

President Cleveland, **WHERE ARE YOU?**

By Robert Cormier

THAT WAS THE AUTUMN OF THE COWBOY CARDS—Buck Jones and Tom Tyler and Hoot Gibson and especially Ken Maynard. The cards were available in those five-cent packages of gum: pink sticks, three together, covered with a sweet white powder. You couldn't blow bubbles with that particular gum, but it couldn't have mattered less. The cowboy cards were important—the pictures of those rock-faced men with eyes of blue steel.

On those wind-swept, leaf-tumbling afternoons, we gathered after school on the sidewalk in front of Lemire's Drugstore, across from St. Jude's Parochial School, and we swapped and bargained and matched for the cards. Because a Ken Maynard **serial**¹ was playing at the Globe every Saturday afternoon, he was the most popular cowboy of all, and one of his cards was worth at least ten of any other kind. Rollie Tremaine had a treasure of thirty or so, and he guarded them jealously. He'd match you for the other cards, but he risked his Ken Maynards only when the other kids threatened to leave him out of the competition altogether.

You could almost hate Rollie Tremaine. In the first place, he was the only son of Auguste Tremaine, who operated the Uptown Dry Goods Store, and he did not live in a **tenement**² but in a big white birthday cake of a house on Laurel Street. He was too fat to be effective in the football games between the Frenchtown Tigers and the North Side Knights, and he made us constantly aware of the jingle of coins in his pockets. He was able to stroll into Lemire's and casually select a quarter's worth of cowboy cards while the rest of us watched, aching with envy.

Once in a while I earned a nickel or dime by running errands or washing windows for blind old Mrs. Belander, or by finding pieces of copper, brass, and other valuable metals at the dump and selling them to the junkman. The coins clutched in my hand, I would race to Lemire's to buy a cowboy card or two, hoping that Ken Maynard would stare boldly out at me as I opened the pack. At one time, before a disastrous matching session with Roger Lussier (my best friend, except where the cards were involved), I owned five Ken Maynards and considered myself a millionaire, of sorts.

¹ **serial** a movie appearing in weekly parts

² **tenement** a low-rent or rundown apartment building

One week I was particularly lucky; I had spent two afternoons washing floors for Mrs. Belander and received a quarter. Because my father had worked a full week at the shop, where a rush order for fancy combs had been received, he **allotted**³ my brothers and sisters and me an extra dime along with the usual ten cents for the Saturday-afternoon movie. Setting aside the movie fare, I found myself with a bonus of thirty-five cents, and I then planned to put Rollie Tremaine to shame the following Monday afternoon.

Monday was the best day to buy the cards because the candy man stopped at Lemire's every Monday morning to deliver the new assortments. There was nothing more exciting in the world than a fresh batch of card boxes. I rushed home from school that day and hurriedly changed my clothes, eager to set off for the store. As I burst through the doorway, letting the screen door slam behind me, my brother Armand blocked my way.

He was fourteen, three years older than I, and a freshman at Monument High School. He had recently become a stranger to me in many ways—indifferent to such matters and cowboy cards and the Frenchtown Tigers—and he carried himself with a mysterious dignity that was fractured now and then when his voice began shooting off in all directions like some kind of **vocal fireworks**.⁴

"Wait a minute, Jerry," he said. "I want to talk to you." He motioned me out of earshot of my mother, who was busy supervising the usual after-school **skirmish**⁵ in the kitchen.

I sighed with impatience. In recent months Armand had become a figure of authority, siding with my father and mother occasionally. As the oldest son, he sometimes took advantage of his age and experience to issue the rules and regulations.

"How much money have you got?" he whispered.

"You in some kind of trouble?" I asked, excitement rising in me as I remembered the blackmail plot of a movie at the Glove a month before.

He shook his head in annoyance. "Look," he said, "it's Pa's birthday tomorrow. I think we ought to chip in and buy him something...."

I reached into my pocket and caressed the coins. "Here," I said carefully, pulling out a nickel. "If we all give a nickel, we should have enough to buy him something pretty nice."

He regarded me with **contempt**⁶. "Rita already gave me fifteen cents, and I'm throwing in a quarter. Albert handed over a dime—all that's left of his birthday money. Is that all you can do—a nickel?"

³ **allot** to parcel out to; distribute to

⁴ **vocal fireworks** because Armand's voice is changing, its pitch varies unexpectedly from high to low

⁵ **skirmish** a minor battle or conflict

⁶ **contempt** *noun* the feeling produced by something disgraceful or worthless; scorn

“Aw, come on,” I protested. “I haven’t got a single Ken Maynard left, and I was going to buy some cards this afternoon.”

“Ken Maynard!” he snorted. “Who’s more important—him or your father?”

His question was unfair because he knew that there was no possible choice—“my father” had to be the only answer. My father was a huge man who believed in the things of the spirit.... He had worked at the Monument Comb Shop since the age of fourteen; his booming laugh—or grumble—greeted us each night when he returned from the factory. A steady worker when the shop had enough work, he quickened with gaiety on Friday nights and weekends,...and he was fond of making long speeches about the good things in life. In the middle of the Depression, for instance, he paid cash for a piano, of all things, and insisted that my twin sisters, Yolande and Yvette, take lessons once a week.

I took a dime from my pocket and handed it to Armand.

“Thanks, Jerry,” he said. “I hate to take your last cent.”

“That’s alright,” I replied, turning away and consoling myself with the thought that twenty cents was better than nothing at all.

When I arrived at Lemire’s, I sensed disaster in the air. Roger Lussier was kicking disconsolately at a tin can in the gutter, and Rollie Tremaine sat sullenly on the steps in front of the store.

“Save your money,” Roger said. He had known about my plans to splurge on the cards.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“There’s no more cowboy cards,” Rollie Tremaine said. “The company’s not making them any more.”

“They’re going to have President cards,” Roger said, his face twisting with disgust. He pointed to the store window. “Look!”

A placard in the window announced: “Attention, Boys. Watch for the New Series. Presidents of the United States. Free in Each 5-Cent Package of Caramel Chew.”

“President Cards?” I asked, dismayed.

I read on: “Collect a Complete Set and Receive an Official Imitation Major League Baseball Glove, Embossed with Lefty Grove’s Autograph.”

Glove or no glove, who could become excited about Presidents, of all things?

Rollie Tremaine stared at the sign.

“Benjamin Harrison⁷, for crying out loud,” he said. “Why would I want Benjamin Harrison when I’ve got twenty-two Ken Maynards?”

I felt the warmth of guilt creep over me. I jingled the coins in my pocket, but the sound was hollow. No Ken Maynards to buy.

⁷ **Benjamin Harrison** President of the United States from 1889 to 1893

"I'm going to buy a Mr. Goodbar," Rollie Tremaine decided.

I was without appetite, indifferent even to a Baby Ruth, which was my favorite. I thought of how I had betrayed Armand and, worst of all, my father.

"I'll see you after supper," I called over my shoulder to Roger as I hurried away toward home. I took the shortcut behind the church, although it involved leaping over a tall wooden fence, and I zigzagged recklessly through Mr. Thibodeau's garden, trying to outrace my guilt. I pounded up the steps and into the house, only to learn that Armand had already taken Yolande and Yvette uptown to shop for the birthday present.

I pedaled my bike furiously through the streets, ignoring the **indignant**⁸ horns of automobiles as I sliced through the traffic. Finally I saw Armand and my sisters emerge from the Monument Men's Shop. My heart sank when I spied the long, slim package that Armand was holding.

"Did you buy the present yet?" I asked, although I knew it was too late.

"Just now. A blue tie," Armand said. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I replied, my chest hurting.

He looked at me for a long moment. At first his eyes were hard, but then they softened. He smiled at me, almost sadly, and touched my arm. I turned away from him because I felt naked and exposed.

"It's all right," he said gently. "Maybe you've learned something." The words were gentle, but they held a curious dignity, the dignity remaining even when his voice suddenly cracked on the last syllable.

I wondered what was happening to me, because I did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Sister Angela was amazed when, a week before Christmas vacation, everybody in the class submitted a history essay worthy of a high mark—in some cases as high as A minus. (Sister Angela did not believe that anyone in the world ever deserved an A.) She never learned—or at least she never let on that she knew—we all had become experts on the Presidents because of the cards we purchased at Lemire's. Each card contained a picture of a President and, on the reverse side, a summary of his career. We looked at those cards so often that the biographies imprinted themselves on our minds without effort. Even our street-corner conversations were filled with such information as the fact that James Madison was called "The Father of the Constitution," or that John Adams had intended to become a minister.

The President cards were a roaring success, and the cowboy cards were quickly forgotten. In the first place, we did not receive gum with the

⁸ **indignant** *adj* angry at something unjust, mean, or unworthy

cards, but a kind of chewy caramel. The caramel could be tucked into a corner of your mouth, bulging your cheek in much the same manner as wads of tobacco bulged in the mouths of baseball stars. In the second place, the competition for collecting the cards was fierce and frustrating—fierce because everyone was intent on being the first to send away for a baseball glove and frustrating because although there were only thirty-two Presidents, including **Franklin Delano Roosevelt**⁹, the variety at Lemire’s was at a minimum. When the deliveryman left the boxes of cards at the store each Monday, we often discovered that one entire box was devoted to a single President—two weeks in a row the boxes contained nothing but Abraham Lincolns. One week Roger Lussier and I were the heroes of Frenchtown. We journeyed on our bicycles to North Side, engaged three boys in a matching bout, and returned with five new Presidents, including Chester Alan Arthur, who up to that time had been missing.

Perhaps to sharpen our desire, the card company sent a sample glove to Mr. Lemire, and it dangled, orange and sleek, in the window. I was half sick with longing, thinking of my old glove at home, which I had inherited from Armand. But Rollie Tremaine’s desire for the glove outdistanced my own. He even got Mr. Lemire to agree to give the glove in the window to the first person to get a complete set of cards, so that precious time wouldn’t be wasted waiting for the postman.

We were delighted at Rollie Tremaine’s frustration, especially since he was only a substitute player for the Tigers. Once, after spending fifty cents on cards—all of which turned out to be Calvin Coolidge—he threw them to the ground, pulled some dollar bills out of his pocket, and said, “The heck with it, I’m going to buy a glove!”

“Not that glove,” Roger Lussier said. “Not a glove with Lefty Grove’s autograph. Look at what it says at the bottom of the sign.”

We all looked, although we knew the words by heart: “This Glove Is Not For Sale Anywhere.”

Rollie Tremaine scrambled to pick up the cards from the sidewalk, pouting more than ever. After that he was quietly **obsessed**¹⁰ with the Presidents, hugging the cards close to his chest and refusing to tell us how many more he needed to complete his set.

I too was obsessed with the cards, because they had become things of comfort in a world that had suddenly grown dismal. After Christmas, a layoff at the shop had thrown my father out of work. He received no paycheck for four weeks, and the only income we had was from Armand’s after-school job at the Blue and White Grocery Store—a job he lost finally when business **dwindled**¹¹ as the layoff continued.

⁹ **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** President of the United States from 1933 to 1945; president at the time of the story’s setting

¹⁰ **obsessed** *verb* to occupy the mind of; concern excessively

¹¹ **dwindle** *verb* to become less and less

Although we had enough food and clothing—my father’s credit had always been good, a matter of pride with him—the inactivity made my father restless and irritable.... The twins fell sick and went to the hospital to have their tonsils removed. My father was confident that he would return to work eventually and pay off his debts, but he seemed to age before our eyes.

When orders again were received at the comb shop and he returned to work, another disaster occurred, although I was the only one aware of it. Armand fell in love.

I discovered this situation by accident, when I happened to pick up a piece of paper that had fallen to the floor in the bedroom he and I shared. I frowned at the paper, puzzled.

“Dear Sally, When I look into your eyes the world stands still...”

The letter was snatched from my hands before I finished reading it.

“What’s the big idea, snooping around?” Armand asked, his face crimson. “Can’t a guy have any privacy?”

He had never mentioned his privacy before. “It was on the floor,” I said. “I didn’t know it was a letter. Who’s Sally?”

He flung himself across the bed. “You tell anybody and I’ll muckalize you, he threatened. “Sally Knowlton.”

Nobody in Frenchtown had a name like Knowlton.

“A girl from the North Side?” I asked, **incredulous**¹².

He rolled over and faced me, anger in his eyes, and a kind of despair, too.

“What’s the matter with that? Think she’s too good for me?” he asked. “I’m warning you, Jerry, if you tell anybody...”

“Don’t worry,” I said. Love had no particular place in my life; it seemed an unnecessary waste of time. And a girl from the North Side was so remote that for all practical purposes she did not exist. But I was curious. “What are you writing her a letter for? Did she leave town or something?”

“She hasn’t left town,” he answered. “I wasn’t going to send it. I just felt like writing to her.”

I was glad that I had never become involved with love—love that brought desperation to your eyes, that caused you to write letters you did not plan to send. Shrugging with indifference, I began to search in the closet for the old baseball glove. I found it on the shelf, under some old sneakers. The webbing was torn and the padding gone. I thought of the sting I would feel when a sharp grounder slapped into the glove, and I winced.

“You tell anybody about me and Sally and I’ll—“

“I know. You’ll muckalize me.”

¹² **incredulous** *adj* unbelieving

I did not **divulge**¹³ his secret and often shared his agony, particularly when he sat at the supper table and left my mother's special butterscotch pie untouched. I had never realized before how terrible love could be. But my compassion was short-lived, because I had other things to worry about: report cards due at Eastertime; the loss of income from old Mrs. Belander, who had gone to live with a daughter in Boston; and, of course, the Presidents.

Because a **stalemate**¹⁴ had been reached, the President cards were the dominant force in our lives—mine, Roger Lussier's, and Rollie Tremaine's. For three weeks, as the baseball season approached, each of us had a complete set—complete except for one President, Grover Cleveland. Each time a box of cards arrived at the store, we hurriedly bought them (as hurriedly as our funds allowed) and tore off the wrappers, only to be confronted by James Monroe or Martin Van Buren or someone else. But never Grover Cleveland, never the man who had been the twenty-second and the twenty-fourth President of the United States. We argued about Grover Cleveland. Should he be placed between Chester Alan Arthur and Benjamin Harrison as the twenty-second President, or did he belong between Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley as the twenty-fourth President? Was the card company playing fair? Roger Lussier brought up a horrifying possibility—did we need two Grover Cleverlands to complete the set?

Indignant, we stormed Lemire's and protested to the harassed store owner, who had long since vowed never to stock a new series. Muttering angrily, he searched his bills and receipts for a list of rules.

"All right," he announced. "Says here you only need one Grover Cleveland to finish the set. Now get out, all of you, unless you've got money to spend."

Outside the store, Rollie Tremaine picked up an empty tobacco tin and scaled it across the street. "Boy," he said. "I'd give five dollars for a Grover Cleveland."

When I returned home, I found Armand sitting on the **piazza**¹⁵ steps, his chin in his hands. His mood of dejection mirrored my own, and I sat down beside him. We did not say anything for a while.

"Want to throw the ball around?"

He sighed, not bothering to answer.

"You sick?" I asked.

He stood up and hitched up his trousers, pulled at his ear, and finally told me what the matter was—there was a big dance next week at the high school, the Spring Promenade, and Sally had asked him to be her escort.

¹³ **divulge** *verb* to reveal, especially something private or secret

¹⁴ **stalemate** *noun* a situation in which none of the people playing a game are able to win

¹⁵ **piazza** porch

I shook my head at the folly of love. “Well, what’s so bad about that?”

“How can I take Sally to a fancy dance?” he asked desperately. “I’d have to buy her a corsage.... And my shoes are practically falling apart. Pa’s got too many worries now to buy me shoes or give me money for flowers for a girl.”

I nodded in sympathy. “Yeah,” I said. “Look at me. Baseball time is almost here, and all I’ve got is that old glove. And no Grover Cleveland card yet...”

“Grover Cleveland?” he asked. “They’ve got some of those up on the North Side. Some kid was telling me there’s a store that’s got them. He says they’re looking for Warren G. Harding.”

“Holy smoke!” I said. “I’ve got an extra Warren G. Harding!” Pure joy sang in my veins. I ran to my bicycle, swung into the seat—and found that the front tire was flat.

“I’ll help you fix it,” Armand said.

Within half an hour I was at the North Side Drugstore, where several boys were matching cards on the sidewalk. Silently but blissfully I shouted: President Cleveland, here I come!

After Armand had left for the dance, all dressed up as if it were Sunday, the small green box containing the corsage under his arm, I sat on the railing of the piazza, letting my feet dangle. The neighborhood was quiet because the Frenchtown Tigers were at Daggett’s Field, practicing for the first baseball game of the season.

I thought of Armand and the ridiculous expression on his face when he’d stood before the mirror in the bedroom. I’d avoided looking at his new black shoes. “Love,” I muttered.

Spring had arrived in a sudden stampede of apple blossoms and fragrant breezes. Windows had been thrown open and dust mops had banged on the sills all day long as the women busied themselves with housecleaning. I was puzzled by my **lethargy**¹⁶. Wasn’t spring supposed to make everything bright and gay?

I turned at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Roger Lussier greeted me with a sour face.

“I thought you were practicing with the Tigers,” I said.

“Rollie Tremaine,” he said. “I just couldn’t stand him.” He slammed his fist against the railing. “Jeez, why did he have to be the one to get a Grover Cleveland? You should see him showing off. He won’t let anybody even touch that glove....”

I felt like **Benedict Arnold**¹⁷ and knew that I had to confess what I had done.

¹⁶ **lethargy** *noun* a lack of activity; sluggish

¹⁷ **Benedict Arnold** an American general who became a traitor to his country’s cause during the Revolutionary War

“Roger,” I said, “I got a Grover Cleveland card up on the North Side. I sold it to Rollie Tremaine for five dollars.”

“Are you crazy?” he asked.

“I needed that five dollars. It was an—an emergency.”

“Boy!” he said, looking down at the ground and shaking his head. “What did you have to do a thing like that for?”

I watched him as he turned away and began walking down the stairs.

“Hey, Roger!” I called.

He squinted up at me as if I were a stranger, someone he’d never seen before.

“What?” he asked, his voice flat.

“I had to do it,” I said. “Honest.”

He didn’t answer. He headed toward the fence, searching for the board we had loosened to give us a secret passage.

I thought of my father and Armand and Rollie Tremaine and Grover Cleveland and wished that I could go away someplace far away. But there was no place to go.

Roger found the loose slat in the fence and slipped through. I felt **betrayed**¹⁸: Weren’t you supposed to feel good when you did something fine and noble?

A moment later, two hands gripped the top of the fence and Roger appeared. “Was it a real emergency?” he yelled.

“A real one!” I called. “Something important!”

His face dropped from sight and his voice reached me across the yard: “All right.”

“See you tomorrow!” I yelled.

I swung my legs over the railing again. The gathering dusk began to soften the sharp edges of the fence, the rooftops, the distant church steeple. I sat there a long time, waiting for the good feeling to come.

¹⁸ **betrayed** *adj* made a fool of; tricked **betray** *verb*