

The seating in the hotel's restaurant had one table facing a window, opening to the sidewalk and to huge beds of yellow and red tulips in a park across the street. Every morning on the Chicago trip, the waitresses saved the table and two chairs. To firm the deal, I slipped these hardworking gals two-dollar bills on the first morning of my stay for their grandchildren.

Such paltry bribery, closer to being trickery, traces back to the "Big Boss," called "Diamond Jim" by one of his cronies after a trip to New York City, where he cut a big swath through the uptown clubs and hotels wearing a hand-painted tie depicting a polo pony and decorating the tables with bills — green bills, sizable ones.

But these ladies weren't showgirls, they were deep-seasoned from hoofing platters of eggs and short stacks to the salesmen and such like who pass through hotels. The hint the two's were working was not only the special table. The tone and affection they used, calling me "Honey," made the bets go that a dollar bill under a plate for a party of four was a pretty big tip in that joint.

On one of those mornings, matters not which one, a group of Australians crowded into the elevator on my descent. Had the weight capacity of the lift been visible from the far corner over Gargantuan shoulders, it would have been a judicious move to ask to stop at the next floor, as the condition of these denizens of the outback

showed that plenty of fried mutton chops and dark lager polished the ol' training regimes.

Most distressing part in the packed cage was that the leader began spinning a pair of men's underwear on an upheld finger, to the vast amusement of his gang. Upon landing in the lobby, he bounded over to reception, tossed the shorts on the desk, and exclaimed: "Found these under my bed, mate."

Once, behind the bunkhouse at the old ranch, a lady from the Northeast showed the same degree of horror that the desk clerk displayed when Cowboy Jake showed her a snakeskin drying on a board. It would have taken a fine-tuned instrument to call who suffered the worst shock. However, the room clerk held an edge. Dressed in a tailored dark suit, he arose to office by removing the offense with a broom handle and depositing it in the trash.

The first three mornings, we walked to the Art Institute to see the special exhibit again and move to the permanent collections once the ticketed crowds swarmed in the doors. The security people guarding the treasures became familiar. I made tentative moves to be friendly. There's no way of guessing if one of the old gals staring into space was supporting a worthless husband or trying to forget one they used to support, but if they aren't moping over some new wretch, they can be quite helpful giving directions in such a huge complex.

On one afternoon, we went to the Shedd Aquarium, the largest indoor aquarium in the world. The guidebook made a

bigger deal over blasting the \$23 gate fee than over the scope of the place. Seeing the whales close was worth that much dough. I stood a long time watching a beluga and her calf swim together in a huge tank, over and over doing back rolls, yet the albino calf staying at her side.

The sign said the calf weighed 250 pounds at nine months, but that's another example not to sell by the head, as the birth weight was quoted at 125 pounds, and I know she had more than doubled her weight. I didn't have the chart along, but whale's milk is high in butterfat. The way those two stayed together, it was obvious the mother gave a lot of milk. (Barnacles attached to a whale soon taste rich as a milk shake.)

I'd have given another 23 bucks to see the calf nurse. The old salt goes way back in my bloodlines. The greatest of grandfathers sailed around Cape Horn in a clipper. He'd probably think looking at whales in a glass tank was like a cowboy vacationing on a dude ranch.

Love of the sea extends to this very age. One grandson sails in and out of the Atlantic, continuing the lure of rolling decks and billowing canvas, through Gibraltar onto the Mediterranean Sea as an engineer on a boat. He further celebrates the nautical life by honoring anchorings in ports frequented by college coeds abroad on a lark – a trait stemming from his maternal side, I'm sure, as his paternal lines come from shy provincials given to solitude of the range and the sea.

Morning breakfast was never more pleasant than being waited upon at a private table by the window overlooking a city awakening in a fury to go to work. I read and made notes. Greeted the days tasting a life in another space.