion—where—wait a minute—I have hooked us tickets for tomorrow night—Sioux Falls Sing-A-Thon
5. Great Plains Zoo and Delbridge Museum of Natural History
6. Woodgrain Brewing Company"

"Notice, Bert, how these lists we call up seem pretty much geared for the careful, nicely white and Protestant family set—not your revised list but the originals? Maybe I'm wrong."

"You're right. Pol-eece, even that brewing company I had to boost way up, and you can bet it's not dark and shady."

"You ever done anything dark and shady, Bert?"

"I'd have to think about that for at least an hour—or week—only I won't. Not now. I guess I told you that I necked a couple of times with girls I hardly knew, that kind of thing—but I suppose that wouldn't rank real high in criminal lists."

"I did that, too, Bert. God, the worst was in junior high—barely in junior high. You know Barney?"

"Barney Appleman?"

"Applebee. But yeah. The ugly kid."

"Oh, I wouldn't say he was ugly, Polly."

"Yes, you would. What would you call him, distinctive?"

"OK. Ugly. You necked with him in junior high. That was charitable of you."

"Jesus, Bert! Here I was—I won't say where, as that makes it worse. Oh, what the hell, on a couch."

"Sure you were, deep in its soft recesses. That's before you moved to a bed, under the covers."

"Ha ha. It was his couch. That makes it worse."

"Really? Anyhow, go on—if you want to."

"Now that I'm started, what the hell. Anyhow, there we were in his living room—I don't remember how that came about—and I remember thinking I should get real excited along about now, figured maybe there was something wrong with me in that all I felt was bored—and kind of aching in my shoulders from how we were sitting."

"OK. I can see how that might be embarrassing."

"Shit on your head, Bert, I haven't gotten to it yet."

"Oh."

"We were kissing away, me trying to imagine I was excited—not just excited but so excited I couldn't help myself, you know."

"OK."

"So, I sort of figured we ought to be progressing—only I hadn't the faintest idea what that really meant or how it would proceed exactly. How pathetic! I thought so at the time. How could I be so ignorant? I did somehow imagine that the progress I was looking for

ought to involve taking off clothes, and I wasn't quite up to taking off his shirt—which seemed really terribly awkward even thinking about—so I did the next best thing and took off my blouse, just did it. Right there. Took it right off. I was really surprised I could manage such a maneuver without breaking off much from the mouth contact—Jesus! So there I was blouse-less and just kissing. I sure wasn't going to tell him what to do, so I guess I figured he needed more encouragement or something. Oh Fuck! So, you know what I did?"

"You got naked. Big deal!"

"Bert! You think I'd get naked with Barney Appleman? You have so little regard for me?"

"Fuck, Polly, you were the one talking about taking off clothes, one layer at a time."

"Oh yeah, sorry. Well, I didn't get naked. I guess I can congratulate myself on that. But anyhow, after a bit, with nothing whatever happening, I broke off the tiresome kissing and reached around and unhooked my bra and took it off. Just to make sure Barney got the message, I then grabbed his hand and put it on—you know."

"Your breasts."

"Just one."

"Hand?"

"Breast. But just one hand, too."

"Ah, how chaste, Polly. No, really, I don't mean to make a joke of it when you're being all serious. What I think was that, though you didn't plan it, once you found yourself with Barney, you figured it was a terrific time to experiment. You were sure in no danger."

"Well, Bert... ."

"And that's not all—just hold on a second or two. You were being kind to poor Barney, who certainly would never get another chance—not with a girl like you."

"Not with any girl, Bert."

"Maybe not. Probably not. But still, there was that one time, and he'd never forget."

"Well, damn it all, anyhow. I bet he bragged about it in the locker

room. ‘Hey, you know that babe Polly? She practically forced me to have sex with her, got all naked, and... .’”

“No, he would never said anything like that, I’m sure. He’s a really nice guy.”

“Now I feel like shit.”

“You should.”

I think Polly shoved this onto me, just to get rid of the naked-flesh talk. Nah, she’s sure no prude. I am, but Polly’s healthy and kind. Even the funny story about Barney illustrates that.

Which isn’t the sort of reflection that’ll get our adventures narrated in a timely manner. Not that we moved along quickly that day, dawdled around so long at the Falls Park that we kind of rushed through the Sculpture Walk before it got dark out and they closed.

They were beautiful, I guess, the sculptures, though I admit I hardly looked at them closely—nor did Polly, I can attest, as we talked away, strolling on our way and paying attention to one another and none at all, really, to the stunning scenery. We ought to write to the appropriate authorities and apologize. And I’m not going to reproduce our conversation, though I bet you could pretty well guess, given Polly’s earlier bold reproductions, all fully accurate, of her revelation. (I guess that’s not the right word, but we don’t revise here, nope.) You’d think we’d get tired of that, but it seems as if the more we say the more we want to tell even more. Something like that.

That night we settled in for some of our usual exciting games and more *Moby-Dick*. Polly was obedient about reading this time around, though she usually hoists that whale onto me. Anyhow, here’s part of what she read and what we discussed:

But, by the best contradictory authorities, this Grecian story of Hercules and the whale is considered to be derived from the still more ancient Hebrew story of Jonah and the whale; and vice versa; certainly they are very similar. If I claim the demi-god

then, why not the prophet?

Nor do heroes, saints, demigods, and prophets alone comprise the whole roll of our order. Our grand master is still to be named; for like royal kings of old times, we find the head waters of our fraternity in nothing short of the great gods themselves. That wondrous oriental story is now to be rehearsed from the Shaster, which gives us the dread Vishnoo, one of the three persons in the godhead of the Hindoos; gives us this divine Vishnoo himself for our Lord;—Vishnoo, who, by the first of his ten earthly incarnations, has for ever set apart and sanctified the whale. When Brahma, or the God of Gods, saith the Shaster, resolved to recreate the world after one of its periodical dissolutions, he gave birth to Vishnoo, to preside over the work; but the Vedas, or mystical books, whose perusal would seem to have been indispensable to Vishnoo before beginning the creation, and which therefore must have contained something in the shape of practical hints to young architects, these Vedas were lying at the bottom of the waters; so Vishnoo became incarnate in a whale, and sounding down in him to the uttermost depths, rescued the sacred volumes. Was not this Vishnoo a whaleman, then? even as a man who rides a horse is called a horseman?

Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnoo! there's a member-roll for you! What club but the whaleman's can head off like that?

"Melville's sneaking in some of his comparative religion, right, Polly?"

"His blasted atheism, my parents would say."

"And they'd be right, right? Did he get a lot of heat when this was published, do you know?"

"I think he got no response at all, Bert, sad to say. Nobody read it—except his buddy Hawthorne."

I don't know if it was that high-flown literary blab was a downer or all the sex talk (body and cloth talk, anyhow) that did it, but we

just undressed, got in bed, and nodded right off. Wild youth, ain't we?

Next morning, the 16th, Polly did climb in with me for a little nuzzling, but not too much, as we still had most of our list to complete—and complete it we must, you know, otherwise... .

After a nutritious breakfast—again!—of doughnuts and milkshakes, we made it to the butterfly and aquarium place. I guess it was new to me—the butterfly part—and to Polly, too. There must have been butterfly places back at home, but somehow, you know, our parents had fucking neglected to take us, them miserable abusive assholes!

We stayed a real long time with the pretty butterflies, not so much with the aquarium, being old hands from back home at fish on display and those underwater crawlies and grotesques. They did have some neat sharks, swimming around aimlessly, circling near the glass and eyeing us hungrily, must have been. I was thinking of “Jaws,” where the Robert Shaw character says that the awful thing about sharks is their “dead eyes.” Damn. At least these eyes couldn't roll over in ecstasy as the vile beasts chewed on us.

We found a neat restaurant nearby, had to share a table—with these old folks who seemed to find our delinquent adventure the finest thing ever. “How wonderful that your parents had the good sense to do this. They're one in a million!” They didn't say the same kind things about me and Polly—probably just an oversight.

They did, however, insist on picking up the check, said we could pay them back later on by trusting our own kids the way we'd been trusted, let them feel that the world was theirs to explore on their own, “without fucking guidebooks, much less guides.” I could not believe that they talked that way, but they did. When they finally got up to leave, I was sure we were in for an epidemic of more Wise Words and hugging—but no.

I mentioned that to Polly.

“They're not sentimental, Bert, don't want to relive their golden youth through us.”

“Right, Polly. Beyond that, they only think we have amazing

parents. We're shit, ourselves."

"Yeah. Invisible, too. Invisible shit."

"God, Bert—but, yes. They weren't about to hug—you know. Anyhow, let's leave this."

And we did.

Our afternoon stops, next on our terrific list, were the zoo and Natural History Museum, about which we agreed—well, we left behind visiting cards telling them how much we'd enjoyed, found the illustrative material useful, blah, blah, blah.

Then dinner at the Brewery, where they made a joke about our ages—"No need to show us your fake I.D.'s! We are convinced—you're twelve! Ha! Ha!"—and served us cokes and some beefy sandwiches.

Don't mean to be rushing, but we sort of felt rushed ourselves, the way you do when you have evening tickets—in our case, at The Washington Pavilion for The Sioux Falls Sing-A-Thon.

"Do you suppose they'll have us singing, Bert?"

"No duets, Polly—not unaccompanied, anyhow. I checked."

Turns out it was a fund-raiser, where people volunteered their money and their talent. There were several solos, three or four duets, too many quartets, and a choir, probably from a church, I couldn't tell if they said. There was no pressure on me and Polly, though I got so moved by the easy-going style, I discreetly whispered to her that we might just do one of our own favorites.

"They'll like us better if we just sit mum, applaud the others, and give money, love."

I took that as a definite no. But just then a guy, at least as old as my grandpa, came on stage to the accompaniment of wild cheers and applause. As soon as he started to sing, you knew that the enthusiasm had nothing to do with his talent. But when he got close to the end of his song and the place quieted down, he seemed suddenly to get more confidence or something. Whatever it was, I suddenly felt like crying:

Oh, you take the high road

And I'll take the low road
And I'll be in Scotland afore ye!
But me and my true love will never meet again
On the bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond,

When people were through clapping, Polly grabbed me by the arm, didn't even ask, and before I knew it, there we were. I somehow knew what she had in mind and joined right in. On the second verse, we slowed down—me doing harmony in a style I thought of as “exquisite” and Polly later said was “way more than that”

The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping
I dreamed I held you in my arms,
But when I woke dear, I was mistaken,
And I bowed my head and I cried—
You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy, when skies are grey.
You'll never know dear, how much I love you.
Please don't take my sunshine away.

The audience cheered and cheered when we were done. But these folks were having such a fine time, they'd have cheered a pig-oinking duet. And maybe we were that bad. While we were singing, though, it sounded so sweet to me. Glad there was no recording or anything to spoil my illusion.

As we were settling in, I asked Polly if she wanted to do an encore.

“Let's keep it as a memory, dear.”

“Ok, Polly. We left quite an impression. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.”

“Or on stage. Goodnight, sweet Bert.”

“Goodnight, my Polly.”

CHAPTER NINE
STILL NO LAKES—FIRST, FARGO

July 17-19

Polly here. We decided to whip up to Fargo, which, we figured, was an absolute must, though we knew nothing more about it than was available in that great movie everyone saw. Of course, that same movie hardly made it seem inviting. Still, how many memorable movies are there with city names in their titles, huh?

You'd think we'd have investigated the town's attractions a bit before turning north on what seems to be—let's see—the I-29, I think it says (just glancing out the window as Bert drives, eschewing maps), in case you're planning to retrace our steps.

To keep Bert (or me) from introducing an uncomfortably hot topic and then expanding it, I hit upon a great whale question, sure to be unarousing—for normal people, that is, though I cannot speak for Bert. And that topic is—Biblical, namely, old flabby Jonah and his special whale, designed by God. I should say that the Internet seems to be packed with Heathen trash ridiculing the story: they point out that the Biblical whale changes gender abruptly from male to female; Nineveh (three-days journey across makes it the size of modern New York City) seems ready, the entire population, to change religious views at the drop of a hat; there's a lot about a magic gourd that centuries of the most devout scholars have been unable to turn into sense. And that's not all.

I summarized all this pointed and telling hilarity for Bert, after reading aloud the entire Bible chapter, as presented to us by King James's packed committee.

"Well, these non-believers will be sorry come Judgment Day, Polly. That's all I gotta say."

"But not all I have to say. You wanta hear some more Bible absurdities, Bert, or move on to Fargo?"

He looked at me kind of puzzled, and then it all at once hit me: he was worried that I carried residual piety round my shoulders, like a shawl. But I also thought he was less interested in all that Bible nonsense, having never been infected. And some of the sites analyzing the Jonah nonsense were gratuitously snide. And so I turned to Fargo.

“Listen to this, Bert, it’s the intro to the town’s What-To-Do-In”:

If we had to recommend top things to do and attractions to see while you’re in our neck of the woods, these would be it. You’ll get a little history, a little art, an interesting picture with the famous Fargo Woodchipper movie prop, and a whole lotta North of Normal fun.

“Somebody in their Chamber of Commerce is real proud of that ‘North of Normal’ line, Polly.”

“And justly so. Anyhow, this is a crowded site, so I’ll need a minute to settle on our agenda.”

“Oh, take all the time you need, Holy-Golly, it’s a good ways up there. But let me put in a vote for the woodchipper thing they mention. We certainly don’t want to miss that.”

I was just starting in on our list, when Bert all at once leaned over my way and shouted, loud as hell, “Hey there, girly-girl! I got this great idea, and I know you’ll agree—or go along—and so it’s set. You use that fancy device we have—stream as you drive—and we watch the movie. I can glance over while barely missing large semis and such and you can fill me in on anything I miss. Just act it out, especially the X-rated scenes. Besides, I’ve seen it before—just need reminded, with lotsa visuals from you.”

Of all Bert’s bad ideas, this was easily the worst, but I said nothing, just set about obediently starting the movie, “Fargo,” playing (sound way up) on our device and glanced at it now and then as I made up our list. (I did not act out the raw scenes, either, case you were wondering.)

1. Today—F-M Visitors Center and Woodchipper
tonight—big dinner and Melville
2. Tomorrow—sleep in (we'll need it)
The Air Museum/Art Museum/Bonanzaville
evening—sample the bar scene for teens
3. Big Third Day, the 19th—
afternoon—Broadway Square “Cats”
evening—big dinner and then “Rocky Horror Picture
Show’ at 11 p.m.

Bert said nothing, just kept motoring onward.

I waited a bit, then, “Too much?”

Nothing.

“Too little? Wrong things altogether?”

“Just playing with you, Polly—which is pretty shitty of me. Nah, it seems just right. I especially like the wood-chipper, which seems to be their real point of civic pride.”

“Yeah.”

“You know, Polly, I’m starting to think that every single town we visit, every town in this vast land o’ ours, has almost exactly the same must-see’s, really about the same. There’s always a fascinating visitor’s center, don’t-miss hike up a scenic hill or two and down several canyons, a zoo, an art center, a fun get-yourselves-lost amusement building, a local history place. You could replace one with another. Damn!”

I thought at first he was feeling jolly about all that, but then I glanced over and saw the signs of depression. Damn! I wanted to find a way to lift this gloom blanket, was certain I could hit on a winner. But nothing came to me. Bert’s views were too close to nihilism to let stand, though. I mean, if every place were the same, what was the point in visiting, of traveling at all? We could just mosey on over to Big Bear Lake for a weekend and call it a summer. No need to see anything new, since nothing was new. I had to find a way to cut

through all this before it strangled Bert—and me.

I just opened my mouth and let fly, having no idea what might spew forth. “Well, Bert, I see what you’re saying, I really do, but you gotta admit that some places don’t have hills—like Fargo, I think—or canyons—also like Fargo. And... . Oh, hell with it. The thing is that we don’t, you and me, give a shit about local history stuff or viewing sights or zoos. Not as long as we got each other. We just waltz from place to place as a way of being together, putting in time between our nightly—you know.”

He glanced over at me, turned off the damned movie, and then said, all serious, “Well, I am surprised at you, Miss Polly, suggesting that this whole trip is just a bald and inexcusable excuse to look closely at one another—and fondle—and—you know, as you say.”

I was starting to protest, when he moved his hand up to my leg, just over the knee, squeezed a little, and laughter so hard. When he was finally finished, he did say that he was sorry about the negative stuff, that he couldn’t imagine anything more fun than doing this, and that being with me would make even a summer-long, dawn-to-dusk trigonometry class thrilling.

I am summarizing what he said, which went on for a while, but I am right about that last word.

We turned the movie back on and then pretended to watch it to the end, though it seems like we both had it memorized, almost. Anyhow, it was fun and relaxing, the whole thing.

Then, out of the blue, here comes Bert with another zinger—hit me right between the—er—eyes.

“Polly, I was wondering. Do girls talk about doing sex, I mean sex acts other than, you know... .”

“Intercourse?”

“Yeah.”

“It depends, Bert, on which girls and where—but you knew that. Yeah, they do, but I suppose within a narrow range—kind of approved things, now that I think about it.”

“Like what?”

“Well, that’s interesting. It seems fine to joke about giving hand jobs, you know, since that seems—now that I think of it—something we can initiate and control.”

“And it keeps boys from getting dangerous.”

“Yeah, Bert, there’s that—I suppose. Anyhow, what girls I know don’t seem to talk about at all is what boys are doing to them, you know. I think that’s perfectly understandable. I bet boys have a much wider latitude for blabbing, right?”

“Yeah, I guess—I know. Depends on the boy, but yeah. Some guys blab all the time, kind of disgusting, but some just say, ‘We had a great time. She’s really nice.’”

“That’s you, right?”

He didn’t say anything, and I felt like I had shut him up, just when he was trying to have a conversation.

“You know what it is, Bert. I think girls want to think of it all as mutual, and for some it is, mostly so, anyhow—and they probably are like the boys you mention, like you. There are a few girls, of course, who go on like, ‘I could barely control him, thought for sure I was going to get raped or something, so I finally had to just take a chance on messing up my skirt with his cum but managed to shoot it all in his pants.’”

“Yeah. The male equivalent—well, you can imagine.”

Oddly, I guess, I had no curiosity, imagined I could hear that sort of boys, non-Bert boys, bragging and being explicit.

“Well, I think times are a little better now, Bert, judging from what my parents hint at, warnings about predator boys and so forth. They should get to know you.”

“I’d like that.”

I was so surprised by that I didn’t shoot forth with the expected stuff about how lucky he was not to know them. I wasn’t sure what Bert meant, didn’t know how to find out.

So off I shut down my temptation to ask him and drove right off to the FM Visitors Center and the famous woodchipper display/experience. They also had a kid there, about our age, not only telling us

about local accents but giving us a taste of the real thing—"you betcha," and "ooooohh yeah," and how to say "boat" so it sounds like "boot."

There was nobody else around at the Center, so we asked him if this was his summer job, since it really didn't seem like it was something you'd do as a long career.

"You betcha. It's a fulfilling job, though, encouraging others to ridicule the local dialect—and people."

"It's the movie," Bert said.

"Oooohh yeah. You think so? Really?" the kid said. He seemed mad as hell, which I think is why Bert was so apologetic.

"Oh, damn. I didn't mean anything. We're from LA, where people can't understand one another, even if it's just the next block."

The angry kid, who was really very handsome, though I don't know why I mention that, melted right away, asked us if we'd like to get a local brew with him, as it turned out to be his break time. We had had lunch earlier—as I forgot to report.

Now, there's an odd time to shift, but Polly just by god did it, so OK. This kid seemed eager to get away from his post, so we went with him, despite not being able to see any welcoming signs—though maybe Polly did. She reads such things a lot better than I.

He may have sensed himself how shitty he had been, as he started right in by apologizing, soon as we had our cokes (the "local brew") and had sat ourselves down.

"Sorry for the nasty stuff. I get used to the knowing giggles from visitors. I mean, why else do they come here?"

Polly didn't bite, so I fed him the line he wanted.

"The movie?"

"Right, that damned movie—which wasn't even shot here, did nothing for the local economy except give us a stream, more like a trickle, of movie fans, drawn by the chance to see someone murdered in the wood-chipper and laugh at the locals. Some even come

equipped with hilarious phrases drawn from that miserable film.”

Polly was still mute, attentive but unhelpful, so I sort of had to ask him what he did when he wasn’t—you know.

“Oh—yeah. Sorry and thanks. I’m a student—and, no, not at Harvard but at U of North Dakota.”

He paused a moment and then apologized—again. “I really am sorry for the tone. It’s not that you guys are snobs.” (How would he know that, since we hadn’t said more than six words?). “I love U of ND and am having the time of my life there.”

Turns out he was an English major, doing film studies, with an emphasis on Hitchcock and later horror films. “If you guys are interested at all, there’s this great book by Lesley Brill.”

I was tempted to say, “you betcha,” just to show how deeply I understood, but I stopped myself, decided it wasn’t really all that witty and sure as shit wouldn’t have been welcome.

We managed to get away, having failed utterly to lift his spirits (or to find out his name), with the recommendation—when asked politely about good things to do in Fargo—to leave as soon as possible and don’t look back. We weren’t going to do that, though it did seem as if the Visitor’s Center offered little apart from a “painted bison statue” and a celebrity walk of fame, where they had proudly on display footprints, I think, of everyone “from Richard Simmons [who?] to Bill Gates.”

“Bert, do you think that kid has absorbed the same sneering he so hates, Bert?”

I wasn’t sure what she meant, and, instead of my usual stance—pretending to know—I asked her.

“Yeah, I see why you’d ask. I’m not sure what I meant, Bert. It’s kind of like people who put so much energy in detesting other people’s bigotry might absorb some of it.”

“Like feminists?” That came out before I could catch it.

Polly looked closely at me—not angry, more as if she were interested. “Maybe, but I don’t think so. Maybe like Dodger fans or people from San Francisco.”

Now I really didn't understand and didn't think I ever would, so I let out a "Yeah," and she stopped.

We had decided earlier that we'd go out for a hearty Fargo meal and then put ourselves to sleep with some Melville. It was still a little early for dinner—and I think neither of us felt quite ready the tempting, prolonged agony of a full hour of changing clothes and peeking and panting and restraining—so we found a local bookstore.

I wonder: does every medium-sized town have a great bookstore, run by the one literate woman in the whole fucking area? Maybe, but this one happened to be run by a man, a man thrilled to his bones by the news that we were from Santa Monica.

"Holy Moses! I lived there at one time—but only for a summer, while I was a student at Pomona—you know it? Of course you do. Anyhow, what brings you to North Dakota?"

When we told him the full story, I thought he would just leave the store, pack up and come along with us, so great was his enthusiasm. How terrific that we were doing this! And all summer! And no set plans! Had we read Kerouac? Other free spirits so like us? Here's a big section devoted to those gifted writers! Take any book we wanted! On him! Just so happy to meet beings so open to the unexpected!

What I liked best was that he said not one word about what enlightened parents we had! Just focussed on us. This guy was the real thing, and we sure would have spent more time with him, were we not worried about how to handle a permanent alliance. I mentioned that later to Polly, just to check on whether I was right.

"Yeah. Ain't that sad, Bert? I bet he sees nothing but movie aficionados, tourists of the most predictable sort."

I saw an opening, so told Polly she was taking easy potshots at folk who doubtless came to the bookstore driven by a curiosity much more seasoned than ours and ...

I thought I'd trapped her, was starting to regret it, but then—"Oh, just go pleasure yourself, Bert!"

We did have a big dinner. "Big" was probably the best

description, alas, though I didn't say that to Polly, knowing she'd agree and wanting to avoid the cheap thrills of alliances too easily forged.

Melville was at his low point, we agree, one of his few, but here yawning and scratching himself while he was talking about whale corpses and also jeering at whalers who knew so little about which dead bodies floated and which didn't and which were capture-able.

It was not long after the sinking of the body that a cry was heard from the Pequod's mast-heads, announcing that the Jungfrau was again lowering her boats; though the only spout in sight was that of a Fin-Back, belonging to the species of uncapturable whales, because of its incredible power of swimming. Nevertheless, the Fin-Back's spout is so similar to the Sperm Whale's, that by unskilful fishermen it is often mistaken for it. And consequently Derick and all his host were now in valiant chase of this unnearable brute. The Virgin crowding all sail, made after her four young keels, and thus they all disappeared far to leeward, still in bold, hopeful chase.

Oh! many are the Fin-Backs, and many are the Dericks, my friend.

"That's Melville being lazy, seems to me, Polly. Even he sometimes lapses into the nyah-nyahing that's supposed to be the province of people our age but really belongs solely to fucking adults—like Melville."

She just smiled, said something about talk like that being "a lust-quencher," and turned out the light.

I thought I could use the dawning of a new day, July 19, as a reason for unloading the narrator's job, but, ha! At least, I could declare, without opposition, that it was past time for a new chapter, despite what the last one promised.

CHAPTER TEN

MORE OF WHAT WAS PROMISED IN CHAPTER NINE

July 19-20

So, that ploy didn't work to get me unburdened either, and thus I'll just carry on ungrudgingly, as is my wont. You've forgotten which of us is speaking, more than likely, so I'll remind you: it's me, Bert, the one who's handy with words, as this opening paragraph aptly demonstrates.

In case you've forgotten, today was set aside for sleeping in, then the Art Museum, the Air Museum (a different spot), and Bonanza-ville, which I'll explain when we come to it.

The first part went as planned, the sleeping-in, though we were both awake by nine, I think, just laid there sneaking peeks at our watches, imagining we were being all thoughtful, kindly letting our mate sleep. Jesus! I wonder if married people do that for one another. My guess is that they do, those that are kind and loving. On the other hand, there may be some out there who maybe just stop caring. I hope not,

Anyhow—"Bert get on with it!" Polly would say—only she wouldn't, since she's so kind. As she demonstrated this morning immediately when we both recognized the waking state of the other, and she right away said, "Bert, I've been wondering: how is it you don't have morning breath? Not even a little. Do you secretly swallow some fresheners or are you just naturally unsmelly in every pore and opening?"

"Oh, Smelly Polly, you only think that because you keep at a very wide distance. Come a little closer, bab-ee, and you'll discover a different aromatic world."

I guess I was hoping to initiate something by that idiotic enticement. In any event, what followed was more than sniffing, if you take my meaning. And it you don't, that's all you'll get anyhow—so, tough!

We had a breakfast we plum forgot we'd even eaten five minutes

later and then took off for the Art Museum. Polly was driving—straight into downtown, as it happened, which meant parking headaches (for many, no doubt, but not our Polly).

“Here’s what we’re in for Polly:

The Plains Art Museum in Fargo is the largest art museum in North Dakota, located in a renovated International Harvester warehouse in the city’s downtown district. If you’re all about finding local art, this is the place to see it. This free art museum’s permanent collection has over 4,000 local, regional, and national works, including Native American art. When it comes to museums in Fargo, ND, the Plains Art Museum is a can’t-miss for its rotating exhibitions of 20th and 21st century art. And, if you’re looking for free things to do in Fargo, you’ve found one of them. Heck, we’d even call it one of the top free things to do in North Dakota.”

I read that out, thinking Polly’d get a kick out of it, but she seemed to find it touching or something: “I think that’s lovely.” She was really hard to predict. In minor and sweet ways. I mean, that wasn’t true in ways that counted—well, in those ways, you know you could count on her. I kept myself from giving voice to any of that, whatever it was, kept my mouth shut, easy for me, and followed Polly’s directions to the museum.

I don’t think Bert was deeply attached to the idea of going to the museum, just used it as an excuse for relinquishing this narratorial chore. I must say, though, since we are pledged—BERT!—not to read one another’s sections EVER AGAIN—that he seems so much easier and happier. I hope I don’t jinx him—jinx me, too—by thinking that.

Anyhow, we found the museum easy enough and a parking spot, this attraction, like so many fine places we’ve visited, having spaces

enough for more visitors than they'll probably ever attract—or so says cynical me.

So, inside we ventured, quickly, too, me and Bert, and found a beautiful building and some nearby art that was, even for an ignoramus such as I, really varied and impressive. The rooms housing local work seemed spacious, as was some of the art, huge, I mean, including these modernistic sculptures that even I could see were breathtaking and daring. The explanations attached were, as always for me, useful, often essential. Truth is, I don't go to museums back home near as often as I should—but who does? Bert, maybe.

“Bert, do you go to museums a lot back home?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“You surprised, Pol-pol? Had me figured for a cretin?”

“No, it's just that I—well, you know.”

“I do, Polly. You and those like you make obligatory visits very seldom and keep them as short as you can, apart from the times at La Brea tar pits, which ain't art, anyhow. Why, for all the good all those L. A. Millionaire art collectors do for you, they might as well have just spent their money helping the poor—or something else useless.”

“You're right.”

I really was—I don't know—kind of shrunk by what he had said. I know he was kidding, but he was also dead-on accurate. Even the art appreciation class I had taken—a good class, too—had left me none the wiser. Damn.

“Oh, Polly, I didn't mean that you were—you know.”

“Bert, you would never say anything unkind, but you are right: I snooze through museums, go as seldom as possible, prefer natural history ones, only because of the skeletons and the grotesque stuff—what eats what. I'm an idiot. Why that piece right there before us, which the placard says is sophisticated and ironic, might as well be a misshapen telephone pole, for all I can see. I'm an idiot, a lazy idiot.”

“No, you're not.”

The voice wasn't Bert's, issued from someone behind us, very

close behind us. We both whirled around, only to find ourselves almost being hugged—so it seemed—by a twenty-something (my guess) in a really pretty tan suit. And it wasn't just the suit that was pretty.

"You're not, at all—don't think it!" he said, emphatically, as if worried we'd get all depressed. "What you see before you is the expression not of a recognizable school—recognizable anything—but a singular vision that comes from a sculptor who has too much time on his hands, is easily bored, and likes to fiddle with audiences and curators."

Bert seemed to figure it out just a blink before I did. "You're the artist."

"Yep."

He smiled so warmly, it sort of took away the apology I was forming, clearly didn't mind the "misshapen telephone pole" comment, actually put his arm across my shoulder, almost hugged me—then did.

"No, really, there is some great stuff here at the Plains, not all of it by locals but much of it. I've been coming to this place since I was a little kid, being a Fargo-er through and through my life through, pretty much. Got to know the Directors and the Board, too, which is one fine thing about a state so small that even not-quite-so-much-smaller towns can do cool things, you know. Where you from?"

When we told him, he didn't melt from shyness or recoil in horror, just grinned again and hugged—this time, Bert.

Lloyd—his name, we soon discovered—said he wasn't doing anything much and asked if we would much mind his company for a bit, as he hadn't had the chance to be with out-of-towners for a long time. Again, there was nothing defensive about all this, no pretend shyness at being with urban sophisticates or anything of the sort, just chumminess, as if we were natural equals, a unit. I don't know about Bert, but I joined it easily, flattered and wondering what Lloyd had for us.

One thing was some really interesting comments on the works

in the museum, both the paintings and the big things. He was one of those rare people who can instruct without seeming to do so. I sort of wish I had taken notes, but that would have been geeky—and you know how very cool I am. Besides, it would be tedious as hell for me to repeat all this to you, right? Anyhow, I'm not doing it—so there!

Lloyd swept us along so smoothly I wasn't tempted to suggest the gift shop, where we could get post cards, maybe even of Lloyd's work, and... .

Suddenly, there we were outside, Lloyd talking earnestly to Bert, who seemed to lose all his shyness around this sweet artist. I heard Bert say, "OK," and then mumble a lot of other things, to which Lloyd also said, "OK." Was I never to be consulted? Actually, I didn't care.

Turned out Lloyd was walking us to the Fargo Air Museum. I had read about it, knew they charged \$10 admission, and wanted to be sure to get to the head of the line, so Lloyd wouldn't feel obliged. I needn't have bothered, though, as Lloyd not only knew the person who seemed to be running the Museum, but kissed her—and not routinely, either.

"This is Linda. You two can kiss her if you like. She enjoys it—and it's part of the admission benefits."

Linda, who was as gorgeous as Lloyd, hardly reacted, just made a semi-sneer crinkle in her mouth, as if she were used to all that, which, it turns out, she must have been. "Lloyd imagines he's funny, but he's harmless. I've been putting up with him for almost a year now, trying to trap him into marriage—like in the old dramas. I'm starting to think I'll be successful—wondering if I didn't set my sights way too low."

She didn't wait for us to respond, just smiled at us both—no hugs—and started showing us the planes, lots of them in the two hangers, including a replica of a Wright Brothers thing that didn't look like it would ever get airborne. Those brothers must have been really courageous—or dumb. Of course I didn't say that, carefully said almost nothing. I knew even less about airplanes than about art, but it didn't matter here, as Linda took it all in, included us without

asking questions or anything.

It was a short tour, but by the time we were through it was after 2:30 and way late for lunch, even for me and Bert. I wasn't too sure how to handle it, was about to blurt out something, when Lloyd took the reins. "Linda gets her break now, and we can... . What?"

Linda was tugging at his sleeve, smiling, then told us all that she was done for the day, that there was a diner, terrible but handy, and that Lloyd would be glad to host a luncheon. Bert was even quicker than I to protest, to agree with the luncheon but not the host part, giving out with way too much detail on how much dough we had—our parents had—and how we were hard pressed to spend enough, having well-meaning but conventional folks breathing down our necks about diet and exercise and changing underwear regular.

I couldn't believe he put in that last bit, though I enjoyed it, me with my fetish and all. At least it would die right there, our time with these two—only not. Linda grinned warmly at Bert, sort of moved close to him, and laughed, "I wish they'd speak to Lloyd, who wears the same jockeys for weeks. And I should know—and they're way too small, too."

You'd think that'd be too much information, but Lloyd and Linda were so easy together, and I felt so flattered that they were sort of joined with us. Bert seemed to take it in stride, but he's just so much more jam-packed with cool than I.

Anyhow, the lunch place was a lot like most diners we'd been to, seeming to rely on nostalgic warmth for diners of yore rather than good food. But then maybe I just wasn't paying much attention to the food, as Lloyd and Linda kept us occupied with steady questions and, far less frequent, tales about themselves and the town.

What wasn't clear to me was how they happened to be here now. Linda, turns out, was a musician, a composer of some kind. Why would a composer and a modernistic sculptor be hanging in Fargo, when it did seem they could go anywhere they liked—Paris, Rome, Indianapolis? Of course I didn't ask then, just vowed to bring it up with Bert that evening.

Meanwhile, we waltzed along, somehow in pairs, Bert with Linda and me with Lloyd, all heterosexually proper. They seemed to know where they were going, so we just trod steadily, all bunched together, until Linda said, "Where are you two taking us?" Lane joke, I thought, but then Bert, said, "Bonanzaville, of course!" and produced from his pocket a set of notes and read them:

This pioneer village and museum in West Fargo, ND, makes you feel like you've stepped into the 1800s and 1900. Wander through original structures relocated here from across the region, including Fargo's first house, a schoolhouse, a saloon and hotel, a church, and a fully-stocked mercantile store. The huge complex has over 40 buildings and 400,000 artifacts. As you explore the history of Fargo, docents dressed like pioneers will explain how life worked in the early days on the prairie. explain how life worked in the early days on the prairie.

"That's about as accurate as these propaganda pieces usually are," Linda said, turning round and giving me such a winning look that I almost forgave her for clutching Bert so resolutely.

"That's about as accurate as these propaganda pieces usually are," Linda said, turning round and giving me such a winning look that I almost forgave her for clutching Bert so resolutely.

"At least," Lloyd added after a second, "they're right about the docents, very authentically dressed, as you'll see. We aren't used to such severe judges as you two must be, but we'll try to bear up." He wasn't hugging me very tightly, and for some reason I wasn't about to change that. Talk about prude on a stick!

We made our way into a few buildings, seeing what we figured we'd see and failing to keep track of the artifacts, to determine if they really did have 400,000 or even close. What was fun was watching the interaction between our guides and the pioneer docents trying their best to dish out canned spiels and to make up answers to questions.

"Can you tell me about the sexual practices of our earliest settlers, Bill?"

"Be glad to, as they differed some from those of Manhattan Island, from whence you hail. Our people were forbidden to engage—you know—except during religious services on Sunday morning."

"Is that a fact? Were you yourself an eager participant?"

"Only when I could persuade the direct forebears of one Linda Johnson—hello, sweet Linda—to wrap themselves up in lust and then—you know—explode."

"Before you lapse into more detail, let me introduce our two young innocents from Los Angeles."

The guy looked at us sadly, for some reason, then went back into what must have been his role, imitating the wacko from the old "Friday the 13th" movie: "You're doomed! You're all doomed!"

As we went along, such merriment continued. I was worried that Bert would be stricken by all this, but he seemed not just to bear up but to flourish, entering into the nonsense with what appeared to be ease. Holy fuck!

Nearing what seemed clearly the end (after what seemed to be days of wandering) and also nearing the agony point of hunger, I assumed our guides would abandon us and take themselves off for much-needed rated-X activities. Nope.

"You guys got lunch, so it's our turn. And, after sticking you with the lousy diner for lunch, we gotta do better, or else you'll imagine Fargo has no entrees on—what's that list of great dining spots, you know... ."

Nobody did, apparently, so we slid past that and proceeded on to Maxwell's, where they featured all sorts of unexpected dishes, said Lloyd. I looked to Linda to see what sort of low diner Lloyd was springing on us, but she seemed placid enough, so off we went—and discovered a place way above what Bert and I were used to, one of the best of the summer, for sure. I figured Lloyd and Linda would know the people here and that way we'd be able to get drinks—for the first time all summer.

I was right, though our hosts stopped us at one—which was above my limit anyhow. As we relaxed in, the L-duo did ask us for more details on where we had been, our opinions on certain spots, and what our plans for college might be. It was pretty odd, considering, maybe the sort of thing you'd expect from especially conventional parents, certainly not from free-wheeling, law-bending hooligans. But it was beginning to dawn on me that these new friends were just that, friends, and not wild youth eager to learn our secrets and initiate us into theirs. They didn't inquire after our sexual practices, made no lurid jokes about what it was we were REALLY up to as we floated across dreary Idaho and Montana. They seemed glued to what Bert told them about Mann Gulch and our experience with the grizzlies—that kind of thing. For the first time this summer, I was starting to miss them even before we were through saying goodbye. I knew enough from school to realize that you often exchanged "We'll keep in touch!" promises with those about to leave your life forever, but this was somehow much more painful. I brought it up later with Bert, who agreed, said that this had been one of the best times of the whole summer, though it'd be tough to explain that to anyone else.

I think maybe Lloyd and Linda had felt the same. When we hugged goodbye and headed our separate ways, there were tears in their eyes—and in ours.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
INTO MINNESOTA

July 21

Dear Polly carried the ball for so long, she must have felt as if she were our only running back—an artful allusion by one who knows about as much about football as he does—oh, yachting.

“Polly, do you like football?”

“I can see why you ask, Bert, as we’re here in the land of legendary teams and players and cheerleaders—at least the last. You probably watched The Minnesota Wild Cats just to see them.”

“They the ones didn’t wear bras, just flopped em out in the breeze?”

“Bert!”

“Sorry, Polly. That was so bad. Really, was there something about those cheerleaders, the first squad to embrace radical leftist causes?”

“I’m the one should be sorry, Bert, being all smart-assed, when you asked a simple question about whether I liked football, to which I must answer that I don’t know much about it or—and, no, I don’t.”

“Oh.”

“Sorry. Do you, Bert—like football? I know you don’t play or anything—I don’t think—or need to get back in a big hurry for summer practice. What makes you ask?”

“I don’t know, something about what Linda said back there, probably just pulling my leg.”

“I don’t think that was your leg—sorry, just kidding. Did you want to talk about it? Seems right, and we haven’t done much in the sports line this whole trip.”

I didn’t have anything to add, couldn’t imagine why I’d initiated that topic, though something about Polly so often made me feel easy that I let things escape without any hope of capturing them.

Anyhow, all this took place while we still lounged in bed, as if we'd decided to take up permanent residence in Fargo. Since we hadn't filed the necessary paperwork, I turned to getting breakfast ready, while Polly fiddled with info on what we might love here in Minnesota, the Land of a Thousand Lakes, in case you haven't heard.

"OK, Polly, I got the bacon nice and underdone, the way you like it, and the waffles soggy, too. Would you like juice or bourbon?"

"I think you're all sprightly because you think these lakes will induce us—induce ME—into unguarded undress. Hey, Bert, now that you bring up our national obsession with football, what you and me don't share, did you ever play, I mean, in your youth?"

"I know it probably seems odd, but no, never, beyond a little touch football at recess and on weekends like everybody else, when I was little. And, as you were about to ask, I didn't really feel unmanly or excluded or ashamed. Somehow, there were a good many kids, boys, too, who didn't seem to be interested, so we did other stuff."

Polly looked at me as if to ask whether I were through. I thought I was, but then I somehow kept talking. "I knew some kids who did play football, so many of them to please their dads, really. How sad that is! Insecure manliness putting more insecure manliness to the test. 'You can't question me. Here I am getting smashed regular, see! Wanna see my balls?'"

I couldn't believe I'd said that—and then didn't apologize. I think any other girl would have seized the opportunity to... . But not dearest Polly.

"Bert, they have a place in this state, somewhere, called The Mall of America."

"Oh Jesus!"

"Yeah."

"Sorry, Polly. Did you—no, I know without asking you'd hate it."

"I did this report in school, civics class, on malls, Bert. They really are traps for women, but you knew that. On the other hand, they are great areas for studying gender differences, the "Men Buy,

Women Shop” adages, for instance. Which turns out to be true—anyhow, it’s pretty depressing, but not too surprising. Women’s shops outnumber men’s about 4-1 and women’s clothes are—get this, Bert!—up to 45% more expensive to dry-clean, even for the same thing, like a shirt. On the other hand, men’s clothes are often wildly expensive, especially commonplace clothes, work clothes for offices.”

“Jesus!”

“Yeah!”

“Are you pissed, Polly? The way capitalism plays into and feeds the worst kinds of gender inequalities.”

“Not at you, dear Bert. It’s those football-luvins jerks, it’s—you know, it’s not men so much, either. You tell almost all boys at school that women make—what?—75% of what men do and they’ll be ready to sign a petition, join a march to change that.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re right. That’s boys, not men. Maybe things change when we grow up.”

“Can you be more gloomy? But maybe you’re right—but maybe our generation is simply better than the last.”

“I’ll put my money there, Polly—or my parents’ money, since, as a male, I’m the one who’ll inherit. And that’s only right.”

She looked at me and grinned, kind of half-punched. No use trying to fool her, I guess—I know.

We got in the car, started driving east from Fargo—figured we couldn’t go wrong too much by that. I was resolutely quiet for a bit so Polly could work on the guide books and such. Turns out, she only needed one internet site and that was it. There’s females for ya!

“Here we go, Bert, though we may have to winnow a little and adjust for geography—I mean, proximity.

1. Bemidji—just because of the name
2. Voyaguers
3. Boundary Waters Canoe Area
4. Grand Marais
5. Duluth

6. Minneapolis

I sure wasn't going to protest, no matter what, but turned out that this sounded pretty reasonable, apart from the canoe place, as I knew from experience that I was not blessed in this area.

Anyhow, off we are going, Polly navigating and me whipping along at about 3 miles over the speed limit.

I figured Polly'd return to the subject of malls and gender issues, but you know what she did? No, not football, but clothing—underwear, really, underpants, to be specific.

“Bert, did you know men spend more than women on lingerie?”

“I did know that, Polly, but there's a good reason.”

“Which is?”

“Men are more sensitive to their bodies, feed them with lotions and perfumes. Now, you will say that this is all forced on you by Madison Avenue, but I prefer to think of it as natural, built-in. We have a closer relationship to our hidden parts.”

“Shut the fuck up, Bert!”

“OK.”

“The truth is just the opposite, of course. And not simply because women's cost more per piece. They own more. I just read that. How odd—don't you think?”

“Not really, since women need to change more often, sometimes—oh, every third or fourth day, I hear.”

“Very funny. And don't think all women are like your own Polly, Bert. Not for a minute should you think that. Just follow me into the girls' locker room and you'll—well, you'll get arrested, for one thing. Anyhow, Bertram, how many pairs of undies did you bring along?”

“Just the one.”

“Me, too, so we can't add much useful to the overall gender stats. Where are you driving to?”

“East, I figured. Isn't that right?”

“Couldn't be wronger. Let me check. Turns out you're pretty

much right and we oughta get to Benidji for a late lunch—very late, but we’re adaptable. And to pass the time, I am going to read *Moby-Dick*, starting all over, since I’ve forgotten what’s happened. Oh, yeah! Not one damned thing, so I’ll pick up right where we were.”

And she did. About spouting. The last part about doubts and intuitions was especially great, and we talked about it some later. I mention this only because I figure you will be tempted to skip—as this is longish. But you mustn’t. There will be an exam.

Still, we can hypothesize, even if we cannot prove and establish. My hypothesis is this: that the spout is nothing but mist. And besides other reasons, to this conclusion I am impelled, by considerations touching the great inherent dignity and sublimity of the Sperm Whale; I account him no common, shallow being, inasmuch as it is an undisputed fact that he is never found on soundings, or near shores; all other whales sometimes are. He is both ponderous and profound. And I am convinced that from the heads of all ponderous profound beings, such as Plato, Pyrrho, the Devil, Jupiter, Dante, and so on, there always goes up a certain semi-visible steam, while in the act of thinking deep thoughts. While composing a little treatise on Eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me; and ere long saw reflected there, a curious involved worming and undulation in the atmosphere over my head. The invariable moisture of my hair, while plunged in deep thought, after six cups of hot tea in my thin shingled attic, of an August noon; this seems an additional argument for the above supposition. And how nobly it raises our conceit of the mighty, misty monster, to behold him solemnly sailing through a calm tropical sea; his vast, mild head overhung by a canopy of vapor, engendered by his incommunicable contemplations, and that vapor—as you will sometimes see it—glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts. For, d’ye see, rainbows do not visit the clear air; they only irradiate vapor. And so, through all the thick mists of the

dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye.

“I think, Polly, we’ve been wrong in calling Melville an atheist. That seems too simple.”

“Yeah.”

“That part about doubt and intuition being balanced. I never thought of that, imagined you had to tilt to one side or the other and stay there.”

“Exactly.”

So, having solved that, we sailed on.

Polly here, after such a long spurt from Bert I thought maybe he was making up for past short blips. Or maybe... . But he had said his disability came and went so I tried to keep from hoping. Tried.

So, Bert still driving, leaving me to find our everything worth knowing re Bemidji. Turns out there is quite a bit, yessir, even if you drift past the predictable walks and zoos (I think) and funny statues of Paul Bunyan and his famous Ox, named Babe (or maybe Girley, I forget). Bemidji is the first city on the Mississippi River, which is worth knowing, as I said to Bert, but gives us nothing in the way of a sight calling for attention. Feeling lost, I read this out to Bert, in lieu of having anything to report:

The city of about 14,440 people, the largest in the region, is home to Bemidji State University, the Paul Bunyan State Trail, Lake Bemidji State Park, Bemidji Woolen Mills and Concordia Language Villages, and a lively downtown dotted with

sculptures. Together, they reflect a passion for the outdoors, Ojibwe heritage, global influences and an artistic spirit.

“I have no interest in artistic spirits,” said Bert, “though I am sure I can respond fully to that passion for the outdoors.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say, so Bert went on.

“I probably hit too close to home with that comment on passion, right Polly? I know what a prude you are.”

“OK, Bert. Right. I say we park and head to the Visitor’s Center, which is close to the heart of things and where we can see about tonight’s performance at The Paul Bunyan Playhouse, where they are doing a red hot new musical called, ‘The Music Man.’”

“That was old for our parents, but maybe it’s just hit The North Woods here, which is where we are, dear Polly.”

“Hmm.”

The Visitors Center was peopled by very welcoming folk, about a dozen of them, all descending on us, as if they hadn’t seen visitors in a month, which may likely have been so. They piled on so many recommendations and handed us so many pamphlets, I thought we’d never escape, especially when they seemed united in pressing about some damned woolen mill and shop, where I felt sure Bert would lead us.

But, no. As we were turning to leave, a kid about our age, my guess, caught up with us and warned us against this very woolen mill—and everything else.

“You guys seem almost sane. What the fuck are you doing here?”

We explained all, asked him where we really might go without blowing our fucking brains out in boredom, told him we had tickets to the theater that night, asked him to join us, and then pushed him on where we might spend the intervening hours.

Turns out he finally did come through with a nearby hike and an indigenous art gallery called Miikanan he said, “was not the worst thing.” Fine by us, so we found the starting point and took off.

“You know, Polly,” Bert started in about four steps along, “I thought after a few days out, maybe a week, that we’d get bored doing pretty much the same thing at every stop—you know, a gallery, a monument, a center for visitors, an animal thingy, and a canyon.

“You trying to depress me, Bert? This dump doesn’t even have a fucking canyon. Even the nearest lake is twenty-five miles away, which makes it a strenuous hike.”

“I was about to say, Ms. Cynic, that what’s surprising is that the activity doesn’t matter a good solid shit when you have company such as you provide, provide ordinarily and when you aren’t feeling too suicidal.”

“Oh.”

“We wander from here to there, display case to display case, dutifully looking, but really thinking of the person next to us.”

“The body next to us, wishing we were back in the camper, slowly undressing and preparing to... .”

“Right, Polly, preparing to what?”

“Go nighty-night. With us it’s all preparation.”

“Which, we both agree, is the best thing of all. Who needs the real thing when you got the getting-readies?”

“I think we should write this all down in a book for lovers, or at least a guide we can duplicate and then pass around among our best friends. And what was the name of that kid we arranged to meet tonight, after sludging through the afternoon hours on this walk and then some culturally approved Indian museum, where we can take notes for a report in school next fall?”

“Polly!”

“Sorry, Bert. I meant to ridicule our clumsy attitude toward the Native people and not the people themselves. I really am sorry.”

“Well, to prove it and heal all, you gotta give me a kiss. Right here.”

“Since there’s little danger you can push us much beyond that, here’s a kiss. Just the one.”

That out of the way, we went forward on this really pretty trail,

noticing nothing at all about it—in my case anyhow—so occupied was I with studying the body before me, its nether parts.

“Bert, change places.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be all male there, taking the lead. You’re welcome to move forward, though you may find there’s not but the one path.”

“It’s not that, Bert, it’s... .”

“Ah, do tell. My ass.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“OK.”

“Want me to drop my drawers?”

“I guess not, not when I’m in the lead. Not in any case.”

“Funny about asses, isn’t it, Polly?”

“Funny?”

“How preoccupied we can get. For instance, your own ass right now, encased in those slimming shorts, your panty lines sharply emphasized.”

I partly knew what he was doing but couldn’t seem to help myself. “Bert!”

“Ah, you want me to pretend not to notice, to notice how intentional it all is and how well it fulfills your desired intention—to make visible what God intended to be hidden—forever.”

“Bert, if you don’t stop talking about my frillies... .”

“If I don’t, then what?”

“I’ll just stop wearing them altogether, which would spoil your fun.”

“Yeah, like we’ve talked about, how nudists have no erotic life left at all, how they just... . Polly, stop. What is that up ahead?”

“Where?”

“Shhh. Right there. See?” He was now talking in an anxious whisper.

I dropped to an equivalent whisper. “Where. That squirrel thing?”

“No—not a squirrel. It’s a—oh, shit, you’re right. It’s a squirrel.”

“Bert, what do you think our parents would imagine we’re talking about?”

“Underwear and forbidden body parts and sexual positions.”

“Yeah. Well, we still have those two last ones to go.”

“Polly, I bet they wish we were talking about things like our plans for college and for productive, high-paying jobs afterwards.”

“Do you ever think about all that, Bert?”

“I used to, not since we took off, though, Polly. It’s like being with you erases all that futurist sort of thinking, makes me focus on here and now, just want this and more of this, wants it never to end, not ever ever. Oh, Polly, I sometimes get scared that this cannot last, that it’s closing in on us even here, when we’re only half-way, about.”

“Oh, dear Bert. I know what you mean. It’s like once we’re back and get forced to deal with other shit, like classes and plans and fucking college, we’ll—I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do.”

“I don’t want to say it.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

“But, Polly, what if we’re making it all worse by censoring it, kind of making sure the future will be dark.”

“That’s a point, Bert. Maybe if we went ahead and talked about it, we could, you know... .”

“Take hold of it.”

“Right, Bert.”

“Polly, will you still be close to me when we get back? I mean, after we’re in classes and things are... .”

“Oh, yes, Bert. I will. I think you know that.”

“I guess I do—or hoped it. It’s just that the way we were talking.”

“Yeah, but you know what, Bert?”

“What?”

“I think it’s wonderful that we can fucking talk about anything. Everybody I’ve known before, it’s like there are some things—lots of things—that are off-limits. Nobody has to say so, it’s just there—or not there.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

Pretty soon we reached the end of the hike and started consulting our little area map to locate Miikanan. In the process, I managed to shift this narrative job, which I have held from time immemorial, to Bertram.

Polly will soon realize—even she is not so very slow—that I am perfectly happy with talking to the page—even to you, the vast sea of readers. And anyhow, we did find the gallery, run by indigenous people and featuring art from a number of locals, spread among the three—I guess—separate areas.

We were joined by a guide, who soon identified himself as “Fred.” He also said he spoke with authority on the art, being himself not only one of those on display but “a genuine Indian, yessir!”

I realized that he was waiting for the question, so I fed it to him. “Is Fred an ancient tribal name?”

What followed on the tour was actually pretty depressing, seemed to me, not the art but the fact that funding for the enterprise came mostly from the Natives involved. It never stops!

So, I’m skipping forward to the evening and our time with our Visitors Center friend, dinner, and the theater. Turns out the friend was no less cynical on further acquaintance, nor was the dinner memorable. The play seemed to me lively and sweet, but when I said that to Polly as we were turning in, all she said was, “Uh-huh.” So there.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MINNESOTA MAGIC

July 22

So, here we are, ripping along on our way, yessir, though it may seem to our faithful readers that we might well be farther along by now. I know you're worried about just that, keeping your finger on the globe, proportioning the distance with the elapsed time the way you do. Not that we don't appreciate your labors, though you may think we pay you no never mind.

Here's the thing, I (Bert, in case you forgot) was saying just the other day to Polly that we ought to hit on some special (in a robust sense) people Kincaid put on his "Not To Be Missed" list. True, we routinely ignore his lists, but this item seemed somehow different, more alluring.

Not to keep you wondering, he insisted we "call on" (a locution nobody else has used since 1912) some "friends and admirers" of his, "old students," in fact, who had gone on to "brilliant careers" at universities not so far apart just north of Minneapolis. A little research located them for us: Kris Deffenbacher, Michael Reynolds, Arnab Chakladar. The last is, according to Google, employed at Carleton College, you see, while the first two are together at Hamline College, which is not all that far away at all.

These spots being about four hours from us, we figured we could easily do with a happy lunch stop, arriving amongst Kincaid's friends (unlikely they felt that way, but that's what he said) in time to have them treat us to a big dinner or at least a beer.

It wasn't that we got all that early a start, even with skipping breakfast, Polly having chosen this morning to sleep in late. As did I, of course, if that's really what happened. Anyhow, it's our story and we're sticking to it.

"Polly, you know when they talk about white privilege, they really are talking about white males, right?"

"Bert, do you really want me joining into such a wildly

absorbing topic when I'm driving here at eighty-seven miles per hour?"

"Really that fast? All those cars passing us, too, must be a kind of regional mania or something."

"Yeah. But I think some forms of white privilege are engineered mostly by men, though—hate to say this—think of women in such fields as real estate, where they work their asses off making sure segregated housing stays that way."

"I see. They don't exactly subvert the system. Yeah. But I still think there are ways in which racism is also sexism. I expect there aren't too many women in the KKK."

"Look and see, Bertram. We ought not be in ignorance of such things."

"OK. Give me an hour or two."

"Just Wiki it."

"Well, if you're satisfied with what the common herd thinks."

"Completely. I is in that herd—happily."

"OK. There are WKKK outfits, but you know that. And some pictures of women in hoods, screaming at black people."

"How many?"

"I'd say a dozen."

"Bertalby! I'm about to de-nut you!"

"You know, Polly, I been a-looking and all I find is anecdotal stuff. I ask 'How many women were in the KKK,' and get back discussions of when and why the movement took hold, how it related to women's suffrage—but not how many, even a guess."

"Yeah—I suppose that would be tough to know, given how secret it was."

"Right, Polly—and with irregular numbers—you know, women having to get permission to attend cross-burnings from their hubbies and all."

She just looked at me, didn't even sneer. Just kept driving along.

"OK. Polly. That calls for a song. What's your very favorite?"

She just started right in. I didn't know the words, not really, so

just chimed in on the chorus:

Explain it to me
Explain it to me
Explain it to me again

Though I know all about
The words you're spitting out
Explain it to me all over again

I already know
How this is gonna go
How this is gonna go

Tell me to calm down
Tell me to clam down
Tell me to calm down again

Don't tell me what to do
My feelings won't subdue
Just because you told them to

You're a cliché
Useless in every way
You're a cliché

Take up the whole sidewalk
Take up the whole sidewalk
Take up the whole sidewalk again!

“You know what I think of that tune, Polly?”

“I was waiting for you to tell me, Bert. Explain it to me/Explain it to me/Explain it to me again, Mr. Man.”

“Right. Well. Woman, I declare it not very tuneful. You

probably are so inside the words you don't notice, but alas... Still, I will give you this—you and the song, that line about taking up the whole sidewalk is a good one."

"I'll pass that along to the other girls. They'll be all a-twitter with gratitude. Even being noticed by such as you, a being with a weiner."

"Well, yes, but an extraordinary weiner, not what you'll find crowding every sidewalk."

"It is indeed. I can testify."

"Only it isn't—as I guess we've discussed, right? Or did I just imagine that, Polly?"

"Imagine what, that your dong had grown?"

"Has it? I thought that was a nettle there at my knee. No, I meant didn't we discuss all that about penises being pretty much the same?"

"I wasn't listening. You talking about white lads, right? Everyone comes in at about 3.8?"

"Except for black guys who are all in double figures."

"That seems to accord with my own experience, though I've only seen a few dozen of each, you know."

"I was looking it up, Polly, and it's pretty confusing. Some of the studies rely on self-reporting, which they admit may not be too reliable."

"Natural modesty tending to shrink the figures."

"That's the key."

"So, Polly, would you like to hear more Melville?"

"All that talk about dicks, right? Get it, Albert? Dick—Whale Dick—Moby-Dick?"

"You're a roarer-a-minute! And here's Herman—"

Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnool! there's a member-roll for you! What club but the whaleman's can head off like that?

"Well read, Youngabert, though the whole passage doesn't seem to me to be Ishmael at the top of his game—*again!* And you read this

before, Mr. Forget-Where Yer-At-English.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn. I forgot.”

“Mark it, where you leave off, using post-its or, at worst, soft pencil you can erase so as not to spoil your first edition there.”

“Right. I’ve done just that, so next time I’ll be farther along, not back with ‘Call me Ishmael.’”

“But what you just read, that capper, really is fine, Bertle.”

“He does manage to get in digs at religion. You catch that?”

“I did, though I imagine anyone who has kept reading this far in the damned book, still yearning for the whale promised in the title, will have become used to such things as treating Vishnoo and Jonah as equally reliable reporters, even when such couplings aren’t repeated?”

“Eh, indeed, Pol-pol. We’re getting well along in this novel, you know. What will we turn to next, different Melville?”

“We still have much to go, as I remember. I think you’re just sputtering there, kid. Postponing the inevitable, which is more talk about personal matters—that’s your game, and I spot it right off. As for what will loom ahead in our literary journey, I say we let the gods decide for us, next time we’re in a bookstore—which we might land in down there at Carleton or Hamline, right?”

“Oh yes, so, Polly, it’s your turn to find something to occupy us for the next—oh—ninety minutes. And it has to be something noisy, as we need to guard against you sleeping at the wheel.”

“As it happens, I know a few, drawing on personal experience with my laugh-a-minute folks and those endless long car trips—you know getting six miles in LA in under two hours. And I won’t even include the license plate game, which is absorbing but has few rewards.”

“I agree about that one, though all the vacationers here would provide us with opportunities LA never dreamed of. Still, how did you and your family entertain yourselves?”

“Apart from inventive incest, you mean, Bert?”

“Ugh. Yes.”

“Don’t say ‘ugh’ until you’ve seen us all in costume—or out of it—and in position, Walbert.”

“So, the games?”

“Right, rudeness. They are: Twenty Questions (old but bursting with fun), Tell Me a Story (one person starts with “Once Upon a Time” and then we go in turn), then Name that Animal, which you know.”

“Name that Animal sounds limited—we have to spot them in alphabetical order? All I see is cows.”

“No, doofus! I say an animal and you say another that starts with the last letter of mine—so if I say cow, you can say walrus.”

“Okay. Does ‘animal’ include reptiles and amphibians—even fish?”

“Fuck, Bert, we haven’t even started yet. And our first game is Twenty Questions anyhow. I’ll start.”

“OK—go ahead.”

“No, I mean, I have something in mind. You ask me questions, such as, ‘Is it a person?’”

“OK.”

“OK.”

“OK.”

“Christ, Bert, what’s your question?”

“Oh. Is it a person?”

“No.”

“Is it a sex toy?”

“No—but the idea, Bert, is to start general and then get specific.”

“OK. Is it a place?”

“No.”

“Is it a thing?”

“Yes.”

“Is it a thing you and I have seen. Wait, make that just me. Is it a thing I have seen?”

“Yes.”

“Was it something in LA?”

“Well, that’s not put in a way I can answer it.”

“OK. Was it something I saw in LA?”

“Yes, you saw it there.”

“But it’s not something like Dodger Stadium, since you could have answered the earlier question that you said you couldn’t. Right?”

“You can’t ask me stuff like that, Bert, but yes, that’s right.”

“OK. I saw it in LA. But it’s not a building. Have I seen it on this trip as well?”

“Yes.”

“The sky?”

“Bert, don’t jump to answers just yet. And, no, it’s not the sky.”

“OK. Is it something connected to you—or to me? I mean, it’s not the milk we put on cereal or something like that—or the car seats. Right?”

“Jesus, Bert. Yes, it is something connected to you or to me.”

“To you?”

“No.”

“Aha. Is it my nose?”

“No.”

“Is it something covered by clothes? I mean, is it covered by clothes sometimes, as in polite societies—soirees and debutante balls?”

“Yes.”

“My record-setting pecker! That was an easy one.”

“Easy but wrong, dumbbo.”

“Oh, is it part of my anatomy?”

“No.”

“My underpants, right?”

“You took more than twenty questions. But yes, you finally found your way to the answer, for which almost-victory you get a prize.”

"An hour exploring your own underwear?"

"No, a chaste kiss."

"I'll take it. No need even to pull over."

She didn't—and he did.

"So," says Bert, "Let's do that animal game. I should win at that, too—unless of course I relax my natural abilities—which is harder than it sounds, as I discovered with basketball, as I may have mentioned, having to tame down my leaping abilities so as not to humiliate the other boys. And as for girls... ."

"Button it, Bert. I'll start. Dog"

"Goat"

"Tortoise."

"Ermine"

"Hmm. Oh yeah, a weasel, I see. Also called a stoat. So, I'll go with that, a stoat."

"Great Jesus, Bert. This is a game for pre-schoolers. You need something that starts with an "e," the last letter in ermine."

"You're expecting me to say elephant, so I will."

"Terrier."

"Rat."

"Tarantula."

"Not an animal, Polly, but I'll give it to you."

"Anaconda."

"A true animal, Bert, but OK. Aardvark."

"Kangaroo."

"Opossum."

Silence. A lot of what sounded like humming coming from Bert—mmmmmmmm. And then, finally, "Maltese Falcon," Polly's protests being drowned out by some insistent thumping from behind, unmistakably a flat tire, though that diagnosis did not leap to either mind right off.

We managed to escape an accident, but by the time AAA had arrived with their cheery helper—"You kids off on your own? Don't look old enough to drive, much less... . I'll never tell. We was all

young once...”—it was late afternoon, way too late to charge in on our Hamline and Carlton stop, their “We’re just looking for colleges we might grace next year and were wondering if...” jokes that had so far gone so very badly. But maybe this time... .

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
CARLETON AND HAMLINE FRIENDS (AS IT TURNS OUT)

July 23-25

The next morning dawned bright and cloudless, not that our duo was awake and registering anything of the sort. They had counted on wasting the morning anyhow, figuring that college classes really didn't get going—not for cool kids such as they—until noon or so. Thus, they lolled about, until—

I don't know—don't want to know—whose voice that is crowing away there at the beginning of the chapter. Anyhow, you now have an authentic person to whom you should attend—me, that is, Polly!

That being settled, it's time to move on, with just a nod to last night's dinner at a fine spot which served the best of what makes Minnesota famous in food circles, and not just those on New York's Fifth Avenue, either. I won't name the place, so as not to threaten them with overwhelming crowds, but, for me, I never once in Los Angeles tasted juicy lucies or cheese curds like we had last night—or I had, Bert settling for commonplace old Booya and Lefse. He just up and ordered them, as if he knew what the hell he'd be getting—the menu offering not the slightest clue.

"Do you know what the hell those are, Bert?"

"Nope."

"Gizzard fat stewed with liver, maybe, and Scandinavian slosh."

"Ah, Polly, you cannot remain forever inside your childish prejudices, nursed by our provincial environment."

"You're right, Bert. Why else did we take the trip, huh?"

"Sexual experimentation, I thought, Polly. At least that's what you said when you lured me out of my trousers and into bed."

"Well, yes. First, sexual exploration and then menu expansion."

"Do you get kinda hot just talking about sex?"

“We were talking about food, Ethelbert. There is a difference—for most healthy people.”

“You were the one brought it up.”

“I wasn’t—you said we took the trip for reasons of sexual exploration, not me. If I’d had the slightest inkling of what was in your mind, I’d never come, no sir.”

“OK, but back to the question, which you’re evading, which tells me you are going to answer loudly in the affirmative, does it make you all hot and squirmy to talk about sex?”

“A little louder, Bert. Those sitting in the next room may have missed the last iteration of SEX. But, to answer your question, no, Bert, I don’t think I get all wiggly and hot talking about sex—certainly not in a general way. I think it is a boy thing.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah.”

“You know, Polly, you may be right. And I can also tell you why that is the case. Do you wanta to hear?”

“No.”

“I know when no means yes, Polly—sorry, that’s insensitive.”

“That’s OK, Bert. Proceed.”

“I think boys get all hot about sex talk because (a) boys are more highly sexed than girls and (b) boys generally have nothing to go on except talk in getting sexual experience.”

“I see.”

“Of course there’s also porn—and playing with yourself.”

“Mustn’t forget them.”

“Yeah. So you agree with what I’ve said, modified and extended in the ways I managed there at the end.”

“Of course not.”

“Good. Here’s our food.”

Not sure why I included all that, imagining that you’d be fascinated. I will say that this exchange, taking it from start to finish, gives you all you need to know about Bert and me, about the subject(s) of our discussion, and about the youth of today. If that isn’t clear, return

to the beginning of this chapter and read it aloud, taking notes.

The waitress who brought our meal seemed real interested in where we were from, what we were doing there, and how we liked the food. “I was so surprised that you ordered the least-served food we offer, you know? Oh you did, honey, and don’t think I’m flirting.” She said the last with a wink at me and a chuck under Bert’s chin. Don’t think I’d ever seen a chin-chuck before, but there it was, by Juniper.

She did abandon us after that, maybe because she really didn’t want to know what we thought about boofa and lepsy, or whatever it was. I am sure you readers have even less interest, so let’s just say that when you find yourself just north of Carleton, which may be the only place still serving these items, and are thinking of giving them a try—just call Bert. Call him collect, too. His number is the square root of this page number, then a 2, then 3628. The area code you can find for yourself.

Anyhow, we decided to descend on Carleton with our tried-and-true and hilarious drama scheme of pretending to be prospective students, just seeing what it was like. Dangerous business, I’ll say now (several days later), since both Carleton and Hamline (upcoming) are schools I am sure we’d love—were we able to meet their entrance requirements—very unlikely.

We asked around for directions, then parked within long walking distance (not EASY walking distance, Bert!)—for which inconvenience I am handing off this narrative chore to you next chance I get—like NOW:

Jesus, Polly. Some revenge! You quit in the middle of a sentence. At least, I have the good manners to... . Oh, well, such are the burdens chivalrous men have always had to bear. Where were we (you)? Oh yeah, we made our way over to the Carleton campus and started walking here and there, Polly using her phone as we went to discover—well, I’ll let her tell you.

“Holy Fuck Yo Mama, Bert, the student/teacher ratio here is 8/1.”

“Is that good?”

“Is that good? Oh, you were pulling my leg. Just an expression Schubert, don’t get all bonered-up.”

“Uh-huh. What else—about Carleton, not my stiffie.”

“Right. This will deflate you. The average cost after aid is \$30,000, the acceptance rate is 19%, and it’s ranked #9 in the country among liberal arts colleges, which ain’t nuthin.”

“Pretty amazing.”

“And, holy shit, get this: they are ranked #1 in Teaching.”

“What’s that mean?”

“They have the best teaching in the country—and since this is the USA, that means the best in the world.”

“How do they measure that? Seems to me it’s like saying they have the prettiest girls.”

“Which measure would be sure to draw you into going for that 19% who get in—but I think teaching is—I don’t know. And, to answer your next question, I also don’t care—not enough to go digging for an answer.”

“OK. Well, here come some kids. Let’s ask them about the school—go into our act.”

We did just that and were told they were all on their way to “an amazing class” and that we were very welcome to come along. I was worried about the two of us causing an overflow.

“Will there be enough places—seats?”

“Oh, sure. Some of us sit on the floor anyhow—you know, sprawl and snooze. The professor is deeply boring.”

I knew she was kidding—or he was, didn’t know who said it—and so we closed ranks with them, telling them on the way the unvarnished truth about our summer trip and even cleaned-up versions of what we’d done. For some reason, both Polly and I seemed to stop acting, really believed we were what we said we were doing there—hoping to get into Carleton and take classes from this guy we hadn’t

met, hadn't even heard about in any direct way. Something about the way they talked about him, "Professor Chakladar," "Arnab" seemed so—I don't know—genuine, I guess.

But maybe they were teasing us, testing. Maybe this guy was a senile dotard unfit for public display. It's often said that teaching is the last refuge of the demented, though I haven't seen anything like that in the old teachers at school in Santa Monica—though not many there are super old. And why can't I just go back and erase all that and park us up where we're going: the top of this beautiful hill and into a classroom with Professor Chadkladar.

We got there early, I thought, but the Prof was in a chair and maybe a dozen others in seats just like his.

Nobody said anything that was for general circulation, though everyone was chatting. Arnab sat there staring straight ahead, did that for so long I was starting to wonder if that was the secret to his popularity: conduct a class where nothing happens, all is silence.

Finally, the chatter stopped, pretty quickly, and the Prof, who was sitting—I forgot to say—like the rest of us in this circle, nothing special. Anyhow, he finally looked around slowly, stopped at Bert for a full hour, seemed like, maybe five seconds. Then did the same with me.

"Do you have anything to add?"

I could swear he addressed that to me. Couldn't be, but then others turned to look at me, so

"We're taking this cross-country trip, me and Polly, and read that this place was the spot for great teaching, Number One in the country. We had no idea what that might mean, so we thought we'd stop and check it out, kind of trespass. But we'll leave if you want."

Arnab said nothing, but several of the students murmured in a welcoming way, so there we were for the time being.

Finally, one of the students said, "As for championship teaching, you've just seen it. All he does is sit."

Another student. "He has lots of patience. I think that's a virtue—or so he tells us. In any case, it's the only one he has."

Arnab looked at the last kid, finally said, “Just for that, you get a C+.”

“That’s a step up,” the kid said.

Were they kidding? Anyhow, I sure didn’t want this class to be about me, so I idiotically broke the silence. “Are you studying something?”

Nobody said anything at first. Finally, a student who hadn’t yet piped up said, “Yes, and thanks for reminding us. I know I’d almost forgotten and the rest of you just don’t care, but we’re doing communism and the failure of liberal democracy—that’s what we all signed on for.”

That sounded terrific to me, though I was also hoping to disembodify—to melt into the woodwork and have them proceed with vigorous discussions on their radical ideas.

Only they didn’t. Seemed like they were perfectly happy just to sit and look at one another or, worse, at me and Polly.

I vowed to say no more, even in response to a direct question, wondered how we were going to engineer an exit.

Just as it was getting unbearable, the class started really going—maybe in response to some signal or other hidden from our view. Arnab at first seemed to throw out some prompts, made some modifications here and there, kind of sharpening stuff, seemed to me; but then, very soon, lapsed into silence and let the discussion go.

After class, the students sort of collected round the two of us, asking us about our trip and inviting us—seemed like every one of them—to spend the day going to their classes or just hanging out. Into the midst of all this—surprise!—strode Professor Chakladar, who proceeded to suggest we get some rest, sit in on a few more classes, and then come to his house that evening.

“Dress optional?” Asked this other student, a boy.

“Not for you, Thomas. The very idea!”

“OK, Tyrantical, but you sure changed your tune since last spring’s Shakespeare class.”

Polly seemed somehow to catch the drift of all this, struck in

with her special wit (I guess it was): “Ah, but that class was not on Shakespeare, nor was it taught in the spring, nor did Professor Chakladar conduct it, nor was clothing optional.”

The other kids seemed to be right there with Polly.

“Right. Clothing was forbidden. One guy tried to wear a sock and he found out what happens to those who broke the rules.”

“He got an A-.”

That last was from Polly—and made no sense, seemed to me. But everybody laughed, including the prof. I didn’t get it, but somehow felt part of things. Mysterious but powerful, the way this guy, who seemed so distant, created such a bond. It seemed effortless, but it could not have been that. Whatever it was, though, it enfolded me. Polly, too, though she seemed a much more knowing participant.

I planned to ask her as soon as we were alone, but that didn’t happen until late the next day. We spent that night in the dorm with other kids and then went to more classes next day. All kind of a blur.

So, here we were back in our camper the next evening, late, having blown through—I don’t know—thirty-six hours maybe and hooked up, too, for the next day at another school, Hamline University, and more stun-gun experiences, I figured. You’d think all this would have made me angry or at least scared, but somehow it did not. I don’t know why—and I can explain even less well how the time at Hamline was so similar.

You deserve a whole lot better than my helpless stammer, so I’ll duck out of the way and hope Polly will pick up the story right here, since she will be able to tell you what I really cannot.

Oh, dearest Bert, you did just fine, and I don’t see how I can get any closer to explaining why the next day at Hamline or the magic of Mike Reynolds and Kristine Deffenbacher meant so very much to us.

I can say that it had everything to do with them and nothing to do with us. That is, I think anyone who spent even a few minutes with Mike and Kristine or with either one of them separate would feel, I

don't know, transported, Here's the best I can do. First being in their class was no different from being at their dinner table or having a drink at the bar with them. It wasn't that they were "always teaching," even outside of the classroom but that they seemed never to be doing what most of us would regard as "teaching," some self-conscious acting designed to elicit set responses. Neither of them talked a great deal or seemed to be setting us up, me and Bert. And it wasn't—as you often hear—that they made us seem "smarter." It was more like they didn't teach at all, but the way they listened was unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

I wish I could tell you more, explain better. But I cannot. I will just say that I'm not going to tell you what we had for dinner or what we talked about. I sure haven't forgotten, but it has taken up residence in part of my brain I didn't know was there before.

That sounds pretentious and I'm sorry. The time with Arnab, with Mike and Kris was the finest of the summer, made that time, and the two of us, into different beings—in a different world.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN WISCONSIN WALLEWS

July 25-30

Still me, your trustworthy Polly, as we moved relentlessly into yet another state and later into this swing month of July.

We talked some about both, we did, me and Bert, who is—you are no doubt noticing—becoming much more voluble. I hadn't brought that up—his loosened tongue—for fear—you know. I was very surprised, then, when he opened up on his new-found ease, just as we were heading out of Northfield.

"Polly, I feel so different now from when we started. I don't even think it was just that great time we spent with Kris and Mike—and Arnab—either. I think it's... ."

I couldn't tell if he was waiting for me, but I sure didn't have anything to offer, so I just smiled at him.

"Jesus Christ, Polly, but you are pretty. Want to just park and neck?"

"If we do that every time one of us feels like it, Bert, we'll be about a hundred yards down the street by Labor Day. Tell me what you were about to say about feeling different. If I like what I hear, I'll let you rub my leg, yes I will, so long as you don't proceed above... . Is that a deal?"

"Odd that we haven't—you know—not really... ."

"Yeah."

"Anyhow, Polly, I was noticing how seldom I get tongue-tied, how most times I just go along as if I were normal—almost."

"That you'll never be, normal."

"True."

"Promise?"

He just looked at me and then smiled in such a way as to make me want to pull right over and—you know, do what he said. But we were right in the middle of traffic by then, so I satisfied myself with redirecting the conversation.

“Hey, Bert, how bout them Dodgers!”

“OK, Pol-pol, your virtue is safe for now. And I also think it’s best if I don’t try to talk much about what just happened. But it was like I’d gone through some mental car wash, you know, without knowing where I was or what was happening at any time. And I wanted to add, too, that I realized you were much more aware of all that than I was—and I was fine with that.”

“Really?”

“Yeah—and that you don’t deny it, try to boost me up or something, makes it all the more solid. You know as well as I do what I mean and what has happened. It’s as if I am different and so are you.”

“Yeah,”

“And so are we.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, Polly, I love you so.”

“And, Bert—I love you—and it doesn’t in any way seem trite or automatic to say so.”

“OK, Polly, we have that out of the way, and to vital matters. Did you remember to brush your teeth?”

I looked over and was again smacked in my most vulnerable parts—all of them—by this smile that almost... .

So, off we crawled through late morning traffic on our way to—I had not the least idea.

“Where we going, navigator?”

“Huh? Oh yeah. Let’s see here.”

In about twenty-seconds, he said, in this real gruff voice, “Well? Do I go left or right, up or down?”

“You go fuck yourself, Walbert. I need a minute. Just drive east, assuming you can figure out which way that is. We should have one of those little compass things on our dashboards—you know where I mean? Little bubble things.”

“Jesus, Aunt Polly, they’re built in. Those bubble things went out in 1957, along with corsets.”

“I always wanted to wear a corset, Blurp. If I had one you could

help me lace it up, you know.”

“Or lace it down, more like.”

“Which makes no sense. Now, give me a minute while you navigate this heavy traffic—which I see doesn’t exist. Just try not to hit any cows.”

Silence for a while, as I examined the maps and guide books, then turned to the Internet for one of those “Thirty Things Not to Miss in Wisconsin.”

“Well, Bert, before I lay out for you all I found out, what’s your fresh idea of things you associate with this state?”

“Well, manly things, you know, like the Green Bay Packers and... .”

“And what?”

“The Milwaukee Bucks and—.”

“Well, that’s very good. But here’s what we’re actually doing, going north—which means a definite swing upwards—before we drop southward. First, Apostle Islands, Bayfield, and Pattison State Park—three separate places but not too far apart, looks like. Then we start sliding downward to our next stop, Lake Minoqua, of course.”

“Of course. Sounds like an Indian lake.”

“Dutch.”

“Right. And then?”

“Then to Door Country and Green Bay, where you can watch a football game and explain it all to me.”

“Actually, they may be in training camp, Polly, so your smart-assed comment might turn out to be—what’s the word, predictive.”

“No such word.”

“There is now.”

“Then we have a trio—Wisconsin Dells, Cave of the Winds, and the great town of Madison, where we meet up with—that’s a surprise.”

“Karina Mendoza.”

“You just spoiled the surprise.”

“Substituting for it rich anticipation, though.”

“True.”

“That’s it?”

“Are you mad? It? When what lies ahead of us is something called Geneva Lake Shore Path and, oh yes, Milwaukee.”

“So, in the meantime, we zoom up north, right, Pol?”

“To Apostle Islands, which had better be great, as it’ll take us the better part of the afternoon—given our late start, which is your fault, Bert, what with your extreme fussiness over wardrobe.”

“Me! Well, Polly, I gotta hand it to you, you do dress fast. At first, I thought it was modesty, but now I see you are just careless. Today, for instance, you neglected your unmentionables.”

“You start that kind of talk, young Bertram, and I’ll just phone home and tell on you. Your parents didn’t raise no foul-mouth boy, so just stop that.”

“OK. I know it’ll disappoint you, but how about, since we seem to be the only vehicle on the road, we turn to some fine car games and singing and Melville and no arousing talk at all.”

“Yes! I’m all for it, though you the one should avoid that suggestive talk, you seducer, you!”

“What did I say that was suggestive?”

“You used that awful word, ‘arousing,’ and don’t deny it.”

“You know, Polly, that actually is so, isn’t it? That word sort of sets me—you know.”

“A-quivering?”

“Yes.”

“To be honest, me, too.”

“Maybe any words we say will do that, Polly.”

“Let’s test it, Bert. Say an unarousing word.”

“Snot. Puss. Goo.”

“That’s three, but I’ll agree with the first two. Goo, though. In the right context, it might sort of, you know.”

“Polly, anything you say—even when you say, ‘Turn right at the next intersection, asshole’—makes me stand and salute.”

“Must be uncomfortable.”

"I'm used to it."

"OK, Bert, let's find a game to play, now that we seem to be out on the open highway."

"Highway to hell."

"Or, in our case, Apostle Islands, Bayfield, and the Something-or-Other State Park, whichever comes first."

We rode along in what you might call a comfortable silence for a good twelve-thirteen minutes, a long time for us. Then Bert said, "OK. My terrific parents used to spring on me this very educational yet tons of fun game called, 'Associations.' You see, how it goes is..."

"Yes. I see. And let me add one other rule. No ookie body parts of clothing or activity."

"Of course. OK. I'll start, Polly. You ready?"

"No."

"Good. The word is 'hot dog.'"

"Mustard."

"Ketchup."

"Bun."

"Buns."

"That's illegal on two counts, Bert. It is a repeat and it's ookie. Come over here so I can pinch you."

He did present his arm to me, but I reached round and... I swear I meant to pinch his arm but instead found myself what you might even call fondling just where I should have avoided at all costs.

"OK, Polly. No need to stop. You want to just pull over and have sex?"

"Yes."

"Right here by the side of the road?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Polly, just do it—park."

But I kept driving for some reason—none that I could name, none that made any sense. There seemed to be nothing for it but to find another game, one that might not lead to the destination we were vowing to avoid.

“Bert, you ever play ‘Would you Rather?’”

“I don’t think so. How’s it go?”

“I ask you would you rather A or B—like would you rather have no ears or no nose—that kind of thing—would you rather go to A or B.”

“I see. I’m game. Should I start? Wait. I gather you aren’t allowed to say neither, right? You have to choose one.”

“Right. You want to start?”

“Sure.”

“Well, do.”

“OK.”

“Jesus, Bert, what is it?”

“What you said.”

“You have to make up your own?”

“OK, I see. Would you rather have sex with Tom or Jason?”

“Jason.”

“You didn’t even ask which Jason. There’s about fifty.”

“Right, and any would do.”

“Your turn.”

“Would you rather eat radishes or pet a cat?”

“Jesus, Polly. Stick to sex.”

“We do that, Vandebert, we’ll lose control—and not just of our vehicle.”

“That’s the hope. Pet a cat. That’s my answer. Would you rather set fire to Mrs. Lane’s house or drive an armored vehicle into the elementary school there by the Dairy Queen?”

“Mrs. Lane’s house. I guess, since you didn’t prohibit it, I could get her out of there first.”

Silence.

“Your turn, Polly.”

“I’m thinking. OK. Would you rather go to school with your underpants on over top of your pants or with no shirt on?”

“Easy. No shirt, since I do that a lot anyhow, and it’d be easier. Now, for you, would you rather wear a short skirt and no panties or

no bra at all and a low slung—er—top.”

“I do both of those a lot, as you know, but I’ll choose bra-less. And, Bert, why are we sliding back to the territory of the arousing?”

“It’s your fault.”

“Yeah. I’ll mend my ways. So, here’s my alternative. Would you rather have sex right now—any kind—or wait until tonight.”

“Both.”

“Ha.”

That seemed to put an end to that wretched game—maybe a good family game, though I’d hate to think of the family who would come up with our range of topics.

“So, Bert, where are we headed, I mean exactly? Northwards, I got that much, but I’m not as certain as to our destination.”

“Yeah, there’s three spots way up there—though we’re getting closer—and I think the most remote and least interesting is Apostle Islands, where they don’t seem to have preachers, though they do have what they call ‘a plentitude’ of black bears.”

“Your favorite.”

“Better than grizzlies.”

“So, is there a bridge over? Sorry. I guess that’s obvious.”

“No, it ain’t, Polly. Germane question! And no, there isn’t—a bridge, I mean. But there is a ferry, so we’re all set.”

Well, not to spend all your time with more conversation—rip-roaring as it always is—between me and Bert, here’s what I’m going to do, skip to the islands and to Bert telling you all about them and—well, as I say, to Bert.

It seems as if we are getting so free and easy, reporting every damned detail, that we run the very real danger of—what? Exhausting your patience, I guess, misgauging what you’ll be interested in. Just because we said it, me and Polly, is not sufficient warrant for writing it down. Right? I’ll keep that in mind as we proceed.

In light of that resolve, I will record no part of the section of

Moby-Dick we read aloud, appreciated, and analyzed. Your loss.

Anyhow, we made it to Bayfield—which, if you’re following along with your finger on a map, is way north in this way-north state—in good time. It was a tiny little spot, seemed like, but the description we’d read, I’d read, said it had a coffee shop and several B&Bs. So, we talked it over, me and Polly, and—you’re way ahead of me.

“I wonder if we can book a room for tonight, me and my—sister?”

“Well, let me see what we have that would be suitable,” said this guy behind a very cluttered counter. He took so long I started to think he had signaled the authorities or something, but then he slid down under the desk, fished out a key, and told us to take the stairs to our right, breakfast between 6 and 9, but easiest on them if we showed up at seven, which would also be the time he’d recommend were we to stand a chance of catching the ferry over to the island, which was where, he assumed, we were going.

“OK, Polly, why is it so different being in this bedroom together, when we’ve been in a bedroom together the whole fucking summer?”

“Seems not different to me, Bert. Just undress a little, make yourself comfortable, the way we always do.”

“Comfortable is what I’m not, Polly. Are you?”

“Sure, I am—nope. I agree, Bert. Here we are staring at one another—or at the ceiling—as if we don’t have a script we can follow.”

“How about we undress one another?”

“Hell, Bert, we’ve never done that—and, before you ask, no, I do not have practice knowing where zippers start and end, that kind of thing.”

“Let’s just go get our B&B dinner, Polly. All this silly shit about not knowing what to do in a bedroom will pass by the time we get back, several beers under our belts.”

“I’m all for it, Bert.”

But, you know what, dinner, which was better than you’d expect, didn’t help at all. And, when we got back, all we did was play some

video games—at least they were two-player games—then undressed privately and modestly, got into our jammies back-to-back, and slid under the covers.

I'm starting to think we should go back and insert lots of Melville in where yesterday was. Could not be more slow-moving—and, who knows? Maybe they'll actually spot the white whale before long. I seem to remember that fish from the movie, but maybe that was a Hollywood insert. (And, yes, I know a whale is not a fish—pedant!)

The B&B breakfast—this is Polly, speaking, you know—was not worth writing about, which doesn't distinguish it from most of what we write about, I know—but anyhow... .

The ferry was pretty crowded, so I was glad we'd snagged tickets yesterday and were also first in line, damned near. As luck would have it, there was a family behind us that kind of echoed us, as far as the kids, number and size, went. There were a requisite set of adults, too, but they kept the fuck shut up, so we could get acquainted with Noah and Ava.

"I bet you could have guessed our names, Polly—or Bert."

"How could we have done that?"

"There are lists on the internet: most common names common parents give their common kids. They change a little year by year but not much. You must have really cool parents, since neither Polly nor Bert has been anywhere near these charts."

"Thanks, I guess, our parents—well... ."

We thereupon explained our summer program, including the funding source, all to the expected accompaniment of "No shit!" "Fuck me!" And "Wanta trade parents?"

Anyhow, we made it onto the ferry, across the waters, and onto land. Noah was holding forth on these islands, or one of them, holding the record for the greatest concentration of black bears on the continent. He seemed very happy about that, somehow, which made me doubt that it was true. (I checked later and found that, rip my knickers,

it certainly was so.)

But we didn't see any, which was more than fine by me. Nothing about the trip would have been worth mentioning—you've been on tedious hikes yourselves and need no reminding—except for a terrible thing I guess I'll tell you about.

There was this one narrow spot we had to get through, up a small grade and pretty rough. Noah and I were ahead of the others by a little bit when we got there, and he held back, I assumed out of some women-first training. As I was getting through the opening, though, I felt this hand firmly on my ass, not so much pushing (which might have been excusable) as groping. I was so shocked I couldn't think of the right protest when we got through and decided to treat it as an accident, which I sure as hell knew it had not been. Not ten minutes later, though, as we were walking along, not even that far ahead of Ava and Bert, Noah returned his hand to my ass. But not for long. I swung around and grabbed his shoulder, didn't scream but didn't whisper either, "You putrid asshole, you touch my ass one more time and I'll knee you so hard in the nuts you'll never have kids."

Of course he pretended to be astonished, didn't know what I could mean, was sure he had done nothing improper. He was whispering all this, clearly embarrassed that his sister and Bert had heard.

Oh, boy. You'd think you might be safe from kids your own age. That sounds naive, and it's not like I've dated hundreds of boys, but I've never encountered anything remotely like that, so crude, too, thought it was something from a half-century back.

After we were back at our digs, I mentioned it all to Bert.

"Yeah, I saw that. I was so proud of you."

"Proud?"

"Proud of me, too."

"You were? Let me guess. You were proud that I handled it so competently all by myself."

"Go on."

"And—oh!—you were proud, dear Bert, that you knew I could handle it, did not need you rushing to my rescue."

“OK.”

“Is that it, Bert?”

“Now, if it’d been a bear attacking instead of Noah, why then...”

“You’d turn tail and run.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“OK.”

**CHAPTER FIFTEEN
MORE WISCONSIN WHOOIE**

“Well, Bertie boy, let me just ask you, how long do we intend to stay in this state?”

“Which one?”

“Are you hung over, sated, woozie with lust? The one we’re in, which you told me was Wisconsin, though maybe you just wanted to lure me over the state line, so you could... .”

“Forget where you were going with that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“We’re in Wisconsin, Aunt Polly, and I think it’s all this water around that has me feeling so easy about blabbing—you know, liquified my tongue.”

“Which I used to think would be good news. Anyhow, so, since you grabbed the wheel like the pushy ass you are, I get to navigate, and I say we head down a little ways to an area known as The Wisconsin Dells.”

”Ah, yes, where all the butter is made.”

“Is it?”

“Sure.”

“Oh, fuck yourself, Bert. To think I fell for that. Anyhow, I do agree, now that I read all about the area, that it’s just the spot for us. Ugh. Actually, it really does look nice—and no need to take my trite word as your only clue. Here’s a fine description:

Wisconsin Dells is known as “The Waterpark Capital of the World” and offers a range of attractions and accommodations to meet every waterpark lover’s needs. An explosion of indoor water parks has resulted in over 21 water parks, added to water-skiing, thrill shows, and super-mini-golf courses. The Dells has two visitor centers that can best assist tourists in planning their vacation.

"That sounds lovely, Polly."

"You being sarcastic?"

"No."

"OK. You're harder to read these days."

"That's good."

"Umm. Anyhow, do you think we can manage twenty-one full-scale water parks?"

"Easy, plus several super-mini golf courses, unless the super-mini part means they're just for toddlers."

"What's a thrill show, Bert?"

"A strip club. You know, how thrilling it is to see... ."

"We don't need that—not as long as we got one another to stare at in our nightly unrobing."

"Only you said you don't peek."

"Right. You are safe from my eyes."

"I ain't commenting on that. So, how about we go over to the Dells, skip the great advising centers and sensible planning, and just see what we run into?"

"Brilliant, Polly."

So, we set off, not too far either, though enough to allow us to assuage our guilt a little at having ignored for so long our dear old Herman, but what we read was, for once, a little—well, tedious would not be the right word—quite:

Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye.

"That's wild, Polly. Regard intuitions and doubts with an equal eye."

"Yeah—and all along you told me old Herm was a steadfast atheist."

"And so it seemed—as in the way he throws in the Devil as a profound thinker ranking up there with Plato, though this is even

more interesting: intuitions and doubts. Wow, Polly.”

“I agree.”

By this time we were at the entrance—or so said the signs—to The Wisconsin Dells, which meant a stop to eat, to change drivers, and, most important, to swap narrators.

Bert here and ready to blab. Our brunch, I should say, was nothing to write home about, which made me think of something.

“Polly, you know that phrase, ‘something to write home about’?”

“I do.”

“Where’s it come from? Do you use it?”

“My parents do, I think—not that I pay attention, Bert. I think maybe it comes from the world wars—would make sense. Look it up there on your handy phone while I get us over to the Dells.”

“It comes from late nineteenth century, Polly. It seems. But there’s—let’s see—nope, nothing very interesting there—gained currency among combatants, where it was used by troops on both sides, usually in the negative. And since you are bound to ask, I’ll clarify: used as in nothing to write home about. But do you ever want to write home?”

“Hasn’t occurred to me, Lollybert. You miss your parents?”

“God, no, but those signs made me remember that they did their honeymoon here in the Wisconsin Dells.”

“Their honeymoon?”

“Yeah. I know.”

“You suppose that’s where you were conceived, little wee Bert?”

“Fuck you, Polly.”

“Anyhow, Bert, I can tell that you want to call them, tell them you’re revisiting a place they loved. Really. I’m not being shitty, either. Just do it.”

“Thanks, Polly.”

So I did call, checking first the time zones and seeing it'd be just fine. Odd thing was, my dad answered. He never used the phone if he could help it, but there he was.

"Hullo."

"Oh, hi, Dad."

"Bert! You OK, son? You have an accident?"

"I'm fine, Dad—and so's Polly."

"That's good. You need money? Something wrong with the camper?"

"Dad, we're fine. Polly says hi."

"OK. Hi to Polly. So, why are you calling? We're fine here, no disasters afoot."

"Just thought you'd like to know. We're at the Wisconsin Dells. Isn't that where you and mom did your honeymoon?"

Silence. I was starting to think this call had been a huge mistake—was sure it was.

But then—"Oh, Bert, what a kind thing... . Let me get your mother. Hey, June! Come here. Bert's on the phone. Yeah, he is. No joke."

In a very short time, "Oh, dearie, are you OK?"

"I'm fine, mom. Just calling cause Polly and I are going into the Wisconsin Dells, where you and dad—you know."

Silence again. Then, unmistakably, the sound of crying.

"I'm sorry, mom, did I fuck up by calling?"

What had I said? She was sure to explode.

But no—"Oh, honey, it's so kind of you to call. Your father and I had such a great time there. I'd get out the old scrapbook and tell you places to go, though they've maybe changed—and anyhow, you'll have more fun discovering on your own, and... ."

There was silence for a minute. I couldn't think of anything to say, was wondering if I should just hang up.

But then—"What a dear you are, son. Thank you. We love you so. Now, just go and have a lovely time, you two. And a big hug to Polly—from me, not you!"

Then there was laughter and then she hung up.

I was glad I called. I told Polly what had happened and that's what she said, too: "I'm glad you called."

I was looking out the window, trying to register on the many signs luring us to what seemed to be tens of thousands of attractions. But I guess I wasn't seeing them too well, hardly noticed when Polly pulled up at something called "Wilderness Territory" and what seemed to be—actually was—a gigantic water park.

"You 'n me's gonna go slide and splash, Berty, just like your folks did seventy or eighty years ago, when the place was new and they was fit and trim—even more than they is today."

"OK, hun. Should we change here?"

"You think? Not that I'm shy around you, but let's just go inside and change."

That made no sense to me, but I kept quiet about it, made a mental note to ask her later, though my mental notes all had a way of getting erased about as soon as I'd entered them.

Anyhow, here I was inside the changing room, which was pretty busy. There was this twerp right there next to me started conversing as if we'd been buddies for years.

"You like this place?"

"Never been here. You like it?"

"It's OK. Lots of hot chicks."

"I see. I bet they flock to you."

He looked at me funny for a minute, then said, "Could you help me pull up my bathing suit? Right there, ya know. It's new and hasn't got stretched out yet—real tight in the ass."

Idiot me reached over to give it a tug, only to have the kid erupt: "Hey, this stranger here is assaulting me!"

Thing was he didn't really erupt, just kind of whispered it.

Still, I moved fast away and headed toward the door, vowing to lose this kid as fast as I could.

But there he was skipping along beside me, apologizing, not softly, and saying how he could show me all the best slides, the ones

where the hot chicks hung out.

There was no shaking him, it appeared, especially when he saw that I had a hot chick attached, one Polly, who seemed to take to this kid, “Marty,” and allowed him to hang with us as we climbed and slid and got doused.

Marty was actually not so much a pest as a sad little lonely kid, happy to have company of any sort. I think Polly saw this right away and was quick to include him in games she invented as we went along. Of course Marty was fully smitten with her. I understood that.

Later on, I again messed things up by asking Marty—during one of our infrequent breaks—if he was here with his parents.

“Yeah, I guess.”

He guessed? What could that mean? Polly seemed to know, shot me a look that told me to shut the hell up, so I did. I wondered, however, how we were ever going to shed this kid.

My worries just increased when Polly asked him what there was to do at night in the vicinity.

“Oh, there’s this great magic show. My parents are going—taking me—and now you can come long. Right?”

Wrong—but of course that’s what we did, made arrangements to meet up after dinner.

“At least we shed that kid for meal-time, Polly.”

“Well, Bert, don’t be completely heartless. That kid is so—I don’t know.”

I probably didn’t know, but could see he had touched Polly somehow. So I asked.

“I’m sure you notice, too, Bert. There just seems to be something about him—so lost and without... .”

“Maps.”

“Yeah. I know we’ve had other hangers-on this summer. We seem to attract them. But something about Marty is different. He isn’t insensitive at all, maybe just the reverse. If we told him to get lost, even gave off negative signals, he’d leave right away.”

“I see, Polly. You’re right. He’d apologize and stammer and

leave. God.”

“Yeah.”

“I kind of lost my appetite, Polly. I’ll just get a salad.”

“That’d be an insult to the local salmon fishers, Bert. You have to order heartily from among those red fish varieties, even if you eat sparingly. And what a fine slogan that’d make!”

“Uh-huh.”

So, off we went to a family style restaurant, just because it was handy, though it struck me once we were inside and trapped that we might be walking right in on Marty and his folks.

But no, so we settled in and ordered.

“I see you didn’t order salmon, Polly. You were just laying a trap for me, though I easily sidestepped it.”

“You did indeed, Zinglebert, and I think it’s commendable in you to go for the all-veggie option.”

“I did?”

“That’s what Number 14 is.”

“Oh, shit. I meant to—oh, well, that’s fine. It’s just one meal in the 200,000 or so we’ll have.”

“That many? How you figure.”

“Three meals per times 365 times 100.”

“I see. Wait, diddle-head, that doesn’t come out right.”

“Sure it does. Take my word for it, Um-pah-pol. Men are always in the lead in figures.”

“In making things up and then bullying others about them.”

“Like Trump.”

“Right.”

“Do you... ?”

“No, I don’t think you’re like Trump, Bert—not too much, though if you keep eating the way you are, you’ll be able to pose with a golf club and have your stomach get in the way of your swing.”

“Very presidential.”

“Very pathetic—disgusting.”

“Anyhow, do you think me being insensitive to Marty is a male

thing?”

“Not at all—and, no, Bert you aren’t a macho type.”

Something about the way she said that, though made me wonder.

“You were going to continue that, Polly.”

“I wonder about men—or women—and pathetic types, whether there is some ghastly instinct to avoid them. Fear of contamination or guilt by association—something like that?”

“That’s so awful. But maybe. I get this image of gym class: some poor kid off by himself, even showering and changing alone.”

“Jesus.”

“You know, once I saw that and tried to help, Polly. Not that I did it more than once or am any different from the usual boy brutality.”

“But that once... .”

“Yeah, you know Thad?”

“Thad? Oh, yeah. What’s his last name?”

“Doesn’t matter. Anyhow, once we were choosing up sides for something in gym and I saw him sort of hide behind these other two kids.”

“Trying not to get picked?”

“Giving himself an excuse when he wasn’t picked.”

“That’s so sad.”

“So, anyhow, for some reason, that struck me, and I said, ‘I’ll take Thad.’”

“First pick?”

“No, but high up.”

“I’ll bet he acted as if it were nothing special.”

“I wish, and probably he tried. But he was so happy it showed—to everybody.”

Polly looked at me as if she were maybe about to kiss me or something. I wish she had, but she just smiled.

Anyhow, we ordered, ate, and made it to the magic show, which was more a comedy show, family style. I don’t feel like talking more about Marty, much less his anxious parents, unable to hide how

thrilled they were that their son had made friends—any friends. We escaped somehow, without plans to meet up on the morrow—or any other time.

I thought poor Marty would cry when we said goodbye. Maybe he did. I am very proud to say that I did not, though I did give him a hug.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN MORE DELLS AND BEYOND

For those worried about what day it is and wondering why we've neglected to provide that tick-tock regularity as we went, try to loosen your mind from linearity. Don't you adore that phrase? Guess where it comes from. It's a local source (not me). C'mon, you know.

So, here we are, Bert and me, with a choice. Should we veer east a good bit to something called Door Country, which you've heard lots about, or just keep on south toward a cave of some sort and then on to Madison and the renowned Karina Mendoza, about whom more in a bit—and not a moment too soon? I guess that was a question, but by the time I got to the end of the sentence, I had forgotten and you were worn out.

So, here we are, me and Bert, having settled a whole lot between us, mostly having to do with him and me. Who would have thought that we'd spend the summer—this part of it, anyhow—talking so little about our wild experiences in canyons, clubs, and zoos and so much about each other, the nature of our attraction and attraction generally and a whole range of ookie topics that we kept afloat so we could return to them. I know it sounds as if we were enjoying a kind of perpetual preliminary-to-rutting session, keeping ourselves at the ready but never taking the plunge. If you mean that as an accusation, go fuck yourself (as Bert would say); if you mean it as an observation, I guess I must agree with you.

Anyhow, in case you're interested, we decided to give Door Country a miss. It was high on the list of Things You Gotta Visit While in Wisconsin and it sure had an intriguing name—Door Country! (Open Sesame!). But it turned out on closer investigation on-line to be just another set of walks and lakes and, probably, cliffs, undoubtedly breath-taking. But we'd seen a whole lot of such ooh-and-ahh spots, so decided to give this a miss, as I say. (And you should feel free to use the above paragraph as a model for getting-to-the-fucking-point writing.)

Since I was driving, I made Bert find out all about someplace else close by so we wouldn't get to Madison too soon, as I've said thirteen times now.

"OK, Polly. How about Green Bay?"

"The football town? The Packers?"

"That's it, boy-girl. You know why they're called the Packers."

"Of course, so don't you dare tell me. What you can tell me is what else is there, since all there'd be now would be some smelly training camp."

"Right. OK, Polly Baby, flashing her you knows and having no mercy on the hot pubescent lad who is her slave, I am here to tell you. But first, since you can never claim really to KNOW a place without an hour or two of rich local history, enlivened by anecdote (even if much of that sort of thing is, by its very nature, unverified) let me drizzle that on your young thigh, shamelessly exposed there for all to see."

"Not all, Bert, just you."

"Polly, can we find a woods or something to visit, private?"

"No, Bertram. You had all last evening to make a move and managed to resist, so just bottle it, boy, or whatever metaphor would work."

"Ah, the metaphor that would doubtless work best is 'Your wish is my command.'"

"That's not what I call a metaphor, kid, and I know."

"Let me be direct, then, Polly. I'd like to undress you—slowly and thoughtfully—and then have sex—protected and responsible."

"Ah, Bert. I was all set to just pull over on the berm and go at it, but all that about being responsible took the oomph right out of it."

"Yeah, I guess. But... ."

"Green Bay's allure, you were going to unveil it."

"Jesus. OK, as I say, Green Bay was founded... . I'll just read—

Green Bay history goes all the way back to early prehistoric times, when Indigenous tribes like the Winnebago, Menominee,

Fox, and Ojibwa, called the area home. They settled near the Fox River since it was an easy gateway to the Great Lakes, which made trading easier. They were also attracted to the rich soil, fish, wild rice, and waterfowl.

These indigenous tribes were the only humans in what is now Green Bay for around 10,000 years. Then, in 1634, a French explorer named Jean Nicolet visited “La Baye Verte” (“The Green Bay”) and turned it into a fur-trading post. The indigenous people were happy to trade with the French for weapons and cloth, and they lived in relative harmony for about 150 years.

“I hate to ask, Bert, but then what happened?”

“The fucking British.”

“Yeah—the war of 1812—started slaughtering the natives and introducing Christianity and torture, hoping to help things along.”

“Nothing like progress. So, along with the many reminders of what was lost, Green Bay offers what?”

“Well, Polly, there’s a museum, displaying, let’s see, everything from fossils to football—and not just one football, but many.”

“Uh huh.”

“More down your line, there’s a motel offering rooms by the hour—very reasonable and guaranteed cleaned, more or less, after each guest.”

“Guest? They specialize in lone travelers? Sad salesmen, maybe?”

“Well, singles need attention, too.”

“You’d know all about that, Diddlebert.”

Silence.

“Bert, I’m turning this over to you, so you gotta speak—at least to the page.”

Polly must have thought I was offended by her joke about masturbating, as if I were sensitive about it. Ha! And, just to prove I

wasn't I gave a demonstration of how easy I was. (I see that last sentence is open to terrible misinterpretation—what I mean by demonstration refers not to what you supposed but to oral practices only—and I see that could be misinterpreted, too, so fuck it. And that also could be mis... . Oh, for heaven's sake!)

"Polly, you know boys talk a lot about masturbating. Do girls?"

"No. Never. I'm thinking, Bert, but, no, never."

"I don't mean boys say something very personal, more like make embarrassed jokes about other people doing it. You know, 'Hey, Horace, you been pounding your pud too much.' "

"Pounding your pud is pretty funny. Are there other jokes about it. I'm sure there are."

"The only joke I know is—get ready: 'If your Uncle Jack was stuck on a roof without a ladder, would you help your uncle jack off?'"

"That's a rip-snorter, Bert. And, yes, as I know you were going to inquire, I do know what 'jack-off' means; and no, I don't know where I heard it. I think lots of things like that, about sex especially, just float in the air we breathe, you know, probably come in a package on our twelfth birthday and evaporate when we're, I don't know, maybe twenty."

"Wow. Twenty! And it's pretty interesting what you say, Polly. You're so smart."

She didn't say anything, but what a smile!

"You want to hear some names boys have for masturbating?"

"Yeah, I do."

"I admit I googled a list, but I'm only saying those I had heard and even sometimes used."

"Authenticity is your middle name, pud-pounder."

"Thanks. And here they are, as I say, authenticated by my own personal practice—oral, that is: celebrating palm sunday, polishing the banister, finding Nemo, shucking the corn, beating your meat, and wanking."

"Well, I feel as if I've been inducted into a secret fraternity."

“You’re welcome.”

“Wasn’t like I was giving thanks. And where were we? Yes, Green Bay wonders, aside from a self-congratulatory museum of local accomplishments and first-ers?”

“I think there’s but one and even it’s a museum, of trains. You probably know a great deal about them, Polly, but not me.”

“Yes, true about my knowledge, but I’ll be patient with you, so tell me what we’re in for.”

“Without further ado.”

The National Railroad Museum is a great place to visit to learn more about the history of the trains that ran through Greater Green Bay and beyond. In fact, this museum is one of the oldest and largest train museums in the country. You can see train cars from all different periods throughout history, including the Union Pacific #4017 “Big Boy” locomotive and the Dwight D. Eisenhower, the only A4 Class locomotive in the United States.

So, we found it, with the help of a friendly local, so friendly, in fact, that she went right along with us, got us in free, in fact, by just waving at the admissions woman, “Ho there, Marge. These are prospective employers thinking of moving big old plants here, jobs for thousands. It all depends on the museum, you see.” Marge may have been used to her, almost managed to smile and did emit a tired sigh of reluctant acceptance.

Our new friend, or abductor, did seem to know a lot about the equipment there and was pretty good at filtering through the dull stuff—how many tons did it weigh? Really? I’d never guessed that. I was worried we’d never get rid of her, and, sure enough, she ended the tour by inviting us to dinner—more like insisting.

I looked to Polly, who looked to me, who looked at the woman and finally saw how anxious she seemed, as if we were going to solve some sort of dilemma that was paralyzing her life. That sounds so melodramatic, but it’s what struck me and made me agree about the

invitation.

I'll cut this short, as it is sort of sad and I want to get us to dear Karina. The upshot of the invitation was that we went to her small house, clean as anything could be but not really hiding that she was poor. Probably very poor, which made it even worse for we overloaded rich kids to be sponging off her. At least she didn't throw t-bone steaks at us, just some sort of stew, and the food wasn't what made the evening so tough anyhow.

Molly (rhymed with Polly, as she repeated a lot) had two kids of her own, turns out, and had, she said, "sort of lost them." Took me a bit to realize what she meant: they had grown up, gone away, and cut all ties, or so it seemed. At least, I didn't try to float some dumb reassurances—"Oh, they'll reconnect before long, just trying their wings." What made it awful was that Molly kept apologizing and reassuring us that she didn't mean to kidnap us. Holy shit.

Anyhow, we figured, later that evening, that we'd spend one more day dawdling on the road down toward Madison, tomorrow at Cave of the Winds and Friday with Karina, just so's you know (just so's I know).

That afternoon I had kind of figured, after our steamy and intimate talk about playing with our privates that we would turn to enacting steamy and intimate things, but no. Maybe it was Molly cooled our ardor and maybe we were just substituting talk for action. It was like the more daring our conversation, the more restrained our action. Makes no sense.

Maybe Polly can figure it out.

I can't figure it out, Bert. Maybe old-fashioned prudery and maybe the feeling that's growing between us. You think? I'm not even sure what I mean by that, maybe something like the more we trust one another in our babble, the more reluctant we are to move on to bodies, as if we want to assure someone—the other person? Ourselves?—that we aren't faking it. I have no idea in hell what that

means. I launched the sentence hoping the words would explain it by themselves. Wrong!

Anyhow, next on our list was Cave of the Winds, where we planned to occupy ourselves for a full day, what with having to drive down there first, you see—and isn't this fascinating!

Bert took the wheel, just like the pushy fellow he was, so I settled in to read about Cave of the Winds and see what tingling talk we'd discover. It was becoming so obvious that there was what the science teachers called an inverse relationship—ain't you impressed!—between the ire of our talk and the arctic freeze of our behavior. I suppose we could have tried restricting our talk to things like school and parents and gossip about friends, but what would that have resulted in, huh? What are you suggesting, reader? Did you turn to these pages hoping for commonplace teen porn? Shame!

"So, Bert, how can we find a subject that'll compensate us for our chaste lifestyle?"

"Maybe we should turn to more tried and true ways of mortifying the flesh, Polly."

"Like gouging one another with forks, pulling out nose hair, cutting toenails too far back or extracting them."

"Maybe just short of that, less medieval."

"Ah, I see. You think maybe we should modify our chastity, let it slip a little."

"Maybe even invade the land of normal teen behavior, Polly?"

"Are you mad? Anyhow, let's throw caution to the winds—in our talk."

"OK. I'll name a subject."

"Do."

"OK."

"I'm waiting."

"Right."

Silence.

Finally, "You know, Polly, we've pretty much covered every forbidden topic I can imagine. I know you are hot on virtually all

subjects related to bodies, clothing, and touch, but I am at a loss to come up with something new.”

“One great thing, Bert, is that these oft-repeated topics are ever-fresh, ever-arousing, at least to you, as I can testify.”

“Don’t be gross, Polly.”

Was he serious? Should I apologize? Anyhow, I was silenced.

“OK, Polly, tell me which boys in our class you fantasized about. No, tell me which ones you hoped to see naked and then I can tell you whether you were right to so yearn.”

“You seen every boy at school naked?”

“Oh, sure.”

“And remember all the details.”

“Naturally.”

“Well, I’m not interested, Bert. Really not. It’s a boy thing, mostly, using pictures and centerfolds, peeking and craning necks, spying. Girls are only concerned about the real thing.”

“Really? I guess you said something like that before, Polly. Huh. Do you want to stop this exploration of hot topics and maybe play a game?”

“Or sing. We haven’t done that in a while.”

And so we did, all the way to the parking lot for Cave of the Mounds, which we sloppies have been calling Cave of the Winds, I think—but no matter. Here we were, mounds and winds being much the same to us.

“So, Lambert, since I got the—wait a minute, isn’t Lambert the name of some literary character? Maybe in Henry James?”

“*The Ambassadors*. He’s one of those—whatcha call it?—centers of consciousness or something... .”

“Thanks, Bert. You know so much.”

He glanced over—we were walking to the entrance from the parking lot—as if to check on whether I was being a dick. When he saw my face, I guess, he saw what was there and grabbed my hand and squeezed.

I thought of heading us back to the camper, but instead read the

passage on this place I'd downloaded to the phone:

It is named for two nearby hills called the Blue Mounds, located in the southern slope of the east hill. The cave's beauty comes from its many varieties of mineral formations called speleothems. The Chicago Academy of Sciences considers the Cave of the Mounds to be "the significant cave of the upper Midwest" because of its beauty, and it is promoted as the "jewel box" of major American caves.

"Thanks, Polly, but why do they have to rank caves, as if others tried hard in the race but came in fourth?"

"Good point, Bert. Anyhow, here we are."

We managed to make it through the cave—the part open to tourists, I guess—without tripping or cutting ourselves on the speleothems. What a word! And they sure were beautiful, which is a trite way to put it but as good as I can do, at least in my present mood.

By the time we had finished, it was time for an early dinner—we were, as ever, very flexible about eating times—and conversation.

"Polly, tonight let's take a huge leap forward, undressing openly before one another. I'm not suggesting anything beyond that."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Anyhow, you want to do the open undressing part, slow and teasing-like?"

"Let me think about it, Bert. OK, I've thought. No."

"OK."

"I'm so sorry. I don't know why, Bert. I think it's because I so love what we're doing, what we've become, that I... ."

"Yeah."

"I don't want to mess it up, dear Bert."

"Yeah."

So, we didn't.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
MADISON AND MS. MENDOZA

I figured I could pass the narration to Bert at this point, a natural transition, as we scooted over east to see a great university town, young and lefty, and our main contact, Karina Mendoza, also young and lefty.

Maybe some background: we had been in contact with Karina for almost a year, learning about her work and background from her and—well, never mind, as revealing all would bring into being a figure we'd like very much to keep cloaked—okay, that vile Kincaid fellow, mentioned here for the last time.

"Hey, Bert, you notice we got dressed this morning in full view, like we discussed."

"Really?"

"You didn't participate. Well, I guess it was just me doing the viewing. You probably have gone beyond the boredom point with me and my tired old flesh, all predictable in every field and valley."

"Good thing you're driving, Polly, or I'd attack you right here—all that talk about fields and valleys."

"OK, chum, let's cut it out from here on out or at least five minutes and set sail across to Madison, a full day's drive, maybe fifteen miles, and find Karina Mendoza and see what's up."

I wanted to be a little bit prepared for the area, so I did some googling, discovered that Madison, like so many college towns—I heard somewhere that New Haven is the worst—has a radical town/gown split, with the town part often being poor and certainly non-white. And now, to Bert, who keeps shunning his manly duties and needs to be the one revealing the naked truth about this not-like-every-other mecca.

Well, that all makes a lot of sense, since we were about to find out—FROM POLLY—all about Madison's seamy side. But I can

distill what she had to say, about the great wealth split, about crime rates in some areas being so high as to be off the charts, about the treatment of the poor, police shootings of same, and the blithe entitlement of the college kids, who pretty much kept to themselves. Oh, Jesus!

Was there a college town that didn't have this divide? Maybe the ones in Montana and so forth, where everybody is white. And Boulder, which we loved, though at least there they seem ashamed of the separation.

Anyhow, we kept driving forward to where Polly figured we should go—I did no directing—and found a place to park close to where she said, surely not a spot the college features in its recruiting pamphlets.

We walked along a few blocks, people passing us and ignoring us pretty completely. I guess that's better than being spat upon, but I don't know if I ever felt more invisible, less able to find a pose or role that would make sense.

"What are we doing here, Polly?"

"I know, Bert. I feel like Donald Trump strolling along in Harlem, whistling and nodding to the locals."

"Yeah. Hope Karina's pretty close."

And she was, round a corner to a crowd, turned out to be a line of people. Having nothing reasonable to do with it, we just plopped ourselves at its end. I think Polly was as lost as I. What in hell were we doing?

Talking to the other people, turns out.

"You have tax problems, too?"

This from a young woman in front of us, who didn't seem to notice we were too young and too white to have tax problems of any kind that the loaded codes didn't solve for us.

Polly caught on first. "Are you in line for Ms. Mendoza? That's what she does, offers help?"

"Are you from the IRS?" The woman's cheer seemed to be all iced over in a flash. I don't know if I've ever seen anyone so afraid.

“Oh, no. We are just—friends of—her.” I was helping out enormously with my usual glibness. I did manage to clarify a little. “Friends of Karina.”

“Oh, my yes!” The smile returned, and it was all we could do to keep her from vaulting us to the front of the line. We spent the better part of two hours there (two hours and thirteen minutes, and who’s counting!), but it turned out to be some of the best experiences we’ve had all summer. The line, unlike most I’ve been in where positions are policed pretty severely, was fluid, and those ahead and behind found ways to include us in their talk. It soon became clear that so many had financial problems that went beyond simply having no money—though that figured in heavily, I’m sure. Problems with banks, credit cards, loans, the IRS, dealings beyond anything Polly and I had ever heard of. Good thing they didn’t ask us to help, but they seemed to see that, though white, we were dead stupid about such things.

And in all that time, no questions about or innuendoes concerning what we were doing day and night in a camper, unsupervised. They seemed to take it in stride, once we spilled the beans on our situation, laughed and were nice. Somehow, that seemed to make it sadder, as if it were not for them to have an opinion on white kids’ activities. We might as well have been the spoiled brats belonging to the fruit farms using their labor and giving so little in return. In a way, of course, that’s just what we were.

About half-way through our wait time, we found ourselves faced with a couple of kids about our age. I’m not sure if they were attached to adults or had some kind of financial snarl of their very own. Anyhow, they were a little easier, after a while even jokey. I’ll skip the clumsy opening stuff, and—

“Well, gringos, so you planning on doing some charity work here? Oh, we’d be so grateful, so very grateful. You could count on us to pick corn the quickest, give you the biggest ears, too.”

“Who said anything about charity? Huh? You go right on with your picking and we’ll see about pay. Maybe, maybe not. Don’t be

uppity.”

“So, you guys know Karina?”

“No, not yet,” Polly said. “We know a friend—well, let’s just say we have a kind of introduction to her—heard lots about her.”

“She’s about the finest person anywhere.” I don’t know which one said this, but seemed like everyone in the line nodded.

I was almost scared to meet her after all this—seemed like meeting some potentate or something. But she put all that out of play within seconds.

“Oh, yes, Jim said. How wonderful—and I’m so sorry you had to stay in the line. But aren’t they wonderful people?”

Polly said something, and Karina said she’d be through in about forty-five minutes, if that’d be OK, and then she’d take us to dinner. The idea of this woman, so wrapped up in helping others, taking US to dinner... Well, I sure wasn’t going to go for that.

“Oh, Karina. We’ll wait—as long as it takes—but dinner’s on us.”

She looked at me as if I were joking (or as if I were an idiot) and then gave me a hug. I guess that settled that.

Anyhow, we spent the evening at a local restaurant doing a mix of what seemed to be authentic ethnic foods of various sorts and clearly catering to some of the people we’d seen this afternoon. A few smiled and waved, and I’m willing to bet that they all knew Karina, but they kept their distance—out of respect for her, I hope, not us. She deserves it.

We had a tough time getting her to talk about herself, but we did discover that she does all sorts of financial work—not just taxes, though plenty of that—in the community, as something of the center of how so many people operate, manage to stay afloat. I wasn’t too clear on the details, and Karina kept turning the talk back on us and our trip.

But what a woman. I feel as if I talk more I’ll diminish somehow what she stands for and does. I wish someday I can be one-tenth the person she is. I know I speak for Polly in all this, too.

And that's enough from me.

OK, Bert. Polly here. I'm with you about Karina. If this trip needed a justification—and maybe it does—there it is.

So, we got to our campsite late. We were both kind of wound-up (as my mama says) but, instead of doing what any other hot teen couple might do, we turned to our old friend Melville, probably hoping he'd ice us. Why we'd want that I have no idea. But we've been over that subject before without shedding any light. So, *Heeeere's Herman*—

But it so happened, that those boats, without seeing Pip, suddenly spying whales close to them on one side, turned, and gave chase; and Stubb's boat was now so far away, and he and all his crew so intent upon his fish, that Pip's ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably. By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him; but from that hour the little boy went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his ship-mates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.

"I think that's one of the best, Bert."

“Yeah. ‘He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it.’ Because he sees the truth about things—about God—he seems mad.”

“Mad is what we call truth we cannot bear.”

“Righty, Polly. We don’t want to see how indifferent, purposeless it all is, confirming what we secretly know.”

“Well, I know I feel much cheerier now, Bert, and I thank you for that bracing jolt.”

“Wouldn’t want you to be happy.”

“Not without warrant.”

“And you want me to provide just that justification, huh, Polly, huh?”

“You only offer that when there’s no way to carry out your promise, of course, which is the way of you indifferent teases.”

“I learned that in church.”

“Yeah. Did you go to church, Bert? I thought it was just me subjected to that child abuse.”

“A few times—with friends. I thought it was all pretty interesting, when it wasn’t boring. Of course, I was young then.”

“Unlike now, when you’d get up and denounce the preacher and the entire congregation, exposing them for the sinners and hypocrites they are.”

“It’s one of those things, Polly, that seems so simple to us privileged white assholes and very complicated to people who have their lives and histories all entwined with churches. I find it pretty easy to denounce all that crap, see it as reigning in lives and misdirecting them, but that seems too easy, too obvious, even. I can say that your life will be better without that mysticism, but what if that’s about it for you, all you have?”

“I keep thinking about my own parents—who sure as hell don’t fit what you’re saying. But I see, Bert. People who have no hope, no happiness. Slaves, for instance. I know, like Frederic Douglass says, that slave-owners loved shoving Christianity at those they owned, but... .”

“But, yeah, Polly. Maybe there are some things we should just shut the hell up about, huh?”

“Yeah. We have plenty of other opinions, won’t miss these, store ‘em away with views of the stock market or higher math.”

“Right.”

“Now that we got that solved, Bert, let’s turn our attention to more fun things here in Madison, unless—you know.”

“Unless we prefer to excite ourselves pointlessly—or not so pointlessly with daring trips into new personal—ah... .”

“OK, by me. I’ve been wanting to travel to new personal territory.”

“Or, since we won’t do that, we’ll find ways to occupy ourselves here, without going to the state capitol building, a zoo, or a museum.”

“Right, Bert. You drive, and, as you slither by I promise to keep my hands where they belong—on your buxom bum.”

I turned instead to the material I already had at hand and found that Madison did feature lots of alternatives to tourist-torture, including various scavenger hunts, some with hilarious rules about kings and queens, others with more of what I took for standard fare: lists of things-to-locate, like dog turds, used Kleenex, tampons, discarded rubbers, and half-eaten hot dogs.

Turns out the game was very high-techy, asking us, right off, how large our group was. I was hesitant about putting in 2, delayed so long it switched to another question, wanting to know if I was alone and would like to attach myself to others in the same boat. I was about to tell the thing I was not alone, but just about, when it suddenly just went ahead united me—united us—with a group of ten others, meet at Carpenter’s (address right there to be copied) in sixteen-seventeen minutes. Give ‘em a credit card and it’s all official.

So, naturally we followed through and, within less than thirteen minutes, were at Carpenter’s along with about six others, who no sooner greeted us than found their numbers swollen to a dozen, counting usuns.

A youngish guy—college kid?—said he had been texted and told

he was “organizer, temporary, not to be confused with leader.” He seemed about as clear on what that meant as the rest of us, so we all just stood around. Then, Liam, the official organizer, sort of yipped excitedly, told us he had just received the list and was instructed to portion it out to the rest of us.

What it contained—I know you’re dying to hear—was a long record of seventy-two items/goals (no dog turds among them) that we were to divide amongst us, six each, and go to town, staying within a quarter-mile radius (as if we knew what that was) and meeting back at Carpenter’s in eighty-five minutes, no more. First, though, we were given ten-twelve minutes to examine the personal lists we had and negotiate swaps, so we could avoid things repugnant to us and gather unto us favorites or things easy for us to spot.

Turns out, though, that there didn’t seem to be any swapping. Good-natured group it was—and besides, one impossible item was as good as another, right?

But what happened was these other kids sort of glommed onto us and we found ourselves with god-awful lengthy lists and about a half dozen searchers.

“How about you and I team up?”

This from a guy who kind of cuddled into me, didn’t wait for a response, and started reading from the lists we had:

an acorn
a plastic 6-pack holder
a feather (not attached to a bird)
a pinecone
a Y-shaped twig
something natural and blue
ladybug
something to recycle

There was more, but those are the ones Wo and I zeroed in on, found em, too, so quickly we had a good forty-five minutes left.

(You're wondering where Bert was all this time. Good for attentive you. I confess I was so focussed on the damned list that I sort of forgot about him. Not forgot, you know, but... . Forgot.)

"Wanta get a coffee, Polly?"

"Sure."

"Not like I'm hitting on you, you know."

Hitting on me? I hadn't heard that phrase—except from parents. Was this guy really forty-five or something? Not to be racist, but it's hard to tell—oh, fuck!

So we toddled off to a place he seemed to know about. What was I doing?

I let him buy me a latte—why? We found a spot—he seemed to know where one would be, probably a regular here—and settled in. For what?

"So, Polly, you a student here, right? This place is so damned huge you never run into the same faces twice, hardly."

I tried to straighten him out, though he seemed to think I was joking about being so young, just brushed it aside, wondered if I'd like to go to a party that very night, at "his club."

"No." I can't even now believe that's all I said. No explanations, apologies, thanks but... . Just, "No."

Even suave Wo seemed a little startled by that, retreated to telling me all about some class he was taking in 18th-century something. Anyhow, we got through the time, reported back to start, where I quickly located Bert—never so glad to see my dear buddy—so dear.

Wo and I, turned out, got a prize, a soup ladle, unfancy but probably very serviceable. He insisted that I keep it, seemed anxious to rid himself of any reminders of this afternoon. I didn't even feel bad about that, much less moved to apologize. I have to find Bert and tell him. He'll be so proud.

Turns out he was, very, though I'll have to take that on trust, as what he said was, "Oh." When asked to tell about his own wild experience, he just said, "It was OK." Made me thank he'd lapsed back into his condition, but I decided to wait a bit, give him space. Turns

out that worked.

"Ah, Polly, it was so sad. This girl I teamed up with, a college sophomore, was really kind."

"That was sad? Sorry."

"Don't be. Turns out our hunt took us into this little woods, where we were scrambling around in the brush. I noticed she kept looking back over her shoulder at me, almost like she was waiting for something. I finally asked her if she was OK, and then she let loose, you know."

I didn't, but knew enough to keep my trap shut about it.

"She told me the last time she was in the woods, on what she thought was just a walk, with this guy—not even a date or anything, between classes or something, I didn't follow that part. Anyhow, the last time she was, this guy grabbed her and—I don't want to say. You can figure it out."

"I'm sorry, Bert."

"No, it's me that's sorry. Sometimes I think the world would be almost OK if all the white men just, you know, surrendered, put themselves in places where they couldn't do any more damage—maybe in a giant gulag somewhere."

"Oh, Bert. Some white guys, really a lot, try to escape the traps. Some do. You."

He just looked at me, doubtfully.

"You know, Polly, when we talk about hot stuff, even there, it makes me feel as if I'm taking advantage of you, luring you, you know."

"You are so dear, Bert. But you aren't luring me."

He looked doubtful.

"Tell you what. Next time we're rousing each other up like that, I'll monitor it and let you know the result."

He actually smiled. Yes, he did.

That evening, we found us a nice place to eat—no games, not even karaoke, and then went back early to our iniquity den and... I am not here to minister to your lowest pleasures (even if a report,

unvarnished, would do that, Bert and I being so—I don't know), so I'll just stop right there, pointing forward to our farewell to Madison on the morrow and our upcoming entry into Milwaukee, where the wild things are.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TAKING A BREATHER—OR SOMETHING

Polly managed to slip this job to me while I was napping or otherwise occupied doing essential tasks. Anyways, here I am, your very own Bert, ready to usher you into the Cream City, which well-known nickname (says the site, though you'd never heard of it) comes from the clay which made the bricks which—yawn. So, what you want is not an Intro to Clay but more of our conversation.

“So, Polly, why are we spending our summers waltzing around in privilege, while other kids are stuck at home?”

“And still others are working on farms or in factories.”

“Yeah, and struggling to stay alive.”

“Because we have money aplenty.”

“Our parents have—because their parents had.”

“Yeah. You gonna talk about inheritance again, Bert?”

“Not. Well, I was after something closer to home, closer to us—why we just float along spending money on ourselves, as if that were natural.”

“Jesus Christ, Bert. I see.”

“And we are about to roll into Milwaukee and keep carefully to nice white areas, so we can make sure our white dollars remain where they belong, do no good at all, just sustain the miserable status quo.”

“Which is what we've done all summer.”

“And what we do back home, Polly, as we luxuriate in liberal Santa Monica, now that they've cleared out the homeless.”

“I think, Bert, white conditioning gives us blinders and turns them on and off for us—mostly on.”

“As has this trip, Polly. How about we try to change that?”

“Yes. How? I don't think we'll do much by hitting the inner city.”

“I know what you mean, dear, but let's try to do just that. The minimum we can do is spend some money there, try to drop some

cash without making it obvious that's what we're doing. We can always get more from home—maybe let them know that's what we're doing?"

"Right, Bert. And let's do let them know. They'll like that. It's one thing about our folks we can rely on—well, one of the things."

So, we did, called both sets and let them in on our plan to find neighborhoods and people who could use our help—and then offering just that. Both sets reacted similarly—enormously pleased and resolutely set against showing it. Polly and I decided their reticence was caused by some instinct not to fuck things up, knowing that we wanted this to be our own decision. In a sense, it wasn't so much a decision as a long-overdue awakening, but it'd work just fine, we figured, whatever we called it.

So, we hit the outskirts of Milwaukee, where, sure enough, things seemed as bleached as expected. Figured, though, that Polly would find the inner city by some means or other. Turns out she did so by pulling over and asking people in this shopping mall—with me doing the asking. Took several repeats, as the first ones I asked either laughed or looked annoyed and walked away.

"It's OK, Bert. They aren't used to people in campers with California plates asking about their secret hideaways."

"If we had Nevada plates it'd be different."

"Mississippi."

"Yeah. But it'd still be a luxury camper."

"Maybe, darling, we should just follow our noses, veer away from—well, what we're used to."

"Drawn to."

"Yeah—but it's our own fault. Right?"

"I want to find somebody else to blame, Polly. Otherwise, where'd we be?"

"Accountable."

"Which won't do."

So Polly kept driving, for forever, it seemed, finally landed in territory that looked promising. Thing was, there weren't visible any

malls with humongous parking lots, extra-wide streets, other camper-friendly places of the sort we'd come to rely on.

I couldn't believe it, but Polly finally just stopped—there wasn't much traffic—and asked this guy on the street.

"Hey, you know any place where we can park this thing?"

"What? Jesus Christ, Missy, what you doing down here? Sure you want to park?"

"We're sure."

"Well, that place over on Washington where they tore down The Dollar Tree is pretty clear now—smooth, I mean and not too much rubble. Nobody'd mind if you pulled in. You visiting someone?"

"No," Polly said, real friendly, "We just wanted to visit anybody'd who'd put up with us—a white invasion, but just us two."

This guy may have been suspicious, but he wasn't proof against Polly's smile—nobody was. But, having no idea how to find Washington, we were no closer to our goal—whatever that was. I don't know if I'd ever felt more a minor part of Polly's play, not that I minded any.

She was leaning out the driver's window, almost whispering with this guy, who'd moved in close to conspire. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but next thing I knew, Polly had opened the side door and he was in with us. Holy Christ!

"Just take a sharp right up here. Washington's the third street, goes both ways, but you want to go left."

Within a few minutes we were parked and out of the camper, the three of us, apparently welded—who knew for how long? At least I could now hear the two of them plotting, though I seemed no closer to being a cog in their machinery.

"There ain't much here any more except bars!"

"Maybe a community center or a youth club, something like that?"

I wish I could say it was me who asked that, but... .

"Yeah, there's one attached to the church up here, kind of serves as a way to help the kids."

“Does it work—I mean, does it help?” I asked, wanting to have some part in all this, even that of the know-nothing.

“Sometimes,” he said, looking at me with a strong expression of something, what I could not tell.

“Actually,” Polly said, “Bert and I don’t want to shove in as if we were investigators or something. We don’t know shit, just want to see if there’s some way we could help.”

“Tutoring, something like that, giving advice?” The guy seemed not to be sneering, just wondering what the hell she could mean.

“Giving money,” Polly said.

“We’ve decided that’s what we do best, throw money around,” I said.

The guy looked at me as if he might get angry, hadn’t yet decided.

“I mean, we’re white people, and that’s what we do, right? We spend money on ourselves, things we don’t even fucking need, making sure it never reaches those who need it so badly.” I was almost crying.

Our guide (Ahmad, we had learned) stopped and looked at me in a different way. For some reason, I was worried he might hug me, but he didn’t do that, just smiled and waited to see if I had more to confess.

I did. “Polly and I seemed suddenly to discover something we’d spent a lot of time hiding, from ourselves mostly, that we’ve spent the whole summer being worse than useless, demonstrating what selfish shits we are.”

Polly was silent through all this, but she had moved over beside me, as if she were joining in with whatever it was—not a selfish confession, I hoped. Our conductor didn’t say anything, just told us to follow.

Before we knew it, we were inside this building, apparently attached to some church or other, and talking to a man and a woman, Tricia and David, who, I guess, ran things. I was hoping Polly would take over and she did.

"I hear you have a place here that helps kids?"

"Would you like to learn more about our activities?"

"Yes," Polly said, "though I should say that we also don't want to take all your time."

She looked carefully at Polly, maybe wondering if she were just one more impatient, all-knowing white shit. "Sure, sure! We know all about it." Then she seemed to figure it out, turned on her—on us—this great smile and started in on all the things they did in the community. What got me was that she didn't talk much about problems and difficulties, about how lucky they were to make any difference, given the conditions under which they were forced to work. No, she spoke as if the kids were all bright and eager, resources were there, and the job they did so rewarding. Wow.

Polly listened carefully, then, at the end, just said, "I think what we can do to tell you how wonderful you are—and what you've done for us—is by giving some money. I know that's crude, but for us it's a big turnaround. We've just been spending money—lots of it—on ourselves and we want to stop it. I think we can, since Bert here—he's right there—will make sure we do."

Everyone was silent.

Then Polly. "I make him sound like a bully or a manly-man. Just the opposite. He's not so bad, given everything."

Everyone smiled, even me.

Polly signed over a credit card statement to them for \$6,500, which odd figure she arrived at by means hidden from me. But she did it wonderfully. Nobody swooned in thanks, told us we were the best folks ever, that we'd changed their views on the whole white race.

They acted like it was nothing special—could not have been kinder, made us both think maybe we were doing the right thing, had wandered into the right territory.

Well, Bert, why not quit right at the peak of things? You were

ever the sly one, of course, but that last stroke was—well, it was.

Ahmad invited us to dinner, seemed to do so in a way that suggested he was sure we'd refuse, maybe because that's what he was hoping for, but I got my loud acceptance in before he had a chance, so took down directions and beat it back to the camper to—wash our hands, I guess. We did know enough not to get all dressed up.

"Should we take something, Polly?"

"I doubt it. You think that's a white thing, Bert?"

"Yeah—or maybe just a polite thing. In either case, it's something we're renouncing, right?"

"Trying to, Bert. I wonder if we tell Ahmad about our new resolve to find our way beyond white privilege, he can help us?"

"You think, Polly?"

"I can tell you don't. Bad idea, right?"

"Well, it's a bit like asking the victim for assistance in making the oppressor feel less responsible. Not quite that, maybe."

"Yeah."

"I do feel kind of excited about what we can do with our new way of seeing things."

"We're not just throwing a party for ourselves are we, Bert, imagining we are now different just because we have said some words?"

"No. I think we're OK. We just have to think better."

"See more."

"Be different."

The dinner was really hearty. I think it was also delicious, but I had trouble focussing on the food, so occupied was I in thinking how Ahmad might help us become less detached from the world we were traveling through.

Finally, I just asked him. "Bert and I took forever to see that we were acting in some white dream, floating on the surface of privilege from place to place, throwing around money that was not really even ours and expecting others to do things for us—like feed us, be polite to us, notice us, like us. How can we get out of all that, Ahmad?"

He didn't seem to misunderstand, looked at me steadily, smiling.

Finally, he did reply, in a soft and kind tone, “I think you know, Polly, that I can’t answer that. I do believe that you’ve been doing a dance to music you didn’t write, music that seems natural and right to you, always has. But part of that music blotted me out. You know that.”

“Yeah,” Bert said, but he saw that Ahmad was not finished and signaled him to go on.

“You guys are trying to see all that, maybe fight your way out of it, yeah. Good for you. I can imagine it isn’t easy. I’m not the one to congratulate you, though.”

Bert reached across the table and touched his arm.

“And here I thought you’d present an award to Whitey, who has always had your best interests at heart.”

Ahmad laughed, would have punched Bert jovially, I think, had there not been a gravy boat and about three-hundred rolls between them. I saw what was happening, kind of considered being pissed about the macho bonding, but decided we had bigger game to bring down.

I would have said something raucous (and hilarious) had not Ahmad’s parents and two siblings been there. As it was, I satisfied myself with a distant but benign smile of reluctant acceptance. After all, we needed Ahmad’s guidance on what was ahead of us, a new path and new visions.

“So, Ahmad,” I finally got in, “we are hoping you can give us a hand on what does lie ahead, how we might—you know, avoid sliding back into old patterns and find—I don’t know—new routes.”

He looked at me politely, didn’t say anything.

“I mean, do you know some people in Chicago we might—hook up with?”

He didn’t slug me.

“Sorry, I mean... . Maybe not Chicago. Gary? Er... . “

“Cleveland?” Bert threw in, trying to help but probably only making things worse.

“OK, guys, I see,” Ahmad finally said. “You want some peach pie?”

I think Bert realized before I did that Ahmad was telling us there was no network of black folk, alert to the needs of reformed white people and anxious not only to let bygones be bygones but to lay aside personal concerns and devote themselves to being tour guides, calling ahead to friendly lodgings up ahead.

Finally, it was Ahmad's mother, who had been listening in and seemed to understand us much better than we did ourselves, who put us straight. "You young people will do just fine. Your hearts are in the right place—or heading there. Nobody can tell you what to do. You wouldn't want that anyhow."

As we left, she added. "You just go on to Chicago and wherever else you were planning. Who knows what lies ahead, right? That's why you're taking this trip. And don't beat up on yourselves for being white. I mean, not like you're the worst white folk on the planet—not quite."

When we were alone and back at our place, I asked Bert if he thought she was being sarcastic.

"Yeah."

"In what way?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, honey, maybe we'll figure it out in the next volume."

"I doubt it."

James R. Kincaid