

# **PECKER TRACKS**

A Novel

by

R.S. Dees

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## Prologue

My tires eased to a rolling stop as the 4Runner came to rest on the asphalt parking lot. From the driver's seat, I looked to the west, over the water, and saw four pelicans gliding in formation through the blue sky dotted with puffy, cumulus clouds. Turning the key, I killed the engine, and stepped from the car. I walked the short distance along the highway toward the bridge, a walk I had made hundreds of times in the past, yet not once in the last three decades. A light breeze carried up the fresh scent of the water from below as I set foot on the walkway that ran along the bridge's western edge.

To my right, three seagulls circled two men who were bait-fishing along the bank. High above their heads, an army of locusts set the towering cottonwood canopy alive while the squawking cries of the gulls cut through the air, and swallows—dozens of them darting beneath me—searched for mosquitoes under the bridge. Across the water, half a mile away, two bow-fishermen trolled quietly, searching near the shoreline for the elusive paddlefish.

I made my way across the bridge then stood there, leaning on the railing, peering at the men below. The experience was surreal, sending me back to a different period of time. Memories of the old fishing hole flooded my mind, especially that hot afternoon, much like today, when I hooked the state record bigmouth buffalo. I could see the very spot where Butch had landed that huge son of a bitch some thirty years earlier. For foolish reasons, I assumed the place would magically vanish once I moved away, yet here it was, now occupied by two nameless fishermen, and it looked like it had hardly changed. I'm sure the two men had no idea how big an event had occurred on that very

spot they were now fishing. I wanted to shout down to them and tell them they were on sacred ground, but I couldn't find the courage. Then it hit me—how many other people had, over the intervening years, fished on that very spot not realizing its historical significance. The thought humbled me, leaving me saddened, feeling old.

I looked to the riverbank on my left. It hadn't changed that much either. The Russian olive trees were creeping down the bank, but it was as if the old place had frozen in time, awaiting my return.

The two men were having a good day, their stringer threaded with three northern pike. Dozens of carp and buffalo were already sunning themselves beneath the surface, basking in the warm layer of water heated by the sun. Feeling young again, my emotions got the better of me. I grabbed a handful of gravel from the roadway, wanting desperately to throw it overboard, to pelt the unsuspecting fish, and to hear the machinegun-like splatter of the rocks in the water below. *Hell, you're not fifteen anymore, Ron. Give it a break. Plus, there are guys down there fishing.*

Reluctantly, I let the gravel fall to the ground, but the temptation to recapture my youth was too overpowering. I grabbed another handful, walked to the other side of the bridge, where there were no fisherman but plenty of carp, and let it fly. *Rat-a-tat-tat!* The rocks hit the water like broken glass, yet the fish barely moved, only diving an inch or two deeper. *There, that felt good.* Had it been much warmer and I a bit younger, I would have been tempted to drop my drawers and cannonball into the water, but for now, I was content to just throw rocks.

I walked back across the road and gazed to the west, soaking in the experience and wringing out memories like a sponge: the sun, the birds, the water, the fish, the smells,

the sights, and the sounds.

A lone car came down the road and across the bridge. *Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom!* Five distinct thuds sounded as the car passed over the bridge's expansion joints. It was a sound I could recognize in my sleep.

I glanced again at the vacant shoreline to my left. It beckoned, calling me to give it one last try. *Why not?* I thought. *I've got my gear in my car. I've got a few hours to burn.* I turned back to my vehicle and began to walk away. And that's when I saw it. It was nothing obvious, but something familiar all the same, something that dredged up a sense of déjà vu stronger than anything I had felt in my life, something that made my heart skip a beat, and then quiver like it hadn't in ages.

I brushed a thin coat of dust from the railing, squinting, straining to get a better view. Like magic, it came into focus. *Well, I'll be damned.* Sure enough, there it was:

Handwritten symbols: RB + mm. The letters are written in a cursive, slightly slanted style. The 'R' and 'B' are on the top line, a '+' sign is in the middle, and 'mm' is on the bottom line.

I couldn't believe it was still there after all these years—five little symbols scrawled into the weathered, gray paint on the bridge's steel guardrail, exposing the rusty undercoat below. They had been painstakingly carved by the once-sharp barb of an orange and gold K.O. Wobbler decades ago. The letters were readable, but only if you knew where to look and what you were looking for. A tankful of time and Mother Nature had done their best to erase this tiny bit of evidence, but it had proven to be resilient. The carvings had survived the biting cold of countless Montana winter nights and the oppressive heat of many drought-stricken summers.

I traced my finger across the letters and closed my eyes, drifting back to a time of innocence, a time of guilt, a time of pleasure, and a time of pain. Nervously, I smiled as dozens of memories raced through my mind and filled my soul with warmth—and my body with chills.

I could smell the sweet aroma of her perfume, Musk she would later tell me. And the scent of Flex in her hair, the taste of strawberry lip gloss, and the stunning way her touch could make me shudder. I remembered her voice whispering in my ear, the giggling, and the laughing. And that smile. A smile that was meant for only me. Or so I had thought.

My body trembled as my skin tightened into goose bumps and a chilling breeze blew up from the dark green water below. Ice trickled down my spine and exited through my heels as the memory of an ancient deception rocked me to the core. My head became light as I was overcome with vertigo. I opened my eyes to gather my bearings and grabbed the railing to brace myself from falling, from tumbling back into space—and time.

I remember the year well. How could I forget? A half-century of years have blended together, some have become even non-existent in the erasable hard drive of my mind—but not that year. That year sticks out like a sore thumb. The Disco Duck wasn't quite on his deathbed, but he had a bad case of pneumonia. In a few years, he, the Disco Lady, and all other disco dudes would be all but gone, but not forgotten. It was long before Osama and Saddam were considered the scourge of the world, but Americans were already well-versed in despising leaders from the Middle East. This one was known as "The Ayatollah." Back then, ISIS wasn't an indiscriminate killing machine, but a sexy, Saturday morning superhero who shared the screen with Shazam. And during this time, two boys from the Midwest—one slow and white, hailing from the small hamlet of French Lick, Indiana; the other athletic and black, born and raised in Lansing, Michigan—would meet in the NCAA Basketball Championship and change the face of the NBA game, forever. Well, until a shoe-salesman by the name of Jordan came around. I remember that year well—1979.

My eyes drifted back to the railing to see if the carving was really there. It was. "RB + MM." Ronny Biscans plus Mary Ellen Moffit. That carving had to be thirty-five,

almost forty years old. I should know. I was the carver.

# 1

## Milo's

“That was Patrick Hernandez with ‘Born to Be Alive,’” announced the DJ on Regina's own CKCK radio—620 on the AM dial if you're keeping track at home. The disco groove ended with Pat's background singers stuttering, “Dute, dute, do, do, do, do—” pause here if you're singing along “—dute, dute, do, do, do, do—” another pause, and then a deep, manly voice that surely didn't belong to Pat “—Born to be alive.”

The day was Friday, June 1 to be exact, the first day of summer vacation and the “Last Summer of the Seventies” as proclaimed by the man on the radio. It would be another five or six years before FM radio would hit these desolate stretches of Northeast Montana, but hell, we didn't know any different.

“That song rocks!” Melv said as my car skidded to a dusty halt in the graveled parking lot at Milo's Lake Stop, our local bait establishment.

Melvin Erikson was a skinny, spectacled towhead, fourteen years in the making—a year younger than myself—and he was my best friend. His skin was fish-belly white and his mopy hair was even lighter. Dripping wet, he tipped the scales at a whopping ninety-five pounds.

The strangest thing about Melv was that he was born with hexadactyly—six fingers on his left hand and six toes on his left foot—similar to his older brother, Marv, who only scored an extra digit in the finger department. Melv wore special orthopedic shoes that cost his folks an arm and a leg to accommodate this oddity. A good Norwegian boy, he had moved to Fort Peck two years earlier from some town in Minnesota, and we had hit it off from the start.

“No doubt!” I agreed, thinking that “Born to Be Alive” was almost as good as John Stewart's “Gold”, our latest favorite song. We were as young, naïve, and carefree as two kids could be— hell, as all kids were back then.

I turned off the engine and climbed out of the Blue Flash, my turquoise and white '69 Chrysler Newport. A boat it was, but the Flash hauled all of our fishing gear and if a little minnow juice spilled on the floorboard, nobody really gave a rat's ass.

“Will ya look at that?” Melv said, pointing to the sign in front of Milo’s.

I looked up to see what had garnered his attention. We all saw it and were dumbstruck. Gas had just jumped another penny—to eighty-eight cents.

“What a ripoff!”

“No shit. What’s he tryin’ to do?” I asked. “Does he think we’re rich or somethin’? Heck, pretty soon it’s gonna be at a buck.”

Milo’s gas was already priced a nickel above anyone else in the county, but the next nearest station was almost twenty miles away, so there wasn’t much we could do about it but bitch. And that, we did plenty of.

“Hey, will one of you let me outta this heap?” pleaded Butch Butts from the back seat on the passenger side. Butch was our somewhat beefy friend and the only kid our age who had a mustache. At least that’s what *he* called it. To me, it looked as though a fuzzy caterpillar had fallen asleep on his upper lip, but he sure sported that thing with pride—a tribute to his manliness, I guess. Not only did Butch have his “mustache”, but this hairy beast had sideburns that would make Elvis quiver in his honky-tonk shoes. As for me, I was old enough to shave, but chose not to. Instead, I sported a collection of blond hairs on my chinny chin chin that would make Scooby’s friend, Shaggy, look like a he-man. I had been growing *them* since eighth grade.

“Hold on, hold on,” Melv told Butch. His door handle had broken off the previous winter when he had tried to open it one night when the wind chill had dipped below minus forty. Where in the hell we were headed that night, I’ll never remember, but being the cheapskate I was, I hadn’t yet fixed the handle—and probably never would. Across the seat from Butch sat his tackle box, a Plano version the size of a small doghouse.

“Why do you always sit on this side anyway, numbnuts?” asked Melv. “You know that handle is broken.”

Butch never was going to win any prizes for smart guys. He was new in town too. His family had come from South Dakota a year earlier, and somehow, he had become part of our small group.

We all admired Johnny Cash, the “Man in Black,” but Melv and I suspected that Butch was his illegitimate son, the “Boy in Black.” Never once had we seen him in any other color of clothing. Today it was tight, black cutoffs and a Harley Davidson T-shirt of

the same color that was two sizes too small. Butch had an old, white 1968 Dodge Coronet that was always parked in front of his house. He'd sit in that car for hours. He didn't have his driver's license yet, but he sure liked to sit in that thing—he was dreaming about driving, I guess. Butch even had a name picked out for it: “White Lightning.” Melv opened the door to let him out.

“Screw you,” Butch told him. With a right front tooth made of gold and an acne-scarred face, Butch looked and acted a lot tougher than he really was. He seemed to do that a lot.

As I walked past the gas pumps and made my way toward the entrance to Milo's, I heard a bell ding inside the doorway. Butch had jumped on the hose that signaled to Milo the arrival of a gas customer.

I turned back to Butch and rolled my eyes. “Good one, Butch,” I said as I looked at Melv, like I was more mature than that. But to be honest, a betting man would have had pretty good odds if he said I had done the same thing the previous weekend.

The old screen door sprang open and another bell jingled above our heads as we made our way into Milo's, a warning to the old man to wake up in case he was catching a snooze or having a sip of whiskey, which he had been known to do on occasion. Immediately, we were welcomed with the moldy, damp stench of the Lake Stop.

Fishing lures of all colors, sizes, and shapes hung from cards on the walls with the price handwritten next to them in Magic Marker. Hooks, bobbers and sinkers were packed in their own separate bins, while rods, reels, and rod-and-reel combos (even a Zebco Snoopy combo for the little tykes) hung from displays, their overinflated price tags dangling below.

Bags of Fritos, Cheetos and Doritos filled the shelves, and pop and sandwiches lined the freezer. Today's “special” was a six-pack of Pepsi for three dollars and fifty cents. That was Milo for you, though, had to make his buck when he could. During the Fourth of July weekend, you could bet your ass that price would be doubled, maybe even tripled.

In one corner sat a newfangled, do-it-yourself stand where you could take a ladle of melted cheese and pour it on a pile of corn chips. “Nachos” was what Milo called them. Next to that was a rotisserie with two-day-old, rubbery wieners tumbling around in their

everlasting effort to become cooked to perfection, displaying their wares and begging each prospective customer to snatch them from their rolling eternity and end their lives in the crotch of a bun. In addition, like any good bait shop, Milo also took care of the fisherman's most basic needs: beer and toilet paper.

What brought us to Milo's on this morning, though, wasn't any of the above. Our mission today was to pick up some bait. We had already snagged a six-pack of Shasta Root Beer from Melv's fridge, so we were set in the beverage department.

“Can I help ya with somethin’, boys?” Milo asked as he looked up from a copy of the *Pecker Examiner*, Valley County’s lone weekly newspaper—a county Milo hadn’t set foot out of in thirty-four years. His deep-set, beady eyes peered out from a leathered face, which looked as though it had lived through two lifetimes—hard ones at that. A little too much hair in the nose and ears for my taste, Milo also had one lone hair protruding straight up from the top of his nose, apparently invisible to the old geezer. It made him look like an anglerfish I had seen on *Wild Kingdom* a few weeks earlier. Today, the old man wore a plaid, long-sleeved flannel shirt, even though the forecast said we’d hit eighty-eight degrees (that’s thirty-one Celsius for you Canadian readers) and a pair of old, dirty Levi’s. His feet were nestled in a pair of worn out Tony Lama shit-kickers decorated with dried manure. His bottom teeth were out today, and his old, straw cowboy hat, which had a small, red and white Dardevle dangling from its side, had seen better days.

“We need two dozen minnows, sir,” Melv answered respectfully.

Milo grabbed a used Pork and Beans can with a grizzled hand that was equally as leathered as his face.

“What size ya lookin’ fer, son?” he said as he lifted the can to his mouth and spit the brown dregs of some Copenhagen into it. He set the can down then shuffled out from behind the counter, a small amount of the tobacco clinging to his chin. He wiped it off with his shirt sleeve.

Melv turned to Butch and me. “Whaddya guys think?”

“Why don't we get a dozen big ones and a dozen medium?” I said.

“Sure, sounds good to me,” Butch added.

Melv shrugged his shoulders in agreement.

Milo led us toward the rear of the store where a door led to a back room housing the minnows. High humidity had swelled the door, causing it to stick in its frame. The old man gave the door a good bump with his shoulder, added an *oomph*, and the door scraped open. We were instantly greeted with the overpowering fishy stench we were all familiar with. I looked at Melv, pinched shut my nose, and made a face. He laughed.

Milo had three steel cattle troughs, about six feet long and rounded at both ends, in the back room. Each housed its own size of minnows—as well as the requisite colony of algae. The sound of bubbling aerators filled the room. A semi-brittle, brown net, that years ago had once been white, sat across the top of one of the tanks. A handwritten sign on the wall told us that a dozen large minnows went for three dollars and seventy-five cents, a dozen mediums fetched three bucks, and a dozen small could be had for one dollar.

A single minnow, my guess was a medium, flipped and flopped on the wet concrete floor, an unfortunate soul who had missed the bucket of the last customer and would meet its demise in a different manner than his fellow minnows. Milo's cat, Sadie, sauntered over and slurped up the small fish in one big gulp and then went on her merry way, silver bell jingling around her neck.

The old geezer grabbed the scoop net as Butch handed him our minnow bucket. Milo removed the wooden lid on the tank and propped it against the wall. The three of us leaned forward, like any curious kid would, to see what mysteries would be revealed.

“Scoot back, ya little peckerwoods,” Milo scolded us, and we all listened to the old man. Apparently, young boys in the prime of their youth didn't hold a whole lot of salt with the seasoned vet.

Milo dunked the net into the tank and scooped out a netful of sucker minnows, each about four inches long. They squirmed in the bottom of the net as the water drained away and into the dark tank below.

One by one, Milo plucked the silver fish out of the net and dropped them into our bucket, counting aloud as he went, “Thar's one, thar's two, thar's three...” until he got to twelve.

*Are you kidding me?* I looked at Melv and rolled my eyes. We were both thinking the same thing—*cheap ass!* Anyone else who owned a bait shop would just scoop out

around twenty minnows, spill them into your bucket, and call it a dozen. Not Milo, that old bastard. We weren't getting anything for free. Unfortunately for us, the nearest bait shop was seventeen miles away, so in a way, we were screwed, and the old man knew it. Funny how a guy like Milo could corner the market on minnows, but I guess he just did.

Having reached the magic number of twelve—no more, no less, mind you—Milo replaced the lid on the tank and walked over to another one under the window. Hanging from the curtain rod was a yellow No-Pest Strip that appeared to have no vacancies. In fact, it had been overbooked. A screen door next to the window led out back and overlooked a stubble field and beyond that was the Missouri River.

Milo removed the lid from the second tank and, once again, performed his magic. Up from the depths came another netful of minnows, this time of the medium variety. Again, the old codger went through his routine, one he had probably performed ten thousand times in his eighty-odd years. “Thar's one, thar's two, thar's three...”

Having filled our bucket with exactly twenty-four minnows, the old man hobbled back to the checkout counter. Melv and I followed while Butch lagged behind, sampling the nacho cheese with his finger. I was at the checkout stand reaching for my wallet and was about to hit Melv up for his share of the bill when Butch came up with a not-so-brilliant idea.

“Hey, guys, you wanna get some nightcrawlers too?”

I looked back to where he was standing and pondered this dilemma for a second. “Got any money?”

“Five frog skins,” he said proudly. It was our slang for five bucks.

“Sure, why not?” Melv said as he shrugged his shoulders again. “I don't care.”

Melv and I stood at the checkout counter—one Milo had covered with a thin sheet of glass. Beneath the glass were carefully placed Polaroids of some twenty-odd fishermen proudly holding their prized catches. Their names, as well as their fish's weight, were written in black marker on the bottom of each photo—Milo's very own trophy shelf.

*Someday I'll have my picture under that glass.*

I glanced at the newspaper Milo had been reading and a headline caught my eye: “School Nurse Reports Peckers Getting Larger and Fatter”.

I nudged Merv in the side with my elbow.

“Check it out,” I said, pointing to the headline. “Nurse Houlihan thinks we’re getting too fat.”

“Well, that don’t surprise me. All half the kids do anymore is sit on their asses and play Pong.”

I thought about what he had said, and sure enough, it was true. Pong had taken our circle of friends by storm the previous Christmas. Some would hole up for days in their basements, honing their electronic Ping-Pong skills. *Oh, well*, I thought. *Video games will never be as much fun as fishing and stuff. They’ll be just another flash in the pan, like the Pocket Fisherman.*

I turned back to Butch who was standing near the refrigerator where the worms were stored. He pulled back on the lever and opened the heavy door of the twenty-year-old appliance. On the top rack were stacks of Styrofoam cartons with “Crawlers” scrawled on each lid in black marker. The bottom rack contained similar cartons marked “Leechs.” Apparently, Milo never won any spelling bees.

Butch squatted down and surveyed the contents of the fridge. I watched his curiosity get the better of him as he reached in and grabbed a carton of leeches then lifted it to eye level.

As Milo punched up the total of our purchase on his handy-dandy adding machine, Melv and I stood at the counter mesmerized by Butch’s actions. *What in the hell was he doing?* It wasn’t long before we found out.

Butch couldn’t resist snapping the cover loose and peeking in on the creatures. A dozen of the squishy, blood-sucking critters were squirming around in the tub of water. Butch rose to his feet and gingerly poked his finger into the carton. Immediately, one of the worms attacked him and coiled itself around his finger.

“Shit!” Butch screamed.

*Oh, man, he’s gonna be in trouble. He just cussed in front of a grown-up.* That was something you didn’t do. Ever.

Melv and I jumped back and Milo looked up just in time to see Butch drop the tub of leeches to the floor. The container buckled as it hit the carpet, sending water and leeches flying everywhere. Butch was hopping around, waving his arm spasmodically in the air, trying to fling the hungry leech off of his finger. He succeeded. The little black

culprit came detached and went sailing across the room, landing with a bloody splat on Snoopy's cardboard nose. *Milo won't sell that one anytime soon.* Water was now soaking into Milo's ugly, puke-brown, tweed carpet, and leeches were squirming on top of it.

Melv snickered. "Guess you just bought yourself some leeches, Butch."

"Smooth move, Ex-Lax," I added. Butch flashed me the finger—behind Milo's back, of course.

Milo wasn't very impressed. "You goddamn kids!" he yelled. "Yer buying them leeches, son!" He scampered over to the hot dog stand as fast as his ancient body would allow and grabbed a handful of napkins, thrusting them at our mortified friend. "Here, take these," he said.

Butch took the napkins from Milo then bent over to wipe up the mess when—*rip!*—there went the back side of his cutoffs, right up the old seam. Butch's face turned beet red and his temporal artery began to throb, almost as if it was pumping out perspiration, which was now collecting on his greasy skin.

Using the lid from the container, his arms quivering like a leaf, Butch knelt down and scooped up the leeches from the floor and into the container. He snapped the lid on and then, his eyes looking down at the floor, sheepishly approached the cash register. He set the leeches on the counter and fumbled around in his back pocket until out popped his wallet.

"Here ya go, sir," he said, handing Milo a five spot. "Sorry about the mess."

Milo grabbed Butch's money, opened the register, and gave Butch his change, along with a look that was just as effective as any lecture Milo could have conjured up. Melv and I paid for our share. Believe me, it was time to leave. The bell tolled, much to Butch's relief, as we walked out of the door and climbed into the car.

"Let's get outta here," Melv said.

"Fuckin' A, Bubba," Butch replied.

Gravel flew from the wheels as I spun out of the parking lot and in the direction of our old fishing hole, the Park Grove Bridge, a mile or so away.

Melv turned to look at Butch as we drove along. "Boy, you sure pissed off Milo," he said.

"No kidding. Don't ya think he overreacted a little bit?" Butch asked.

“Well, what the hell were you doin’ over there, anyway?” I asked, trying, but not very hard, to suppress a chuckle.

The event was already evolving from the momentary awkward encounter it had just been to the embellished story it would later become, one we would probably tell again over and over in the future.

“Shit, I just wanted to look at the leeches.”

## The Bridge

We rolled to a stop in the gravel parking lot fifty yards north of the bridge. The bridge was located on the outskirts of Park Grove—a cottonwood-shaded hamlet, which housed about one-fourth as many bodies as the town of Fort Peck, and that was around three hundred.

Most of the “community” of Park Grove occupied a peninsula; whereas, the government-run town of Fort Peck, a mile or so to the south down Highway 117, rested on a plateau above the river valley. From our vantage point, we could see the centerpiece of Fort Peck, a seventy-foot flagpole waving Old Glory that was the proud possession of the U.S. Corps of Engineers. In addition to the bridge, the tiny hamlet of Park Grove also housed Chubby Dick’s Bar and Grill and, of course, Milo’s Lake Stop. Park Grove’s “post office” consisted of a dozen mailboxes in different states of dilapidation, sitting side by side on the edge of Chubby Dick’s parking lot. Near the post office was a newspaper rack—the enclosed kind you had to put a quarter in if you wanted the daily paper, the *Billings Gazette*. If you got up early enough, say before eight a.m., you’d find yourself six or seven newspapers—the daily allotment for the place—still bundled together, sitting on top of the rack. The first customer of the day, whomever it may be, was expected to slit the yellow, plastic ribbon, deposit their quarter, and place the rest of newspapers in the rack. According to *Gazette* records, not once had any of these papers ever been taken without the patron shelling out the almighty quarter.

We crawled out of the car and we were met with a gentle breeze blowing from the west. A quick glance at the flagpole a mile away, told us winds were a bit stronger in town. This was good news in our book. It usually meant decent fishing. I had once read an old saying in *Field and Stream*:

Wind from the east, fish bite the least;  
Wind from the south, fish open their mouth;  
Wind from the north, fish come forth;  
Wind from the west, they bite the best.

It had proven to be true by our unscientific standards.

I opened the trunk and we grabbed as much stuff as our arms would allow. The three of us marched toward the bridge and picked our way down the embankment until we came to the water's edge twenty feet below.

The bridge was about forty yards long. It ran north and south, carrying Highway 117 on its back. To the east of the bridge was the mighty Missouri, and to its west was an area locally known as the Dredge Cuts.

The Dredge Cuts were man-made water bodies formed when the Corps of Engineers built the massive Fort Peck Dam in the 1930s. Dredges—floating barges with large attachments that could cut and suck away at the mucky river bottom—carved out the Dredge Cuts and pumped their murky slurry through twenty-eight-inch iron pipes to the dam site three miles south. The result of this four-year project was one of the largest earth-filled dams in the world—four miles long and two hundred fifty feet high. Water flowed from the Missouri through the narrowing under the bridge and into the Dredge Cuts, which were filled with water to a depth of about twenty feet, providing a playground for fishermen, swimmers, skiers, and tubers.

In all, the Dredge Cuts were almost a half-mile wide and two miles long. Big enough to be called a lake in most people's book, they paled in comparison to "the lake," which was the massive reservoir formed behind the dam. When residents said they were going "up on the lake" they meant the reservoir—all one hundred thirty-six miles of it. You only went up there if you had a hefty boat, and today, we didn't.

We settled on a point on the northwest side of the bridge. The peninsula jutted out into the Dredge Cuts, resulting in a picturesque bay that housed six private boat docks. We almost always fished on the northwest point, unless somebody was already there; in that case, we'd fish on the southwest bank, but never the east side of the bridge—nobody had ever caught a fish there in the history of the human race.

Setting our tackle boxes on the rocky shoreline, we all staked our claim to a section of the bank. Each of us had two fishing poles we'd be using, one for bait fishing and one for lure fishing.

Dozens of swallows darted erratically through the air, capturing a morning breakfast of mosquitoes before returning to their mud nests on the underside of the

bridge. A flock of Canadian geese passed high above, heading north to cooler pastures. A mourning dove cooed away high up in the cottonwoods behind our backs.

Butch marked his territory, literally and figuratively, nearest the bridge as Melv and I scattered out around the bend. We each baited a hook, Butch and I choosing a large sucker and Melv choosing a medium. The leeches would have to wait.

With his lure fishing pole, Melv chose a small, blue spoon with a mother-of-pearl stripe. I picked out an orange and gold K.O. Wobbler that I had won as a door prize at Milo's the year before in his annual fishing contest. Butch chose instead to sit on the bank near his bait pole and do a little stitching. I guess he figured having the ass-crack on his shorts sewed up was more important than trying to land a lunker.

"Ya know what we need," I said to Melv, "are some pop cans or somethin' we can put on our poles, in case we get a bite." Melv knew what I was talking about.

"There should be some around here somewhere," he said.

We scoured the brush and grass along the hillside until we had found a faded Fresca can and one labeled "Hamms" lying under a Russian olive tree.

Having already cast my bait line, I slipped the end of a can over the rod tip, being careful not to abrade the monofilament. Melv did the same. In case we got a bite, the can would crash to the rocky bank below, alerting us to some potential action. We walked down the bank another thirty yards, waded in up to our waists, and began casting our lures.

Melv launched an arching cast that traveled at least fifty yards. "Yeah! Beat that!" he said proudly. I stepped up to the plate, ten yards to his right, and sent my spoon at least fifty-one yards. "Oh, you suck," he said. "You got that heavy Wobbler on there, don't ya?"

I knew he wouldn't let me have the victory that easily. I grinned and said, "Yeah?" as if to say, "So what?"

The next few casts found us trying to outdo each other, as if our total manliness depended on it. We sure could cast far—that had been established—but we couldn't catch a fish worth shit. Finally, one of us got lucky.

"Got one!" I yelled, charged with the adrenaline rush familiar to all fishermen, but my excitement was short-lived when I soon realized that what I had hooked was a plain,

old shiner, or “goldeye” as we called them. In other parts of the world, folks call them “skipjacks” or “shad,” but we just referred to them simply as “goldeyes.” To us, they were junk fish; fun to catch when nothing else was biting, but too bony to eat. We'd catch them by the dozen and would usually let them go.

“Just a goldeye,” Melv said nonchalantly, as if catching absolutely nothing was better than that.

“Yeah, well, at least I caught one,” I told him, acting way too proud for catching the lowly creature. Occasionally, we'd throw them up on the bank for the seagulls to eat. One time, we even threaded twenty feet of fishing line through the gills of a goldeye and attached an inflated balloon to the other end. We wanted to see if he'd lead us to the school. He didn't. He floated to the top instead.

“Yeah, well, that just takes away your chance of catching a northern,” Melv said. “Northern” was short for “northern pike” in our lexicon. I unhooked the fish and let him slip back into the water. It wasn't long before Melv joined in on the fun.

“Got one!” he yelled, but it too had risen to the surface and twirled as Melv retrieved the line. Indication: a goldeye.

“Okay, Mr. Big Fisherman. Where's your northern?” I asked.

“Screw you,” he said as he brought in the line.

Melv and I took turns catching goldeyes until he had twelve and I had ten. Eventually, one of us struck gold—or so we thought. It was Melv.

“Uff da!” he shouted, feet bumbling around in the rocky bottom, trying to find his balance. This one was no goldeye. Melv's pole bent beyond goldeye level as he fought with the beast on the other end of the line. I retrieved my lure and stood patiently watching.

“What is it?” I asked, as if he were some expert and could tell me.

“It doesn't feel like a northern,” he said. Northern were strong fighters and took your line sideways. This fish wasn't doing that. “Maybe a walleye or sauger.” I was thinking the same thing.

The fish made a run and the drag on Melv's reel buzzed as line ripped free. Melv pulled the rod back and cranked away as I watched expectantly, the tension mounting. The fish gave another run, sending Melv's drag buzzing once more.

Finally, a broad, silver fish emerged. “Hey, it’s a drum,” Melv said with surprise.

Although not a walleye or northern, a drum wasn’t bad. It was sort of like a consolation prize. In some parts of the world, the fish was called a “sheepshead.” We preferred “drum.” Its head looked nothing like a sheep. Then again, the animal didn’t look much like a drum either.

“Cool, we can get the ivory out,” I said. The freshwater drum was widely known to contain large ear bones, otoliths, which were mistakenly called “ivory” by many people. I was one of them.

“Yeah,” Melv said. “I’ll save ‘em for the old man.” Melv’s dad, Merv, had a Folger’s can full of otoliths on a shelf in his garage. He used them to make jewelry. “Get me my stringer, would ya?”

I trudged back to the shore and found a metal stringer in his tackle box. “Here ya go.”

Melv slid the stringer through the gills of the fish and snapped it shut. He removed the hook from the fish’s mouth then attached the other end of the stringer to the belt loop on his cutoffs.

“Man, I never knew you could catch a drum on a lure,” I said.

“Me neither. I don’t think I’ve ever done that before. Merv always catches them on worms.”

Time passed and by now, the heat of the day was taking its toll on fishing. The wind had calmed to a gentle breeze and the fish had quit biting. A dry spell, lasting fifteen minutes, had sapped our enthusiasm. We didn’t even catch a goldeye, much less a walleye, northern pike, or a drum. Two seagulls appeared overhead.

“Hey Melv,” I said, breaking a stretch of silence, “You ever catch a seagull?”

He looked at me, a puzzled expression on his face. “Huh?” he said as he retrieved another fruitless cast.

“How ‘bout this? If we catch another goldeye, let’s throw him up on the bank.”

“What for?” he asked.

“Just do it. Trust me on this one. I’m doin’ a little experiment.”

Finally, Butch, who had finished his crude stitching job around the corner, returned.

“Did ya get ‘em fixed?” I asked him.

“Yeah, check it out.” He turned around, showing us his backside. His seamstress skills had made it appear as though the ass cheeks on his shorts were permanently puckered up.

“That looks real good, Butch,” Melv laughed as Butch made his way into the water and began casting.

We had pretty much given up on our bait poles, which, throughout the afternoon, would be seeing about as much action as Butch would on prom night. But then, Butch started yelling.

“Hey, I got one! I think it’s a northern!” he said.

The way he was fighting the fish, I thought he had hooked one too. Melv and I stopped reeling and watched as our lures dropped to the bottom. Butch’s drag buzzed as line tore from his reel. *Damn, I thought, he’s got a nice one on there.* But it wasn’t to be, for soon, a flat, silver fish rose to the surface and spiraled in as Butch retrieved his line. Butch had pulled in a goldeye.

“Oh, yeah, some northern,” Melv said.

The way Butch’s reel had screamed made me think he had hooked a big one. “What do you got your drag set on?” I asked him. “Zero?”

Butch looked at his reel and fumbled with a knob before unhooking his fish and throwing it up on the bank. *Just what I thought.*

“Now watch those seagulls,” I said. Within minutes, the two birds, attracted to the flopping fish on the beach, started flying in circles above our heads like planes in a holding pattern, screeching at each other and at us. On each pass, the birds would get bolder and bolder, closer and closer. We waited patiently. Three more birds appeared.

When one of the birds was about thirty feet in front of me, I let my line fly with a high, arching cast. The bird saw my lure and, at the last second, darted to the left, right before I had it hooked.

“Oh, man. You just about had him,” Butch said.

Melv and Butch joined in the fun, but the birds were just too quick for us slow humanoids. None of us had ever caught a bird, and we didn’t know what we’d do if we did, but it made the afternoon go by when fishing was slow.

We fished for twenty more minutes and threw three more fish on the beach. The birds were getting more aggressive, rushing in and then appearing to stop and pivot in midair. Then, out of nowhere, I heard Butch yell.

“Crap!” Indeed, crap it was, for one of the seagulls had dropped a slimy, white, nitrogen-rich greaser right on top Butch's oily, black mop. He was rubbing his head, trying to somehow remove the watery poop from his hair. He only made it worse.

“Shit!” he added, his head smeared with bird turd. Melv and I howled.

Butch tromped back to the shoreline, set his pole on the bank then returned to belly-deep water. He bent over, held his breath, and dunked his head under the surface. With a scrubbing motion to his scalp, a slurry of natural shampoo oozed from Butch's hair, at first floating, then sinking in the water.

“Gross!” Melv said, backing away from the avian waste product.

Butch frantically scrubbed away at his head, the white goop slowly vanishing. Satisfied, or maybe out of breath, Butch's wet face reappeared.

“There, that should do it,” he grinned, his gold tooth sparkling in the sun. He waded back to shore, grabbed his fishing pole, and returned.

“Nice one, shithead!” I said. Melv let out a laugh.

Time passed. Then even more time. Still more time and no fish. On cast number six hundred forty-nine, I snagged up.

“Shit!” I complained as I held my rod tip high above my head and jerked it back and forth. Nothing. So I tried trick number two. Holding the rod horizontally, I adjusted the drag until there wasn't any give. I pulled back until the line was about to break then opened the bail sending a wave of slack in the lure's direction. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't work. This time it didn't work. Trick number three consisted of climbing up the hill, walking halfway across the bridge, and praying. Today, I didn't have that kind of patience and decided to take the lazy man's way out. I just snapped the line, the lure-less remains dangling limply in the air.

“Good one, numbnuts,” Melv said.

I walked away until I got to the shore where my tackle box rested. I grabbed a

swivel and tied it onto my line. God had cursed me with a slightly unflattering dental deformity—one in which the second lower incisor on the right side was set back, partially hidden behind the other teeth in its row—a Class I malocclusion, my dentist called it. I had my dad’s side of the family to thank for that one—not only him, but his pa, his grandpa and his grandpa’s pa and who knows who else down the line. Even my brother, Jimmy, suffered this affliction. But, being the fisherman I was, I had put this oddity to good use. It served well as a cutting tool, especially when it came to monofilament fishing line. So, taking the remaining inch or so of line left over from the swivel knot into my mouth, I positioned it between my crooked tooth and a good one and promptly chomped down then discarded the remains on the rocky shoreline. I attached another K.O. Wobbler to the swivel, hoping it would bring better luck than the last one.

The minutes slowly ticked by and fishing had come to a standstill. We had been in the sun for hours; its rays were beginning to take their toll on us. I was starting to get thirsty—not just thirsty, parched.

“Hey, anyone bring anything to drink?” I asked, forgetting about the root beer sitting in the trunk that was, by now, probably approaching its boiling point.

“Shichyeah,” Butch said as if the two words “shit” and “yeah” had morphed into one. “I’ve got a bottle of water.” He pointed to a jug floating a few feet away, tethered to the shoreline by a fishing stringer.

“Thank God,” I said, wading toward the jug. “Can I have a swig?”

“No way, José.”

“Whaddya mean, no way? Come on, I’m thirsty.”

“I’ll sell it to ya.”

“Are you fuckin’ crazy?” *Who in the hell would ever pay for a bottle of water when you could get it for free right from your faucet? Gimme a break.* “Forget it,” I said, annoyed that he was being such a tight ass. I walked away, my mouth still begging for a taste of the quenching liquid. Once I was thigh-deep, I trapped a puddle in my hands and lifted it to my lips. The cool liquid did the trick. I glanced at Butch. “Not bad, shithead.”

The wind had now completely died, and the water had turned to glass, which meant one thing. “Hey, let’s go snag some carp,” I said.

“Yeah, let’s do it,” Melv added.

Leaving our bait lines in the water—most likely because we were too lazy to do anything else with them, God knows it wasn't because they were catching fish—we all removed our lures and attached our snagging gear. Melv unclipped the stringer from his belt loop and attached it to a stick he poked in the bank.

We trucked up the embankment to the top of the bridge, carrying our tools of the trade. A raised walkway, three feet wide, ran along the west side of the bridge. It was a good place for tourists to take in a scenic view, for kids to jump from, or for us to snag fish.

Once upon the bridge, we tucked our poles beneath the lip of the walkway. The reason for this was a sign twenty feet away that proclaimed “NO FISHING FROM BRIDGE”—a rule that was enforced by the local sheriff, notorious in these parts, simply known as Valley County Deputy Sheriff, Roddy Peete.

Deputy Peete was a mean bastard who took his job way too seriously. Our nemesis, the cocky officer stereotypically wore mirrored sunglasses and chewed on a toothpick. Two weeks earlier, a friend of ours had been snagging from the bridge when Deputy Peete snuck up on him using a not-so-well-traveled road. Deputy Peete wrote the kid up for fifty bucks, which is a hell of a lot of money when you're a kid without a job.

On days like today, when the sun was hot and the wind was calm, hundreds of fish could be seen sunning themselves in warm water just below the surface. Many of the fish were carp, but the fish we were after were the carp's lighter-colored impostor, the bigmouth buffalo, *Ictiobus cyprinellus*. Occasionally, a northern pike or, if you were lucky, a paddlefish would swim by.

“How’s it look?” Butch yelled to Melv and me. We were already on the bridge, peering down into the water forty feet below and scanning the surface for prized “tuna” as we called the big ones—ten pounds or more.

“Lots of small ones,” I yelled back. We were looking to set a record.

We all knew old Bobby Shaw of nearby Park Grove. The ancient exterminator had held the state record for the buffalo of twenty-three pounds and four ounces for the last six years. We all had seen fish larger than that in these waters. That was part of the excitement, part of the allure of snagging. We all wanted our name in the record books.

Butch arrived at the bridge, huffing and puffing from the ascent. He began to scope the surface with us.

“Watch for cars,” Melv said.

I wasn’t too worried about your average car, just one particular vehicle. “Yeah, especially Peete,” I told them.

We all took a quick peek up the road to the north and then to the south, scanning for Deputy Peete. All clear. A waist-high, chain-link safety fence ran the length of the bridge. It kept people from falling off and provided us with a place to lean on while snagging.

Together, we retrieved our fishing poles from their hiding spots and dangled them over the other side of the fence. At the end of each fishing line was a hand-sized treble hook with a weight attached, except in Butch’s case. His weight was an old spark plug.

Unconsciously, like some inborn trait all the boys who snagged from the bridge possessed, our heads swiveled from the left, Peete check number one; to the center, fish check; to the right, Peete check number two; and back to the center again. The pattern repeated itself indefinitely.

A white pickup drove by, and the driver flipped me the finger. It wasn’t the middle finger that carried a derogatory meaning, but rather the lone index finger of the right hand that rose from the steering wheel, a signal that all Valley County residents had mastered, indicating a friendly “hello.” I flipped him the friendly finger back then turned my attention back to the water.

Dozens, maybe even hundreds, of fish could be seen swimming below, but none were large enough to warrant a cast. From experience, we all knew that the instant you threw your line out to snag a smaller fish, a monster would appear, only to dive to deeper depths by the time you got your line reeled back in and ready to cast again.

After five silent minutes of searching, Melv’s impatience got the better of him. To my port side, I saw movement. I watched as Melv leaned over the guardrail and gave his hook an underhanded toss. The hook plunked in the water on the far side of a buffalo that probably weighed in the eight to ten pound range. I watched as he slowly retrieved the line, drawing it closer to the fish. *Closer. Closer.* Melv gave his rod a quick, hard thrust the instant he deemed it appropriate. The light brown fish darted off to the west and disappeared into deeper waters.

Melv retrieved his line as the treble hook and sinker bounced through the air on their journey back to the top of the bridge. Melv reached across the guardrail and grabbed his hook.

“Hey, check it out,” he said, holding it up for me to see. On the hook were two brownish-white scales, each about the size of a quarter. He peeled them off and tossed them into the water below. They fluttered on their way down.

“Pretty close,” I said.

We continued to watch and wait for the big one. My eyes were working overtime, and I felt like I was becoming hypnotized. *Small one. Small one. Not big enough. Small one.*

Finally, it was Butch’s turn to give in to temptation. He tossed his line out beyond a medium-sized carp that was sitting broadside to him—too good of a shot to pass up, I guess. I leaned over the fence and watched as he retrieved the line ever so slowly. *Closer now. Closer. Just about there.* Then, just as Butch was about to set the hook, the sound of an approaching car caught my ear. A red convertible was speeding toward us from the direction of Chubby Dick’s. As the car got closer, I could see the driver and three bikini-clad girls riding with him, one in the front and two in the back. Butch was oblivious to the situation. He was too mesmerized by his task at hand. Just as his line crossed the back of the buffalo, Butch jerked back on his rod, putting his entire beefy body into it. Like a missile shot from a submarine, his hook snapped out of the water and came sailing up toward the bridge at a subsonic speed, making a beeline toward Butch’s head.

“Shit,” I heard him say under his breath. Melv had seen it happen too.

“Shit!” Melv said louder than Butch had.

*Butch had better du—* I thought to myself.

Butch managed to duck his head just in time as the hook sailed over his head and lodged itself into the bikini top of one of the backseat riders. Butch’s rod bent then snapped back as a white bikini came flying his way. The girl shrieked as the car came to a screeching halt, blue smoke billowing up from the rear tires. The driver turned back to us and began to back up toward Butch, who had reeled in his line and now had the girl’s top dangling from the end of his rod. A pretty girl in the back was frantically covering her titties with her arms as the car came to a stop. My eyes were saucers, as were Melv’s.

“Could I please have my top back?” the girl asked Butch, way more politely than I would have.

“Sure,” he said sheepishly. “Sorry about that.” Butch fumbled trying to get the top unhooked from his treble hook then tossed the top to the girl.

“You dumb fucker! You're gonna kill someone!” yelled the pimp in the front seat. He stomped on the gas and smoke billowed as the car screamed away.

“Good one, Butch,” I said.

We all had a good laugh, each of us making exaggerated comments about the great set of boobies we had just seen, probably the first real pair any of us had ever set eyes on. I know they were for me. After a few minutes, we turned our attention back to fishing.

We waited another five minutes, and my patience was now wearing thin. I couldn't see anything that was worthy of a cast. Then, out of nowhere, a giant shadow appeared about twenty yards in front of me. Melv, who was stationed forty feet to my left, was looking the other way. Butch, forty feet to my right, was busy untangling his hook from the chain-link, so I knew neither of the two had seen the fish. Although we were all friends, when it came to snagging potential record-breakers, it was every man for himself.

Careful not to attract attention from my opponents, I quietly leaned over the fence and tossed a cast that landed twenty feet on the other side of the shadow. I could see where my line entered the water, and it was this point I focused on. Slowly, I began to retrieve the line. Inch by inch, I watched as the purple, twelve-pound monofilament crept closer to the shadow. I was moving in for the kill. I could not have asked for a better chance than this. I couldn't believe the size of this thing. It definitely was a potential state record.

The fish was sitting broadside, apparently unaware of the encounter it was about to experience. I cranked the reel as the line slowly crept closer. It was now only inches away from the fish. I took one final breath and stopped reeling for a second. The hook sank deeper in the water, just beneath the big fish's belly. It was now or never. I braced myself and gave my rod a quick, firm jerk. The fish, feeling the line tickle across its back, darted to the right at the last moment, causing the three-inch treble hook—a buck seventy-five at Milo's—to lodge in his tail.

“Got one!” I screamed as the drag on my reel began to hum. Line ripped from my

reel like crazy. Melv and Butch dropped their poles and came running.

“Son of a bitch!” Melv shouted, knowing a big fish when he saw one.

I flexed my arms and braced my legs for the fight. The fish was blazing away from the bridge as line continued to tear from my reel. I was holding my rod upright, but the fish was bending the rod to where I thought it would snap. I was afraid this fish would break my line, my rod, or both. A small groove appeared on my index finger where the line was cutting as the fish sped away from the bridge.

Just then, I heard, “Shit! It’s the fuzz!” It was Butch, and he was pointing up the road. About half of a mile to my right, just down from Chubby Dick’s, was the notorious, white Chevy Blazer with the police light bar mounted on top. His lights were flashing blue and red and his siren was wailing. I could see my name in the record book fading away as old man Shaw smiled in his rocking chair, puffing on his pipe. *Shit!*

Deputy Peete was closing the gap as the siren grew louder and louder. The way I saw it, I had two choices: cut my line right then and forget about getting my name in the record book, or make a run for it and see if I could get to the end of the bridge and down the bank before Peete caught me. I chose neither. Instead, in one quick motion, I scrambled up the chain-link fence and leapt off of the bridge.

*Keep tension on the line. Don’t give him slack,* I thought as I fell through the air. *Don’t give him slack,* I told myself again, this time louder. I reeled the Daiwa as fast as I could, trying to keep tension on the line as my body plummeted toward the surface below. I pulled my rod back as far as it would go until I was falling through the air, my back parallel to and racing toward the water below. *Somebody call Guinness,* I thought. *I’m about to set the record for the world’s highest back flop.* Then, milliseconds before I hit the water, my line became taught flipping me one hundred and eighty degrees and sending me into the water with a massive face-plant.

I floated to the surface just in time to hear Peete’s Blazer go speeding across the bridge, *Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom! Ba-boom!* The siren faded in the distance. Apparently, he had more important things to worry about than me.

Now, more than ever, I was determined to land the monster fish. It continued to swim away and I could see I was running out of line. Finally, it hit the end of the spool, jerking me forward and towing me across the water. With the Missouri River going up

my nose, I debated whether to let go or keep fighting. Then, to my horror, just a few feet from my head, a treble hook and spark plug spanked the water. *Butch!* He was on the bank trying to catch me and save me from drowning at the hands, or fins, of the colossal fish. I saw the hook and plug sinking and reached out for them, hoping that Butch was smart enough not to jerk his rod at the wrong time. I grabbed the hook and hitched it through the belt loop of my cutoffs then gave Butch the signal. From my vantage point, I saw Butch struggling to reel in his line. My head went under water. I resurfaced an instant later, only to hear him yelling something, which I could only guess was a swear word. I glanced back to the shoreline and saw the source of Butch's frustration; his reel was lying on the ground, detached from his rod. The extreme weight of my trophy fish—not to mention me—was too much for Butch's gear.

I was taking in water like a sinking ship and didn't think I would last much longer. Then, in a moment of genius, I saw Melv grab the detached reel, wrap the line around his waist, and run down the bank. Butch aimed the rod in my direction while Melv reeled me in as he ran. Within minutes, I landed on the shore, rod in hand, fish on line. Moments later, after the fight of my life, I had landed the new state record bigmouth buffalo, or so I had hoped.

“Dang, now that's a fish!” said Melv.

“Fuckin' A, Bubba!” Butch added.

With the help of Butch and Melv, I attached the fish to Butch's yellow and white nylon stringer. I poked the sharp, silver end of the stringer into the ground and sat on the shoreline trying to regain my breath, drenched and exhausted, but elated as well. We made our way down to Milo's where the old geezer contacted Montana Fish and Game warden, Larry Locks, who officially weighed my fish in at twenty-eight pounds three ounces, a new state record. Milo excitedly took a Polaroid of my trophy fish, which I held out at arm's length to make it appear bigger. Then he slid the photo under the glass, permanently marking my place in history. We never did use the leeches.

## The TV Antenna

Following our one-car parade through town, we stopped at Butch's and stuffed the fish in his basement freezer. His dad tinkered with taxidermy on the side, and Butch guaranteed his dad would mount it for me.

Next, we arrived at Melv's place. His older brother Marv was washing his Trans Am in the driveway. He thought he was hot shit, the big man on campus. He was three years older than I and didn't like me at all—then again, he had his reasons.

“What are you little assholes up to?” he asked.

Melv flipped him the bird. “Shut up, Marv,” he said as Butch and I followed him up the steps. “Ronny just caught the state record buffalo.”

“Really? I suppose you snagged it illegally off the bridge, huh?” he said. “You know, that doesn't count then.”

“Fuck you,” Melv said.

The three of us walked into the house where Melv's mom was dusting the furniture with Pledge—the lemon-scented kind—as *Days of Our Lives* played on the TV. Like most moms of that time, Marion didn't have a job other than raising two boys and keeping Melv's dad company. She was pretty nice as far as moms were concerned and always went out of her way to make us feel at home.

“How are you, boys?” she said, greeting us with a smile. She set down her Pledge and dust rag as if she had been doing the chore just to keep herself occupied. “Are you hungry?”

“Sure,” I said, thinking Marion would set us up with her old standby—potato salad and a bologna sandwich. Butch excused himself to the restroom as Melv and I pulled a chair up to the table.

Marion was a third generation Norwegian-American with a quick smile. Her passion was knitting—scarves, sweaters, mittens, hats, you name it—anything that a cold Norwegian would need. She always took care of us boys. Whenever Butch or I were at her house, she was always fixing us up with lunch. It was amazing Melv didn't weigh

about a hundred pounds more than he did.

Swervin' Mervin was Melvin's dad. He was a milkman for Udderly Fresh. He earned his moniker for an incident that had happened the previous month. Seems that on an early morning milk run, a slightly inebriated Mervin hit one of Jalmer Nelson's cows with his milk truck. Merv swore he swerved to miss the cow, but alas, the cow died and Merv took a three-day suspension. If the Breathalyzer would have been invented, Merv may have been fined and, quite possibly, thrown in the slammer. But it wasn't, and he wasn't, and life went on.

I sat at the table, looking around at the Erikson's dining room. Decorative plates of blue and white hung from the walls, and others were displayed proudly in a lighted china hutch. I figured Marion was paying homage to St. Olaf, the Patron Saint of Plates, or someone like that. A print of Eric Enstrom's "Grace"—the picture of the old, gray-bearded man with his head bowed in prayer in front of his daily bread—overlooked the dinner table. *Typical Lutheran home*, I thought. I had seen this same decor in the houses of my relatives, all of whom were good Lutherans themselves.

As I waited at the table for a sandwich, Melv's dad entered the picture. "You boys hungry, ja?" he asked, in a thick Norwegian accent. He sat down next to us.

I looked at him, waiting for Melv to answer. When he didn't, I did.

"Ah...a little bit," I said before Melv told him the story of my record fish.

Marion approached the table with a plate full of thick tortillas, or so I had thought. She set them down and returned to the kitchen. A smile lit up Merv's face as Marion brought another plate containing white, fishy-smelling stuff. *I don't think I'm gonna like this. That isn't a bologna sandwich.* Merv took our plates and set one tortilla on each, along with a helping of the smelly fish stuff.

Now, I love to catch fish, don't get me wrong, but I will never eat it again as long as I live. The previous summer I had been working at Bernie's Fish Empire. Bernie and his crew would haul in twelve hundred pounds of goldeye a day from the lake using gill nets. The fish would be gutted, packed, and frozen before being shipped to Canada where they were served as a delicacy in restaurants. In Montana, they were thrown on the beach to feed seagulls. It was my job to clean the fish. That was enough to spoil the taste of fish for me. For life.

Merv looked me in the eye while handing me a plate. “You ever eat lefse or lutefisk, ja?” he said through a mustache that touched his bottom lip.

I politely smiled at him. “No.”

“Well, deeg in. You’re goona like eet.”

Merv spread some butter and sprinkled some sugar on the tortilla, or rather “lefse” as he called it. I did the same. I took a small bite, a sampler. *Not bad, but not my favorite. Maybe if I doused it in sugar.*

“Try the lutefisk,” he ordered, pointing his finger at my plate. “I made it myself.”

There was no way I was going to eat that shit, especially after later learning it was cured in lye—the same stuff serial killers use to melt their victims.

“Um...” I stammered. “I’m allergic to fish.”

“Come on, boy! It won’t hurt ya.” He was adamant that I try it, offended if I didn’t.

Reluctantly, I took a tiny bite and chewed. I chewed some more. Then some more. I didn’t like it *at all*.

Melv looked at me. “What do ya think?” he asked, gobbling up the stuff like it was chocolate pudding.

“I don’t really like it,” I murmured, reaching for a napkin to spit the shit into.

Merv became enraged. “If you can’t say nuttin’ gute ‘bout lutefisk, den don’t say nuttin’ atall.”

Thankfully, Marion came to my rescue. “The boy doesn’t like it, Merv. Leave him be.” She turned to me. “Would you like a sandwich, Ronny?”

*Anything to get this awful taste out of my mouth.* “Are you sure it’s no problem?” I asked, not wanting to piss off old Merv any more than I already had.

“You betcha,” she said then left for the kitchen.

She returned with the best sandwich I had ever eaten in my life—bologna, courtesy of Oscar Meyer, of course. In addition, she drowned my taste buds with a handful of Fritos and a can of root beer.

“You come back tomorrow, boy,” Merv interjected. “We havin’ da blood pancakes. Dem will grow hair on your chest, ja.”

*Blood pancakes? Is he fucking kidding?*

I was enjoying my sandwich when Butch returned to the table. “What is this stuff?”

he asked, eyes zeroing in on the table full of “food.”

“Lutefisk and lefse,” I answered in a muffled voice, my mouth full of chewed up Wonder Bread, processed meat, and Miracle Whip. “It’s awesome.”

Butch sat down, and within seconds, Marion had a plate of lefse and lutefisk in front of him. Butch wasted no time becoming cultured.

“Mmm, this is good stuff!” he said. Either he was the world’s biggest brown-noser, or his taste buds had mutated.

“See, Marion, da boy likes it. ‘Es a gute boy.” Merv piped in. “You might even like da blood pancakes, ja?” he said, looking at Butch.

*Not them again! I gotta get outta here—and fast!*

I turned to Butch, trying to steer the conversation away from thick bread, stinky fish, and bloody flapjacks. “So when do you think your dad will have that fish done?”

“I dunno. He’s kinda busy this time of year. Maybe in a few months.”

Having finished our lunch, the three of us were stuffed. We headed downstairs to Melv’s cool, dark basement. Beginning in the late 1960s and stretching into the early 1970s, the federal government—owners of the town built in the 1930s as part of FDR’s New Deal—leveled most of the old houses in town and put up brand new ones. There were one hundred thirty-five in all, and they all looked alike. The only difference was their color—pink, white, yellow, or Gumby green. Each house came with a basement of finished concrete. The furnace sat in the middle of the floor near the base of the stairs. It separated the basement into two halves. In Merv’s house, one half was for work and the other half for play. On the work side sat the washer and dryer in one corner—just like every other house in town. The other corner housed assorted boxes, which had Christmas decorations sticking out from the tops. In between the two sat a lathe that Merv used for making whatever it is you use a lathe for.

In the play half of Melv’s basement sat a pool table and a black and white TV with a Pong video game attached to it. A red vinyl beanbag chair sat nearby. Worn out from my morning adventure and belly full of sandwich, I flopped into the chair and felt my body go limp. It didn’t take Butch long to notice the pool table.

He piped up, “Ya know, back at my old school, my friends used to call me ‘Butch

Mosconi.” This was an allusion to the great pool player that always played Minnesota Fats—a guy so great they even named a state after him—at least once a year on ABC's *Wide World of Sports*.

“Yeah, sure they did,” Melv said, “and my friends used to call me ‘Melvesota Fats.’”

I laughed and shook my head. “I could beat both of your asses with one hand tied behind my back,” I bragged, knowing I was probably the worst pool player in the tri-county area, but bragging about oneself was a way of life in Fort Peck. It didn't matter if you could walk the walk; all that mattered was if you could talk the talk—and we all could.

“I'll rack,” said Butch. He grabbed the triangle and starting filling it with balls. “Let's play cutthroat,” he added.

Cutthroat was a three-man game where one guy had balls one through five, another guy had balls six through ten, and the last guy had eleven through fifteen. The object was to knock the other guys' balls off of the table and to be the last one standing.

“I'll be the big balls since I've got the biggest ones,” Melv boasted. Butch and I each let out a feeble laugh.

“Oh, good one,” I said, rising from the chair. “I guess that means Butch will be little ones then,” I said. “I'll be middle.” Butch gave me his tough-guy look, the one that said “I can kick your ass if I want.”

“You go first,” Butch told Melv. Usually, the guy with the smallest balls—you know what I mean—went first, but since Butch racked, we couldn't let him break. That was an unwritten rule somewhere.

Melv sized up a cue stick and walked to the end of the table. He leaned over the green felt, cocked his arm back and drove the cue stick forward. The cue stick struck the cue ball, which then blasted into the racked group of balls. The twelve-ball went sailing into the corner pocket.

“Uff da!” Melv muttered, having sent one of his own balls into the hole. At least he got to shoot again. He surveyed the table then took his next shot. The balls clacked together before leaving the three-ball sitting on the lip of a side pocket.

I was up next. Setting the butt end of my cue stick on the floor, I touched the chalk

to the tip. A glance at my opponents told me I had their attention. *I'm sure they're going to be impressed with this one.* With the instep of my foot against the lower end of the cue, I rotated the stick back and forth chalking my cue; just one more way to show the fellows how cool I was.

I walked around the table, examining it like I was some pool shark in a smoky, Montana bar. I eyeballed the ten-ball, which was sitting at the other end of the table two inches from the corner pocket. I was never very good when I had a lot of green to shoot across—heck, I wasn't very good any time.

The cue ball was stuck up against the bumper, making it a difficult shot for anyone and almost impossible for a guy like me. I thought quickly. I lifted my cue stick until the butt end was on the table and then slid the butt between the cue ball and the bumper, moving the ball one butt-length away. Melv and Butch looked at me, disbelief on their faces.

“What the hell are you doing?” Butch asked.

“Fort Peck rules,” I told him.

“What?” Melv asked.

“Yeah, when the ball's against the bumper, you can move it like this,” I informed them.

“Bullshit,” Melv said.

“No, really,” I lied. “Everyone in town plays that way.”

Before they could protest any further, I bent over the table and lined up my shot. Keeping my cue stick level and steady, I smoothly struck the cue ball like I had seen the pros do on TV. It tapped into the ten-ball and sent it gliding off of the front corner of the pocket while the cue ball found its way into the side pocket. Scratch.

“Crap,” I said.

“Crap” was a good word to use back then. You could get away with saying it when just about anyone was around, even some adults. It was one of those “transition words.” You'd drop it into a conversation in front of your parents then watch carefully for their reaction; if all they did was blink, then you'd try again. If you got your ass chewed, you would simply tuck it back into the do-not-say vault until next year when you'd try the whole charade again until they gave up scolding you. “Shit,” on the other hand, was a

word reserved strictly for times when adults weren't present.

Mosconi was up next. As he hunched over the pool table, his greasy black hair, parted on the right side, hung in his eyes. He swiped it aside, but it only fell back. Coupled with his black T-shirt featuring Harley Davidson and cutoffs of the same color, he looked like a biker dude who you could find in any smoky barroom or at any biker's rally.

Butch's first shot was an easy one. He drained my eight-ball into a side pocket and left himself with an easy shot at the eleven. *Smack*. Down went the eleven-ball, followed by the six, and then the ten. I looked at Melv who was propping up his stick and shaking his head, a look of wonderment on his face. Next up was the thirteen, fourteen, and nine. Melv and I both had only one ball left. I had gotten over the fact I wasn't going to win and actually began to root for Butch to take us both out of the game. It was funny how I could root against myself, but I felt that what I was about to witness would be far more memorable than the thought of me winning a stupid game, and believe it or not, I think Melv was feeling the same. So, with Melv and I both rooting for Butch to beat us, he didn't let us down. He sank the seven and fifteen.

"How in the hell'd you learn to play like that?" I asked him.

Butch broke out with a shit-eating grin on his face. "My dad used to run a bar down in Deadwood, and I used to play all of the time. When I was ten, my dad would lay bets that he and I could beat anyone in partners, and we usually did. We'd throw the first few games, but then when a guy was just feeling cocky, we'd take him to the rafters. He made a lot of money that way... 'til word got out." He paused and looked at the floor, reminiscing about something that didn't seem so good. Then he came back to reality.

"Wanna play again?" he asked. I didn't feel up to it, but Melv did.

I took the beanbag chair and tossed it over next to the TV. I plopped my butt down and switched on the television. Back then, we only got four channels, and one of them was from Canada—not that it made much difference. I did learn that thirty-five degrees centigrade is a pretty darn hot day. I also learned that when you're in Canada, you don't say schedule with a *sk* sound, but rather with a *sh* sound—"sh-edule." Why they chose that word to pick on is beyond me; and the last letter of their twenty-six-letter alphabet is not pronounced "zee," but rather "zed"; and, finally, one sport I found the Canadians are

crazy about, the one they can't resist watching, is curling. Sliding that big old "stone" down the ice while two guys on skates sweep the lint out of its way really turns those Canadians on. Apparently, there must be nothing better to do up in the Great White North.

The tuning knob on Melv's TV was broken and a rusty pair of vice grips were now clamped to the shaft to serve that function. I clicked through the channels and found that my choices were slim pickin's: *Days of Our Lives*, *Another World*, *Farm and Ranch Report*, and, on the Canadian channel, a Bingo game.

After a few seconds of agony, unable to decide which of the four highly-touted programs to waste my time on, I turned it back to Channel 79, the one featuring the *Farm and Ranch Report*, only now a mouthwash commercial was playing. I found the little jingle catchy:

If your breath is bad  
And it really stinks,  
You need to gargle with  
Good Ol' Finks.

The song was followed by a scenario where an average housewife, lying in bed, refused to kiss her below-average husband goodnight, supposedly, because of his bad breath. He tossed and turned in his sleep, suffering from anxiety because of his inability to score with his lady friend. The next morning at the office, a coworker presented him with some Good Ol' Finks and, lo and behold, he got his kiss goodnight (and probably a lot more) and slept like a puppy. The commercial ended with this take on the jingle:

If your breath is bad  
To get forty winks,  
All you gotta gargle with is  
Good Ol' Finks.

It was then followed by a voiceover from a manly set of vocal chords: "For those with simple chronic halitosis." Hell, I didn't even know what "simple chronic halitosis" was, but I was betting it had something to do with rotten breath.

The *Farm and Ranch Report* came back on much to my delight. It was obvious the reporter had grown up on a farm or ranch, or maybe both. "Welcome back to the *Farm*

*and Ranch Report*. In Omaha, hog jowls are down three and an eighth, pork bellies up two and two thirds...”

Heck, I was from the sticks, but I didn't even know what a “hog jowl” was or what the heck you'd do with one if you bought it. And what in the heck would you do with a pork belly? I could see myself coming home from the store with a few extra items that weren't on Mom's grocery list. Let's see, I got the Pop-Tarts, the Cap'n Crunch, the chicken noodle soup, the bologna, and, oh yeah, Mom, I got a little something extra special today—hog jowl and some pork bellies.

Not very interested in the cattle futures, I hit the switch on the Pong game and played myself, hitting the electronic “ball” back and forth between the “paddles.” But after Right Hand beat Left Hand 21-4 and 21-3, I decided I'd had enough; it wasn't that fun. *These video games will never catch on.*

I switched the game off and, much to my surprise, the *Farm and Ranch Report* was over and was replaced by *The Price Is Right*. I settled back down on the beanbag chair. Just as I was about to place a bid on an Amana Radarange, my life changed forever.

It's funny how so many moments of a person's life are lost in time, trivial occurrences that slip away as if they never existed, and other moments are monumental, life-changing moments. They are moments that are frozen in time like the day President Kennedy was shot, the day man landed on the moon, or 9-11. The instant I was about to bid on that microwave was one of those life-changing moments for me. It all started when a dark-haired Bob Barker asked contestant number two for a bid. Unexpectedly, the picture on the screen went snowy.

“Hey, Melv. What's goin' on here?”

He looked up from the pool table. “Huh?”

“The picture got all snowy.”

“Oh, the wind probably blew the TV antenna outta whack. That happens sometimes. Go up and fix it if you want.”

I left the two pool sharks in the basement and tromped up the stairs. I found Merv's wooden ladder in the garage and propped it against the side of the house. Stepping back a ways, I could see that it looked as if the antenna had, indeed, been blown out of position. I walked back over to the ladder and climbed up on the roof of the garage. I made my

way up the side of the steep roof until I came to the peak. Just as I grabbed the antenna pole, I saw a sight that would forever change my life. Over in the next yard, hidden by a six-foot-high redwood fence, was the most beautiful sight my fifteen-year-old eyes had ever settled upon. Lying facedown on a lawn chair and reading a book was a dark-haired, caramel-skinned girl dressed in nothing but a pink bikini.

I turned the TV antenna to the proper direction then stood on the peak of the roof, staring back at the girl. She hadn't noticed me, I didn't think, but I had certainly noticed her. *Okay, now what?* I took a deep breath.

By moving across the length of the roof, I could cut my distance in half and get an even better look. I crouched low as I made my way across shingles until I got to the other end of the house. As far as I knew, the girl still hadn't spotted me. I made my way down to the rain gutter, reached in and pulled out a handful of leaves, tossing them to the ground below. Still, the girl had not moved. From my new vantage point, I could see her oil-drenched skin glistening in the sun, the wooden fence protecting her from a slight breeze that had picked up. Her hair hung past her shoulders, but it was her legs I noticed the most—slender and dark. *Odd for this early in the summer.* I decided it was time for a little more effort on my part.

With my knuckles, I wrapped on the metal rain gutter to create a little noise. This primitive idea worked. The girl turned her head and sat up in her chair, looking right at me. *Holy shit!* I froze. Not only did she have great legs, but she also had a nice set of bosoms to match.

She gave a casual wave and smiled. "Hi," she called out.

*Oh, crap. Now what?* I wasn't very good at carrying on conversations with most girls, much less one that looked like this. "Oh, h-hi," I stuttered. "I didn't notice you there." My heartbeat escalated out of control.

She got up from her lawn chair and set down her book. "What are you doing up there?" Her voice had a southern drawl that was different than anything I'd ever heard in my life.

"Just cleanin' the rain gutters," I said, trying to calm my nerves.

"I'm Mary Ellen," she said, walking toward the fence. I knew she wasn't from around here, but I thought I'd ask anyway.

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

“No, I’m from Texas. I’m stayin’ with my Aunt Elaine and Uncle Ben this summer.” Her uncle was a truck driver and her aunt was a math teacher. I knew them well.

“Oh, okay.” I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was the prettiest girl I had ever seen.

“Do you have a name?”

“Me? Yeah. Uh...yeah, I have a name.” I had to stop and think what it was for a minute, but yeah, I did have a name. “Ronny. Ronny Biscans.”

“Well, hi, Ronny Biscans. Is this your house?” she asked.

“Uh, no. It belongs to a friend of mine.” I stood there in a daze, panting, trying to get my heartbeat under control, desperately thinking of something to say and praying I’d come up with anything. The silence was painful. “Uh...” I stammered. “Well, I better get back to work.” *Shit! That was all I could come up with?*

“Well, it was nice meeting you,” she said. “Maybe we’ll see each other around again.” She smiled, waved once more, and then turned back and walked away.

“Yeah. Yeah, for sure.” I was pissed at myself for not being able to extend the conversation.

I climbed off of the roof not yet knowing my life would never be the same.

