

Recreation Yesterday and Today

Celebration

Sonny

1935

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That morning as soon as he heard Pa moving around downstairs Sonny jumped out of bed, and he was already in the kitchen pulling on his socks when Pa emerged, one overall suspender still unhitched, heavy work shoes in his hand, and a surprised look on his face. Pa was not used to having help from his ten-year-old son before breakfast, and certainly not before milking time. No telling what might happen on the Fourth of July.

The boy was soon out the door, calling back, "I'll get the cows," and with only one hand on the top rail, he cleared the wooden gate at the water tank and half-galloped toward the pasture, waving at the sky with his new cap pistol: "Whoopee ti-yi-yo!" The old collie, Pup, glad to be stirred awake by such playful company, offered a yipping bark of his own and hurried to frolic alongside.

He was Tom Mix mounted on Tony, loping down the pasture trail, and his sharp cowhand eyes narrowed as he carefully surveyed the scene. The sun was already up in a clear sky; it was going to be another warm one. Dew still glistening in the grass darkened his scuffed shoes. As he and Pup moved along, grasshoppers crackled and whizzed away, a half-dozen of them in the air at the same time, fanning out and tracing arcs in the sunlight before disappearing again in the damp green. Sonny spotted the black-brown-white shapes of the cattle down in the draw, half of them lying down, some up and gazing. He noted, here and there, tawny fat gophers that warily watched their approach, scurried toward mounds of clay, and flicked bushy tails once or twice before darting downward. For one of them, keeping Pup well back, he glided in stealth close enough to draw a bead with his cap pistol. At the sharp crack in the pasture stillness, the curious rodent disappeared, and Pup backed away in offended alarm. Sonny discovered that the gun could give him new power over the nearby cows, too: those that had been lazily lying there chewing their cud lurched to standing position, and all of them regarded him with respectful suspicion. Thus aroused, even without having to sic Pup on them, they were easy to get started toward the barn, their filled bags swaying as they hurried ahead.

"Boy," he said aloud, "if I can make them move with this cap gun-what couldn't I do with a firecracker!" It made him feel good to picture the nearly full, green package of those loud, powerful beauties back in the house, awaiting him and today's celebration. Pa had let him use up three last night to show how to do it, throwing two of them when the wick started sizzling-before the thing could go off in your hand-and exploding the third under a tin can with a flashing bang that sent it soaring, suddenly bloated, through the air. Firecrackers could make things happen, and he had twenty-one of them to take along to the lake.

The Fourth, he was thinking as he angled along the worn cow path behind the herd, is the best day of the year. Better than any Sunday: even if Pa didn't work in the fields on

Sundays, he always had plenty of jobs around the place that he needed help with. And the Fourth was better than going to town on Saturday nights, too, he told himself.

He scowled and kicked at a clump of grass. It still made him mad, just thinking about last Saturday night. They'd finished chores early, and by seven the Model T was rolling toward the graveled county road to Clear Lake, Ma in front with the baby on her lap and Clarice, Sonny, Elaine, and Snooky (as Mavis was always called) packed in back with the egg case and cream can. After they dropped the cream at Tom Farrell's station, they found a good place to park right on the main street in front of Jake's Harness Shop. Pa carried the eggs to the New Store, and after Ma ordered the groceries there, she and the three little girls got back in the car and just watched the people go by. Sonny wandered around the street for awhile but couldn't find anybody he knew, so came back to the car. He climbed up to the driver's seat and put both hands on the steering wheel. He knew how to drive the Ford. Pa would let him do it again sometime when they were alone.

"Where's Pa at, anyway?" he asked.

"He took that piece from the mower to have it welded over at the blacksmith's," his mother said.

"Can't we go home pretty soon?"

"Have to wait for the cream check, to pay for the rest of the trading. It'll be a while yet. You can go walk around."

"Nobody to go with."

"You usually walk around with Craig." Craig Koppman was his only classmate at school.

"Well, they're not here tonight. I guess they went to Estelline."

A pause, and then his mother looked off to the right and laughed. "Here come Clarice and the Schleuter girls again," she said. "They've paraded by here about ten times."

"Yeah, they sound like old hens, the way they crackle at the boys." He knew that he was jealous of his sister's having friends to be with. Ma shifted the sleeping baby to her other arm. Elaine and Snooky stood behind her in the back seat, their cheeks bulging noisily, a small brown bag clasped between them.

"Want a piece of candy?" his mother asked.

The hard sweet tasted good, but he still felt cooped up in the car, and Ma could tell. "Go on, you look by yourself awhile longer," she urged. He wandered along the sidewalk, past Ralph's café and the pool hall and the drugstore, but the search for familiar faces was in vain. After a few minutes, he returned to loiter on the car's front bumper and kept on watching the passing people.

Once in a while he recognized men or women from the Hidewood, but mostly they were strangers. Farmers like Pa, in their clean striped overalls and dress-up straw hats, carried packages from the hardware store or harness straps to be repaired at Jake's. Women

wearing flowered print dresses, toting babies and bags of groceries, stopped to visit with one another. Except for Clarice, and the Schleuters, he didn't know any of the girls who, in pairs or gangs, all giggly together, strutted and said their foolish things to passing boys. And other boys, having a good time together, too. It wasn't fair, he thought, that he was the one who had to be alone. He thought about those who had brothers to be with all the time. Somebody to play catch with, somebody to do things with. At home all he had was girls-the two older sisters, the three little ones-and there he was, left out in the middle. At school he had Craig and James-those lucky brothers even had regular baseball gloves-but he'd hardly seem them since school let out for the summer.

Sitting there on the bumper, Sonny watched a group of four older boys stroll up the sidewalk in exaggerated leisure, talking and laughing loudly together. They were town lids, he knew: that casual familiarity with each other, their expressions of assured superiority, brilliantined hair that was carefully combed every day. They stood to look in the window of the harness shop, where old Jake bent over his stitching machine. One of them said something in a secretive whisper and leaned over to elbow-poke a companion; they all broke into laughter again as they turned and headed past him. The tallest one looked his way then crossed toward him, the others hanging back. Miraculously, the tall boy was smiling and speaking.

"Hi there,"

Sonny found voice enough to murmur back a hoarse "Hi."

"Say, uh, could you so us a favor?" His brown eyes shone with friendliness.

They were asking him to do a favor for them. "Sure, what?"

"Well, we need a left-handed monkey wrench, see, but we're afraid t'ask, so you go into the harness shop here and ask Jake if we can use his left-handed monkey wrench, okay?"

He could feel his stomach tighten around the emptiness inside. So that's what they were up to, just making fun of the kid from the country. Sonny had heard the one about the left-handed monkey wrench from his uncle Bub, always joking; these guys knew the joke, too, and thought they could get him to fall for it. He couldn't think of anything to say, so he simply started back until one of the three boys standing back called out: "Aw, c'mon, Willard, you blew it. Shoulda used the striped paint." Another added, "This'n's too old, anyway. We need a littler one-like that." They all followed the direction of his glance, and as Sonny watched, one of them moved to intercept a small, shaggy-haired boy in overalls. The little kid, confused but willing, actually went in to put the striped-paint question to old Jake. The gang huddled to peer through the window and then, laughing again, disappeared down the street. Sonny stood at Ma's open car window. "Did you see that?" he growled, "I hate those kids!"

"Well, you don't have to be like them," she said, "but you don't have to be a country hick, either."

Remembering the incident, and freshly filled with humiliation and anger, Sonny kicked at another sod clump at the edge of the cow path and unlimbered swear words he dared use aloud only when alone.

"Sonsabitches," he muttered. Why do town kids have to be that way, getting their good times by poking fun at country rubes? He knew that his mother was right: "You don't have to be like them." But it was hard not to feel envy for the easy life of town boys, playing together every day of the year-and never any of these cows to milk, either.

Pa had the barn door open, and six milking cows started in-all except Old Holstein, always contrary, who wanted to go toward the water tank first. Sonny ran to head off and pulled his cap pistol from his belt: it took two caps aimed right between the eyes to turn her around.

They pulled their T-shaped milking stools from the wall of the cow barn. "Pa, how soon you think we can go to the lake?"

"Well, guess we better do the milkin' first, anyway," his father said, in a joking way rare in their work talk. "Then there's the rest of the chores t'do."

Chores. Always those chores, no escape. Twice every day, the cows to milk. He remembered how he had pestered Pa to let him start learning, two or three years ago-remembered how first he and Pa had compared hands: his own had seemed so small alongside Pa's broad palm and thick, callused fingers. Then he finally got to squeeze the long, easy teats of Blackie and Old Holstein. Even now, as the foam rose in his milk pail, he could remember the satisfaction of hearing that metallic ringing of his first squirts on the bottom of the gallon-sized syrup can he'd held between his small knees. It had made him feel more like a man. Now, milking every day, the fun had gone out of it; it was just repeated work. So many chores that never ended, like turning the heavy handle of the cream separator in the pantry, taking skim milk back out to the calves, climbing up in the haymow looking out for the sharp spines of Russian thistles that lurked in each forkful. Pigs and chickens to feed and water. Eggs to get, barn to clean. And when the sun goes down, start the whole thing over. The darn chores. Those lucky town kids.

But today was the Fourth, and doing chores did not seem too high a price to pay for a carefree celebration at the lake. He pitched in energetically, even volunteering to take care of the henhouse chores by himself while his mother fixed potato salad and packed fried chicken and wienies for their planned picnic. Even so, by the time Pa had finished his regular work and then started to patch a tire on the car, it was midmorning. The girls, scrubbed and pretty in their summer dresses, were ready to go long before anyone else was, and Sonny soon had his new polo shirt and blue pants, the cap pistol stuck in the belt and the package of firecrackers comfortably filling a pocket.

"Go tell your father to hurry up," Ma said, taking off her apron. "We want to get a parking place near the picnic tables." Finally Pa got himself shaved and into his white shirt and suit pants and oxfords-you could hardly tell he was a farmer-and they were off. The dishpan heaped with bowls and buns and lemonade jars took less space in the back seat than Saturday night's cream can and egg case. Pa drove even more slowly than usual, and Sonny wondered whether it was because he was worried about the tires or simply because he wanted plenty of time to look at the growing fields along the way. He kept making observations: "Sure looks better'n last year," and "There's some corn made it knee-high by the Fourth."

Patience came hard. "Come on, Pa, can't we go any faster?" Sonny had to blurt out as they neared the top of one especially long hill on the graveled road. "Ah, we'll get there," his father's easygoing response drifted back with the warm air flowing from the open car window. He leaned back against the seat; on his blue pantlegs, the firecrackers and five coins bulged through from his pockets, and he touched them with his fingertips. At the other back-seat window, Clarice kept taking out a little mirror from a white purse to investigate various angles of her eyes and lips. The two little girls were being careful to follow their mother's repeated urgings to "keep those organdy dresses and white anklets clean, now." He was checking the roll of caps in his pistol when excited Elaine screeched, "There's the lake!"

Beyond where her small finger pointed, over on the left through clumps of trees and small hills, the receded waters of Lake Poinsett glistened, bluer than the sky. Only minutes later as they came over the steep little hill, the Fourth was suddenly there below them: the big casino for roller-skating and dancing stood at the edge of what used to be the lakeshore-now, after last year's drought, a half-mile from the water. And he could see, partially hidden among the roadside trees, the flag of the familiar merry-go-round and the small flashing banners marking stands for bingo or hamburgers or games.

They parked between two trees, and Ma hurried to set the dishpan on one of the last empty picnic tables, like Columbus planting the flag in the New World. Along the way back she stopped to greet some family she knew, encamped nearby. For a while, Sonny stood next to the car, absorbing the dazzling sights and sounds. Dozens-hundreds-of people, just taking it easy, the men in their light shirts and straw hats standing in clusters while the dolled-up women tended food and small children and hooted and had a good time among themselves. He sniffed the aroma of celebration-popcorn, frying hot-dogs, cigar smoke, burnt powder-drifting in from the midway area accompanied by the merry-go-round's rhythmic pipe-organ chords and clanging cymbals. Cap guns and varied firecrackers exploded at random all around. He pulled his pistol from his belt and fired once, twice. It was barely noticeably in the din. He got the matches from Pa, extracted the wick of one precious boomer from the entanglement in the green package, laid it against a tree trunk, and backed hurriedly away as the sizzling spark signaled danger: bang! The flash and the loudness only feet away excited him, and he looked around to share the moment; no one else paid any attention. A few cars away another firecracker went off, louder than his own had been. He heard his mother calling for "everybody to come and eat now." He put the stick matches away in a separate pocket.

No other Hidewood neighbors seemed to be there. But by the time they had finished their picnic, two of Pa's brothers and an old boyhood friend had stopped by the table, and the four of them lit cigars and ambled across the road to watch the baseball game. MA hovered around the table, talking with people she used to know, while keeping an eye on the three little girls playing on the swings and teeter-totter. Some of her own brothers and sister from Overhome would be arriving later. And Marie was due soon, along with the family from Hayti she worked for. "Clarice," she suggested, "why don't you run over to those tables toward the merry-go-round, see if Marie's here yet?"

Free to wonder, Sonny stood with his hands in pockets, feeling once again for the assurance and promise there: the smooth, waxy paper pack of firecrackers in one and in the other the quarter Pa had given him jingling with the saved dime, nickel, and two

pennies. He contemplated the pleasures that forty-two cents could bring-the rides, the games, the pop.

His first decision was easy. Irresistibly, he was drawn toward the pulsating music and the brightly painted ponies rising and swooping, smooth and graceful, endlessly circling in blaring harmony. The ride made him dizzy with sensation, and he nearly got in line to spend a second nickel, then decided he'd better wait. He moved through the milling crowds toward the casino and the strains of quieter melodies coming from inside. For a long time he watched the roller skaters glide-so smoothly and without effort, the muffled roar of hundreds of hard little wheels on the huge wooden floor blending into the background music. After a while he wandered back to the midway and used another nickel on a strawberry ice cream cone. After the last pink was pushed to the very tip and savored, he stopped to try his luck at the penny-toss stand. His first chucked coin rolled completely off the platform; the second nearly ended up in a little twenty-five-cent square, but it touched the line. He watched as the aproned operator-without stopping his nasal call, "Hey, hey, toss a penny, win a dollah, got a winner here!"-exchanged coins with customers with one hand, with the other worked a longhandled broom to sweep the board clean again. Another boy at the other side of the stand tossed a penny. Suddenly Sonny felt a thrill. That familiar face belonged to Wayne, who had been his sole classmate in the third grade, before the move last year. Anticipating the pleasure of a surprise reunion, he hurried around to the other side and tapped the boy on the shoulder.

"Hiya, Wayne! How's my old pal?"

The boy turned around and looked confused for a moment. When he finally did show recognition, it wasn't with the same look of close friendship remembered from times past. There was another boy with him, whom he called Doug, a town boy from Estelline. Neither Wayne nor Doug seemed to be very interested in doing anything until Sonny showed them the pack of firecrackers. Then their enthusiasm grew quickly, and they had all kinds of suggestions on how to make the most exciting explosions. Ten minutes later, the firecrackers gone, their mood of boredom seemed to return. Walking back toward the casino, they kicked at the sand, and then the three of them sat on the edge of the boardwalk. Wayne leaned back on his elbows and looked at Sonny.

"You're sure you ain't got no more firecrackers?"

"All gone. Few more caps, is all." Sonny touched the pistol still in his belt.

"No money neither, t'buy some?"

He hesitated only briefly before sort of shaking his head; if you didn't actually say anything, maybe it wouldn't be considered a real lie.

The town boy stretched lazily. "Maybe I oughta look for my old man," he said, "an' try t'talk him out of another dime or two." Wayne said he thought that was a good idea, but nobody moved.

It was then that Sonny became aware of something new. At first there was only the sound-a distant, distinct, fluttering roar over the roller-skating noise, over the shouts of hawkers at the stands, absorbing the popping firecrackers and growing in intensity with

each second until suddenly it was a powerful engine sound that burst into a yellow vision flashing in the sky above them. He had never seen an airplane flying low-so low that he could make out the pilot's white scarf trailing from the rear cockpit, his goggles and helmet, the gloved hand waving at the crowds below. Then it was out of sight again, hidden behind the big tree alongside the casino. Sonny ran down the grassy sand embankment to the edge of the old lake bottom, where nothing obscured the open sky, and there it was again, the afternoon sun glinting on its double wings, banking and turning toward the water's edge. Its roar diminished, and the airplane dipped downward: it must be coming in for a landing on the smooth sands where the lake had receded. In the distance, a man was waving at the pilot. All else forgotten, Sonny joined a small crowd of excited men and boys running in that direction.

Off to the right, the descending airplane was now close enough for him to watch the yellow disc wheels hanging under the golden fuselage, not even turning as they glided swiftly over the earth, waiting to touch the moving shadow on the sand. Suddenly they were spinning and exploding small clouds of dust as the plane rolled, slowing now, bits of dried grass catching in the settled tail skid, idling propeller quieter in its breezy flutter, the broad yellow wings poised as if eager to keep flying. Engine cut, the flashing propeller slowed its heavy clicks and was still. The front cockpit was empty; from the rear, the pilot-all white teeth and mustache-smiled down at the assembling admirers, and with black-gloved hands he lifted his goggles onto his close-fitting leather Lindy cap. He called to the man who had been signaling him.

"Hey Charlie, wheels chocked?"

"All set, Bud."

"Okay!" Bud removed his helmet, used two gloved fingers to wipe sweat from around his eyes, and climbed down from the plane. On the ground and without his helmet, he seemed to be a more normal man; his short, dark hair reminded Sonny of Craig's older brother James, from school, except that this fellow Bud was shorter, and under that light leather jacket, he probably didn't have the muscles that James had. The field boots and flaring tan boot pants made him look pretty special, though. "So!" The pilot was looking around at the faces. "Who's gonna be the first to take a ride with me? Just two dollars, and away we go!" He pointed at Sonny: "How about it, young fella?"

Behind Sonny, plenty of takers crowded in and past, pushing him so close he could reach out and touch the smooth, yellow surface below the pilot's cockpit. He was surprised to discover that it gave under the pressure of his finger: it was just cloth, stretched tight over the hard frame. "Hey kid!" He looked up at the sharp command. The other man, Charlie, was scowling at him and motioning with his hand: "Don't touch the aircraft, kid! Let's everybody move back!" The fear that he'd done something wrong quickly subsided, and Sonny watched as Charlie herded people back, collected dollar bills from those ready for a flying adventure, and then helped the first one climb up into the front cockpit. Sonny felt the quarter and nickel that remained in his pocket: the glory that had been close enough to touch for a brief moment now seemed far, far away-could he even dream of doing such things? The lucky passenger was buckled in and had donned the extra helmet and goggles. Bud swung up into the pilot's seat, and Charlie gave the orders: "All right, everybody, get back now. Way back!"

As the throng receded, Charlie removed the wheel chocks. He stood in front of the propeller, and he and Bud began the very same ritual that Sonny had seen in the movie about airmail: "Contact." "Contact." Charlie placed both hands flat on the blade, lifted one leg high, and with an athletic, sweeping motion pulled swiftly downward. The propeller jumped, and sputtered pops came through the exhaust smoke up front. The engine again clattered with power. With the other onlookers, Sonny backed farther away, hands protecting his face from the sand and loose weeds flying through the air. Then the yellow fuselage and broad wings were moving away, the tail jerking back and forth and the wing edges up and down, as if the airplane were flexing muscles, impatient to be aloft. Beyond the spot where wheels had first touched sand, the airplane again faced into the summer breeze. Sonny could hear the authoritative surge of power as it moved the throbbing yellow machine ever faster until-just coming by them-open space appeared and widened between the still-turning wheels and the ground. It was flying.

Wide-eyed, breath suspended, Sonny stood apart from the others, watching the phenomenon of flight, almost feeling the sensation of becoming airborne in the wondrous yellow machine climbing toward the sky, free of everyday constraints, dependent upon no one else, moving with a thrust of power that led up and away, into the blue. He felt strangely detached from everything, as if in a dream, and as he watched the diminishing double line of wings, he struggled to figure out what was real and what was not. The airplane and the pilot, they were real, all right, and they were up there flying through the air right now. The thirty cents clenched in his pocketed fist was just as real. It would take eight quarters to make two dollars. For a moment, he let his soaring imagination carry him to unreality: Bud, the pilot, and Charlie are still smiling at him and they know how much he would like to ride in their airplane and they are saying, "Sure, for you old pal, why not? Thirty cents is plenty this time"-but he stopped himself. No. This is not a fairy tale. That Charlie guy is not smiling at anybody, and the pilot doesn't do any magic, either, not like some King Arthur or Merlin. He's just an ordinary man dressed up fancy who maybe when he was a kid found out about airplanes and now he has learned how to fly one. The quarter and nickel clenched in his hand could be a start toward saving enough to take a ride someday. Someday.

For now, it was enough to stand on this spot and watch the airplane circle back, fly over the casino, turn for the landing, and roll up to take on another passenger. Eight, nine times, he lost count as he followed every move in the airplane's rounds of maneuvers. Gradually the little band of onlookers thinned. Wayne and his friend had been among the first to leave the lake-bottom group, and by the time the sun glowed red in the west, Sonny was standing alone. After the last passenger descended and headed back toward the casino, Charlie climbed into the front cockpit. The pilot craned to inspect both sides of his aircraft, and when he was looking in Sonny's direction, he paused for a long moment. His leather-jacketed arm appeared above the cockpit, and the tip of his elegant glove touched his goggles. Slanted rays of sunlight deepened the warm tan of his face and highlighted the white teeth and mustache. Suddenly Sonny knew that this was a special, personal salute meant for him alone, a salute meaning-what? "I see you there, you have proved your interest in flying, you are like me." His own sweaty hand released the quarter and nickel in his pocket and came up to imitate the airman's salute, and the white under the mustache flashed broader. He continued to watch as Bud pulled down his goggles, gunned his engine, and headed into the wind. Against the hazy blue, the yellow wings and fuselage gradually dwindled into a moving speck and disappeared into infinity, and

the only sounds came from the midway and picnic grounds, where people were still celebrating the Fourth.

"Where you been?" His mother sounded a little angry when he appeared back at the scene. But there was no time for her to listen. Everyone else had eaten their share of the evening picnic; she handed him a bun and chicken leg and packed up the empty dishpan. Pa's brothers were no longer around, and Ma's sisters and brothers had already come and gone home again early in order to get chores done and return to the dance at the casino. Clarice asked why they couldn't stay until after dark for the fireworks, but Pa said better not; it had been a long time since early-morning milking and "some of those cows shouldn't wait much longer." But when they got to the car, the tire Pa had fixed that morning was flat again-"sun got too hot for the patch, I guess"-and he had to jack up the back wheel to put on the worn spare, bulging with a boot inside where the hole in the tire showed through. When they finally got going, Pa had to drive more slowly than ever to favor the worrisome boot, which made the back of the car wobble with each turn of the lame wheel. The worry was not baseless: halfway home, a plaintive hiss came from down below, and the Ford rumbled to a stop on the gravel. No choice now; Pa peeled off the flabby rubber and they proceeded on the rim, a ringing crunch of metal against pebbles as the Ford crawled along, leaving its trail of shame double-cut into the roadway. To avoid permanent damage, Pa turned off onto dirt roads and watched carefully for large rocks.

It was long after dark when they finally eased into the driveway. The cows stood waiting at the barn door, and in the lantern light their bags looked swollen and stiff. Sonny could muster little energy as they went about the evening chores, and the wayward Old Holstein managed to add both insult and injury when she kicked him into the manure gutter just as he touched her. She had a mean, bloody gash on her bag, apparently from another attempt to jump the barbed-wire fence. Pa had to take over milking her, tying a rope around those menacing legs. "Dang fool cow," he muttered as he gingerly applied Bag Balm. "Never satisfied with what's on this side of the fence; always got t'get in trouble.

An hour later, tired, sore, and morose, Sonny sat with his mother in the dim yellow glare of the kerosene lamp between them on the kitchen table. Their shadows loomed high and dark on the walls behind them. He ate slowly from the cup of bread soaked in milk that she'd set before him. The girls were long since asleep, and Pa was finishing up the chores.

"You're not talking much," she observed. "Bet you're pretty tired. Long day."

He glanced up briefly but offered no reply. The lamplight shining on just one side of his mother's face made her look sort of glamorous, like a star in a movie magazine. This chance to talk with her, just the two of them, calm like this, came along every once in a while, since her moods seemed so much better now.

"That cow didn't really hurt you, did she?"

"Naw." Old Holstein's dumb ways were not what was bothering him the most. "But we sure have to work a long time around here just to take a few hours off."

"Well, chores is part of farmin'. You had fun today though, didn't you?"

"Mmm, yeah, guess so. Different."

"Who'd you see, besides Wayne?"

"Hardly anybody I know. Nobody from around here."

"Well, what were you doing all that time, then? You never did say."

He held his empty spoon upright to emphasize what he wanted to tell her. "Ma," he said, "I was down there by that airplane. I touched it. I, ah, sort of talked with the pilot, even."

"That so."

"Did you know that airplanes are just made out of cloth? Stretched over a frame of wire or maybe wood, and painted?"

"Hmm. Makes them light, I spose."

"Sure. And the way you say 'contact' and pull down on the prop to start it, like in the movie show, remember? And that big old motor just roars and kicks up a windstorm, and the plane rolls along, and in a little while there's nothing between it and the ground-but air?"

In the silence his spoon clanked again in his cup, and he swallowed the last of his soaked bread. He could feel her eyes still on him and returned the gaze. "Just imagine," he said, "what it must feel like, flying around in the air like a hawk."

She nodded, half-smiling. "You'd really like that, wouldn't you."

He felt the realization glow inside him. No one else in the whole world understood him like his mother. "You think I could ever really fly an airplane, myself?"

She looked at him matter-of-factly and spooned another portion of her bread and milk. "Don't see any reason why not," she said. "A person can do anything, if he wants to bad enough. First thing is, you got to want to do it."

He thought about this for a moment, then turned to get up from the table. He saw his shadow rising toward the ceiling, and he spread his arms, wagging shadow wings. "Look," he said, "I'm flying already!"

"Better fly upstairs to bed."

Shoes off, he turned from the upstairs door with another insight to impart. "The wheels on an airplane-they turn only because the plane is rolling on the ground. They don't move, even, when the plane is flying. Did you know that?"

She shook her head, and there was that relaxed smile between them that came only once in a while. "No," she said, "I never thought of that."

He raised his hand, touched an eyebrow with the tip of his fingers-bent just so, as if encased in the most elegant kid-leather glove-and with a farewell salute, he turned to climb the steep stairs.

From Robert Amerson, *From the Hidewood: Memories of a Dakota Neighborhood* (copyright by the Minnesota Historical Society, 1996).