

5-2017

Little Stars

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Little Stars

by

Janice T. Lefebvre

A Creative Work

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in English

May, 2017

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Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
1. Prologue: 1948	3
2. 1974	10
3. 1974	31
4. 1931	41
5. 1974	62
6. 1974	67
7. 1974	80
8. 1950	87
9. 1974	98
10. 1974	119
11. 1974	130

Prologue: 1948

The snow reached to the rooftops as Sal walked down the middle of Third Street toward home. The weekend blizzard had sacked Stockton good, and all businesses that opened their doors Monday morning did so late because of the massive shoveling and plowing required. *More like tunneling*, thought Sal with a smile. It was his guilty secret that he liked blizzards. Guilty because people always died in them...men getting disoriented on their way to the barn and found the next day frozen stiff just twenty feet from their front doors, families in cars sliding into ditches and the drivers stupidly trying to walk for help. Many who died were lifetime Minnesotans who never learned. If you respected a blizzard, it was a beautiful thing. The world became small and sacred. Clean. Sal even liked the bitter cold days that followed a blizzard. Mornings he liked to rise early, bundle up with full winter gear, including a facemask, and walk. Hardly a soul would be out so early in such temperatures. The sound of the brittle snow crunching at his feet would travel what seemed like miles. He would set off some dog or other into barking, and the chain of barking would continue yard by yard until some far distant dog was the last one he could hear. Walking in winter was peaceful. Sal decided tomorrow he would take a long stroll about town before even Ma arose.

Thinking of Ma made him pick up his pace a little. She would begin worrying if he weren't home by suppertime, which was every day at 5:30 on the dot. He forgot to remind her that he was picking up her resoled shoes at Yonke's after work. It only delayed him five minutes or so, but he knew even five minutes could sometimes make her frantic if it were one of her bad days. Both he and his younger brother, Ig, had

travelled the Pacific for two years while in the Navy and survived, but Ma still imagined all kinds of accidents and tragedies that could befall them in Stockton. He knew she didn't sleep much. She hadn't slept much since Pa died almost five years ago. Being a tosser-turner himself, Sal often heard Ma at night, shuffling around, trying not to make noise in the kitchen.

Since it was Tuesday today, Sal knew potato pancakes along with a sauce made of boiled apples and onions were on Ma's menu. There would also be ring bologna and sauerkraut. Ma's weekly menu never varied as to the main course. It was as ritualistic as Catholic mass on Sundays. Only the desserts and vegetable dishes altered depending on the time of year, especially during the gardening months of summer. After Pa had died, Ma's ever-present anxiety over making decisions grew acute so that she would work herself into tears over trying to decide between meatloaf and hotdish. The boys had devised the set menu to relieve some of her stress. Sal's favorite supper was on Thursdays when sausage with maple syrup and corn bread were up to bat.

Sal looked up to the sky. Already it was black, but the stars seemed endless and brilliant after the cloudy skies of late. As he walked the last block down First Avenue to Third Street, where his family's house stood on the corner, he still couldn't actually see the house because the street plow had pushed the snow so high. The Lansings' house, directly across the alley from his house and facing Second Street, was buried as well. He pictured Rose inside, curled up in her favorite overstuffed chair with a book and her small thermos of coffee, absentmindedly twirling a lock of her shiny brown hair. Sal had given her the thermos two Christmases ago when he was home on leave. Rose had told him

that the coffee in her mug, always loaded with milk and sugar, would turn cold because she would get lost in her book and forget to drink. She'd later have to reheat it on the stove so that it wouldn't go to waste. As she was opening her gift, Sal panicked, suddenly realizing how unromantic and cheap a thermos might seem, but when Rose saw it, she appeared genuinely moved. She smiled at him, eyes sparkling, and said, "Oh Sal, nobody pays such careful attention to what I say like you do. This is the most thoughtful present ever!" Then she insisted that they try it out immediately and, after kissing his cheek, dragged him to the kitchen to brew some coffee.

Thinking of her brought the usual spread of sadness that began with a clenched heart and ended with nausea. He turned his gaze away from the mountain of snow that was her house and looked up to the sky again to find Pleiades, or the Seven Sisters as the guys in the Navy called it. The tiny cluster was hard to pick out amongst so many brighter stars. He knew they together looked like one star and you had to look carefully to make out the shape, which was an extremely tiny version of the Little Dipper but found at the top part of Taurus. Sal's feet kept walking on toward his house, but his eyes soaked in the sky as a yearning flooded him. He wished he could soar up toward the heavens and float away.

Instead he trudged on, his winter boots heavy. Normally he would enter his house through the side door by the kitchen, but he had only managed to shovel the shorter length from the front door to the road. As he maneuvered around a huge snow pile to turn the corner at Third Street, a flashing red caught his notice. He froze, slowly taking

in that the light was from an ambulance. A cop car was parked ahead of it, but its light wasn't flashing.

Sal's pulse began to thump. He had just talked to Ma on the phone at noon, checking in like he always did. Nothing had seemed out of the ordinary. In fact, she had seemed better lately. She had even been teaching Sal's older brother, Art, her family recipes, passed down through generations of Germans. Every evening they cooked together, following the set menu. Before that Ma had never let the boys so much as boil noodles. He struggled to remember whether or not he had locked up her medication after putting the correct number of pills in the shot glass by the kitchen sink, but of course he had. He always checked and double-checked before he left for work.

Growing dread made Sal feel like his legs had oatmeal instead of blood in their veins, but he propelled himself forward. He hurried to the narrow path leading to the front door. Panic rose as he saw that, despite the bitter temperatures, the door stood wide open. He ran the last steps to the front stoop and entered.

Art sat on the couch with Bernice. She and Sal's other brother, Ig, had just been married less than two weeks ago and they lived one block further down the road. Art was crumpled and leaning against her, shaking and moaning. Bernice had her arm around him, gripping his shoulder. Her other hand rested on Art's clenched hands. She was saying, "Take a deep breath, Art. There, that's right." The police officer, who stood nearby, put his small notebook in his pocket when he saw Sal. *He must be the new guy*, thought Sal because he didn't recognize him.

"You're the third brother?" he asked.

Sal nodded. He didn't think he could manage to speak.

"She's in there." The officer turned his eyes to the door of Ma's bedroom. "We kept her uncovered since you were expected at any moment." He was assuming that somehow Sal had been told what had happened, but it didn't matter. Sal knew without being told. He had already played the scene in his head thousands of times before. He slowly looked over to Ma's room and willed his feet to move in that direction.

The ambulance attendants already had her on a gurney in a body bag but not zipped up. The bag was big enough to shield Sal from a direct view. He could only see part of Ma's gray and black hair above the canvas. The attendants were putting medical supplies into a metal case. Sal saw Ig standing silently and stiffly at Ma's side, working his jaw muscles. He looked up to Sal with his large gray eyes. They were weary but clear.

From the corner of the room someone said, "We're so sorry, Sal. There really wasn't anything we could do." Sal realized the speaker was Joe Leukum, a fellow VFW member who served on both the ambulance and fire corps.

Sal nodded at Joe. "Thank you." He was surprised at how calm and polite his own voice sounded. He saw Joe glance at his partner. Sal recognized him as one of the Stangler boys. *He couldn't be an adult yet. Didn't he just play basketball for the Stockies last year?*

Joe continued, "We're ready to go, to take her to the funeral home, but Ig wanted you to see her. That is, if you want to." He looked over to his young partner, who kept his eyes on the metal case and didn't seem interested in helping with the necessary

dialogue. Joe took a deep breath. “Hanging isn’t pretty, Sal. She doesn’t look like she’s...peaceful. Her neck and her coloring...” He shook his head to ward off the mental image.

Hanging? Sal took in the word. *How could that be right?* In all the scenarios that he had considered, hanging had not been part of the picture.

“He means that she looks horrible.” It was Ig speaking. His voice was wooden but held an angry edge. “She’s black and purple at her neck and her whole face is swollen and blue. At least her eyes are closed now so you won’t have to see them.” He turned away and looked out the window where the snow blocked the view that the streetlight usually allowed. Suddenly his voice came out in a gasp. “She used a rope. I thought that quack doctor told us women never use ropes.” He clenched both fists and began pacing. “Christ! Why didn’t we make sure there weren’t any damn ropes around here? Did she get it from the shed? She never goes in there.” He put a hand to his face and shuddered. Then he began to cry quietly.

Sal sensed that both attendants would be much happier if they were allowed to zip up Ma’s bag and roll her out at once. He didn’t disappoint them.

“You can cover her. I’ll wait to see her at the funeral home.” Sal noticed Ig tense his shoulder muscles, the thing he always did when disgusted with him. But Ig couldn’t have been surprised. *He knew I wouldn’t be able to look. He knows me.*

As the attendants wheeled the gurney to the living room and out the door, Sal realized that he was still carrying the bag with Ma’s shoes. He set it on the dresser. As he turned back, he caught Ig’s glare.

“Where were you?” he said. His tone was harsh. “She did it right before you were to come home. She sent Art upstairs with fresh sheets for the beds so he’d be out of the way. You were supposed to find her, not Art. You know she’d have never done this to Art.” He sat on Ma’s bed and ran his hands through his black, wavy hair before looking again at Sal. “Thank God I’d decided to walk over here. I could hear Art screaming halfway down the block.” He made a fist again. Sal wondered if he was about to get punched. Instead Ig lay back on the bed and put his arm over his face.

Sal wished his bones would collapse inside of himself and he could fall to the floor in a pile of dust. “I picked up her shoes,” he said. “All I did was pick up her damn shoes.”

Chapter 1: 1974

The stench in the car suggested that Stubby was as good as dead. The only question was whether to let him become dead on his own the natural way or to help him along. Ig would, of course, be practical and put him to sleep, but Art would see euthanizing any creature as inviting a one-way pass to hell, and upsetting Art had to be avoided at all costs.

“So did you want to schedule the appointment then?” the receptionist said in an impatient tone that let Sal know it was at least the second time she had asked. His cheeks flushed. It was a constant embarrassment to be always daydreaming, especially because he never knew how long he had been standing there in a daze. But he couldn’t stop himself; it just happened. In fact, it was a family trait. Ig, would actually expect people to wait through his daydreams before continuing conversations. He would sort of hover between his dream state and wake state with his eyes bugged out, a half grimace on his face, and his hand held up, keeping others at bay until he was good and ready. Daydream finished, he would look up and say, “Now, what was that?” Everyone in Stockton took this in stride. In fact, they thought it was charming somehow. But that was Ig. He always got away with being quirky, simply because from birth on he always was and never hid it. Sal wasn’t so lucky. But at forty-six years old, it was too late to start showing his quirks now. It wouldn’t be charming, just plain old weird.

“Mr. Schmidt, the appointment?”

“Huh? Oh. No, I don’t think I’ll schedule it, not today anyway.”

“Then, do you wish to make a payment on Stubby’s account?”

It was still strange to Sal that Stubby had his own account with bills arriving at the house in envelopes addressed to Stubby Schmidt as if dogs carried billfolds with cash and insurance cards. It was a marketing ploy, cuteness for dog lovers. Yet, if Sal didn't pay up, it wouldn't be Stubby the vet clinic would call. Could he deny knowing the dog? In truth, he hardly recognized the gray lump of Schnoodle curled up in the cardboard box at his feet. Each breath the dog took made a wheeze.

"Mr. Schmidt, would you like to make a payment then?" She sounded annoyed now. Ig used to say how nice the receptionist at the vet clinic was, "a sweet girl who drives in from Cold Spring." He couldn't have meant this one; she seemed rather prickly. Plus she wasn't a girl by any stretch of the imagination, more like Henry Kissinger with makeup and a poodle perm. Even Ig's optimism couldn't have seen sweetness here.

"Yes. Yes, of course," Sal flushed again. "I'll pay up today."

"That'll be \$75.00."

The amount threw him. *\$75.00?* He couldn't have heard right? He wanted to ask, "For what? Two vet visits and a bottle of pain pills?" It was highway robbery! He should ask to speak to the vet. After all, Doc Heinemann didn't cure Stubby; he was still going to die just the same. Sal regretted ever setting up the first appointment. In all his life and through the lives of the many dogs he and his brothers had owned through the years, Sal was pretty sure Stubby was the first to ever be brought to a vet, and certainly he was the first to have Sal take time off work to accompany him. But this was 1974. Times had changed.

Sal said nothing and wrote the check. He even added a strained, "Thank you."

After settling Stubby in the back of the red Chevy he had kept working with a variety of home repairs since he bought it slightly used in 1963, he slipped into the driver's seat and pulled away from the clinic. Even though the windows were open, the whole car smelled like damp, rotting dog. The growing cancer had completely filled up Stubby and had to ooze out somewhere. The humidity of the June day was making the stench worse. Sal knew he should go downtown because he was getting low on milk to soak Stubby's bread in, the only thing Stubby would swallow these days, but the odor was bad enough that he shortened his trip by driving instead to the Pump n' Petro, which was six blocks from his house.

He liked the new idea of the convenience store where he could pump his own gas. That Stockton has such a store was a source of pride since most convenience stores with gas were found in big towns like St. Cloud or Willmar. Sal liked cutting out the chit chat with the service attendants and slipping in and out of the store with less hoopla, but lately he had been avoiding the Pump n' Petro. When Mary Lang had been the lady behind the counter, she had kept exchanges with customers on a distant, aloof level, simply saying "hello," the total you owed, and "thank you" as she handed over your change and the bag of purchases. Sal liked things that way. But Mary had relocated to St. Cloud to be near her daughter and a new woman had been hired, a gal who had recently moved to town from points unknown. Bonnie. Sal couldn't help but remember her name because she was forever saying it. "Now you just ask good ole' Bonnie if ya can't find nothin'" or "Hey honey, you need Bonnie's help back there with those ice bags?" Plus no topic was

too private for Bonnie. Ex-husbands, financial woes, wrinkle creams, physical issues.

“Watch out!” she’d laugh, “It’s my time of the month! I might bite!”

For some reason, even though Sal always avoided talking to her for one second longer than he had to, Bonnie seemed to save her extra attention for him. “Hey, *Handsome’s* back,” she squealed the last time he had entered the store as the roughly one dozen customers all turned to look at him. “I haven’t seen your cute face in ages!” Sal had been so humiliated that even his eyeballs had started to sweat. He could hardly see to count out the money for his gas.

That was the awful part. Bonnie always acted so familiar with him, always winking and flirting, like they had some big secret together, like she knew what he had put on his toast that morning. He’d die if anyone in town thought something funny was going on. *Sal and the three-time divorcee. Beautiful.* Yet, however cold he was toward her, Bonnie remained oblivious, leaning over the counter towards him with her blue-black teased hair and drawn-on eyebrows, gloppy black lashes, and cakey pink lips, her ample bosom spilling out from the top of her work smock because the top three buttons were never looped. He figured she was just shy of six feet tall and she towered over Sal’s 5’9 frame. With the heels she always wore, Sal’s eyes seemed to line up height-wise directly with her bosom.

This is what Sal faced as he sat in the parking lot, mustering up courage to enter the store. It was three o’clock, and only two cars were there besides his own, Bonnie’s very dirty Volkswagen Beetle she always laughingly complained about “not performing” and had therefore named “Lenny” after her first husband. The other car was an old beater

that was idling right by the door. *Good timing.* His embarrassment wouldn't have much of an audience today.

He entered the store, wincing in preparation for the expected voice of Bonnie. However, no such greeting came. In fact, he didn't hear her at all. Surprised, he turned his eyes toward the counter and saw something wrong...

Bonnie, looking at Sal with tense and pleading eyes, was being held up by a wiry teenager holding a handgun.

"All right, old man. Stand by her behind the counter," ordered the kid. His voice squeaked and his gun hand shook.

Bonnie turned her frightened eyes back to the gun and whimpered, "Oh baby."

Sal instinctively held up his arms; then he moved stiffly and slowly to the opening at the counter and through to Bonnie's side.

"I don't wanna shoot you guys or nothin'. Just give me the money and I'll go. Throw in some Marlboro Lights too."

Bonnie's eyes were huge and wet. Her bottom lip quivered as she spoke. "Sure, anything, honey. I'm gonna move now and get the money first. Okay?" She blinked and two big tears rolled down her round cheeks, leaving a black path through her thick makeup.

"Yah, okay. Quick, before somebody else comes." He moved his eyes to Sal. "Just stand there, old man, and you'll be fine." The pupils of his pale blue eyes looked like shiny black beetles darting around below the brim of his Fleet Farm cap.

Maybe it was her cashiering habits that made Bonnie start with the coins first. It didn't occur to her that the kid probably wanted only bills. But whether he was inexperienced at robbery or else not thinking, he held out his hand to receive a bunch of nickels Bonnie thrust his way. Two nickels slipped, bounced on the counter and dropped to the floor. The kid looked down for just an instant.

Sal never would be able to fully explain what happened next, why he did what he did, but in that instant he simply leaned forward and plucked the gun from the kid's hand, and, for some reason, the kid's fingers released it. Sal didn't aim the gun at the kid, which would have made more sense, but instead he held it limply by the barrel, dangling it in the space between them. All three stood there together for a strangely connected moment, searching one another's faces for what to do next.

Then the kid said, "Oh shit," and in a blur was gone. Shortly after, Sal heard the beater car rattle away.

Then Bonnie started shaking. With each shake more and more of Bonnie reemerged. Only she reemerged times five, blubbering and spewing forth every endearment she ever used until, words spent, she hurled herself towards Sal in a deep, suffocating embrace, knocking him into a pastry case.

By the time Sal was able to disentangle himself, call the police, and watch the police car drive over from the station down the street, he was already feeling a stiffness in his shoulder from Bonnie's tackle. He grabbed a napkin from the dispenser to wipe her tears and lipstick from his cheeks and forehead.

The next hour was a fog. The police department, consisting of Bob Hartway and Skip Heinen, closed off the store to anyone other than a county sheriff they had called in and the owner, the ancient Jacob Lennerman who owned five businesses in town. The VFW owed its expansion of its dining room to Mr. Lennerman, who was a WWI vet. A plaque hung on the wall there, commemorating his \$5,000.00 donation. Sal now looked at him, mentally calculating years to estimate his age, guessing him to be around 85. His face, with its cracks and spots, looked worn enough to be 100, but he was spry and sharp-minded. He shook Sal's hand vigorously and thanked him for his "service to the safety of Stockton." Sal felt undeserving of such praise. The police had radioed an all-points bulletin to the sheriff's department and neighboring police forces with a description of the kid and his vehicle. Out the window Sal could see at least twenty cars had accumulated along the street outside, with spectators trying to find out what was going on. Some had stepped out of their parked cars to converse with each other. In Stockton, people followed sirens and words traveled fast.

While Sal finished giving Bob his account of what happened, he became acutely aware of Bonnie giving her rendition to Skip. She was reaching new heights in volume and shrillness.

"...and then, you shoulda seen him," she cried, eyes wild and arms waving around. "He simply stared down that criminal and ripped the gun away from him. Just ripped it right away." She gave Sal a huge, grateful smile. "It was the bravest thing I ever seen. Till Mr. Schmidt came in, I thought I was a goner." With a sigh, she sat down on a pile of water softener salt bags and completely fell into sobbing.

Sal felt dread fill his heart. He knew he was being swept along in some kind of flood he did not want, some kind of recognition he wouldn't be able to stand up in, and he suddenly felt overwhelmingly tired. He shuddered.

Bob noticed. "Hey Sal, I have all I need for now. It might be a good idea if I drive you home. You look a little shaky. We can bring your car around later."

While waiting for Bob to transfer Stubby to the police car, Sal had to suffer one more crushing embrace from Bonnie. As he rode with Bob out of the parking lot, feeling the many stares from the road beyond, he realized he never bought the milk.

Chapter 2: 1974

Police sirens...Sal trying to reach for the gun but not being able to quite touch it... A phone ringing somewhere.

Sal's eyes flew open. He blinked twice and looked at the clock on the bookshelf and realized he could not have been sleeping more than half an hour. It was only five thirty and the phone was ringing. It wasn't part of his nightmare. Groaning, he covered his head with Ma's old, scratchy afghan and felt a lurch in his back from sleeping on the lumpy living room couch. He knew the phone would keep on ringing until either the caller gave up or Sal gave in. Art certainly would never answer it. He hadn't answered a phone since the early 1940's. Sal let three more rings go by. Then, realizing it could be the police, he dragged himself to the kitchen wall, which held their only phone.

"Hello?"

"Sal! Thank God! What the hell is going on?" It was Ig, ten decibels too loud as usual. "I'm calling from Homer's. I stop in for a beer after work and the guys swarm me, said you almost got yourself killed! What the hell?"

The doorbell rang. Sal decided to ignore it for now.

"Sal? You there?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It wasn't like that. It was no big deal." Again the doorbell rang. He thought he heard people talking somewhere.

"Skip Heinen said you saved that gal's life. He said you wrestled the gun away. What the hell? You nuts?"

Again he heard voices, soft rumbles from the front of the house.

“Hold on, Ig. Something’s going on.”

Sal stretched the phone chord as far as it would go so that he could just see out a window. It took him a moment to absorb the sight.

“Oh my God,” he said aloud. A crowd of at least fifteen people, reporters by their looks and equipment, stood in the yard and on the front steps. Several cars and vans were in view, one of them sporting a TV station logo with transmitting equipment on the roof. Suddenly Sal realized he had lowered the phone to his side and Ig was hollering to get his attention.

“Ig, I’m back. Sorry.”

“Will you please tell me what in the Sam hell is going on? Where’s Art? Where’s Stubby?”

“Stubby’s lying right here. I don’t know where Art is. Upstairs, I assume. Ig, WCCO is here and I think another station.”

“Where?”

“*Where?* Here! Right outside the door.”

“No shit?”

“It’s crazy. What am I gonna do? Get here.”

“On my way.”

“Hurry!”

“Hey Sal, is the *St. Cloud Times* there?”

Sal strained to see. “I think so.”

“I’ll be damned.”

Sal hung up, and the phone immediately rang. He picked up and hung up again, then took the receiver off the phone and set it aside. He gathered Stubby, lifting him against his chest as if for protection, and leaned against the refrigerator, contemplating his next move. If he made a dash out the side door, someone would certainly spot him. Anyway, he didn't have his Chevy to make his getaway. He could try climbing out an upstairs window to the hedge on the side of the house, but he'd have to jump at least ten feet, and at his age he'd end up in the hospital in traction...which at this point didn't seem like such a bad alternative. But he couldn't leave Art. *Where is Art?* He shuddered to think of Art hiding in his bedroom, thinking the world was ending. Again the doorbell rang.

Ig would know what to do. He would use that booming voice of his and say to the reporters something like, "Thanks for your interest, but we really need our privacy. I'm sure you understand." And, in his no-nonsense presence, everyone would agree to leave, at least for a while. Sal wouldn't even have to step out the door. He could be upstairs feeding Stubby bits of bread and calming Art.

But Ig hadn't arrived yet and hiding in the kitchen wasn't going to solve anything. He had to get everyone to leave for Art's sake. That was that. After settling Stubby in his box, Sal forced himself through the house to the front door and opened it.

The camera clicks reminded him of pellet shots. At least six or seven questions were shouted at once; one was something about whether his Navy experience had prepared him for the *gun struggle*, but he didn't catch the other ones. He stood there, overwhelmed and silent until the reporters quieted, waiting for him to speak.

“Thank you for your interest, but...”

That’s as far as he got before the questions began again, drowning out his best Ig impersonation.

Just then the real Ig showed up to save him. Sal hadn’t seen him working his way to the doorstep, but suddenly he was there, giving him instructions in his ear.

“Sal! What the hell? You can’t just say nothin’!”

“What?”

“Say something, anything.” Tell’m what happened. Give it in a nutshell.”

Sal looked over the crowd. It grew quiet again, but Sal couldn’t form a single word.

“Sal, for Christ’s sake!”

#

Sal’s statement made all three Twin Cities ten o’clock newscasts. There he was for all the world to see, frozen and serious on his front step, mumbling. “When the boy looked down, I grabbed the gun. It was no big deal.”

After the reporters left, he and Ig found Art, as Sal had feared, up in his bedroom, shaking and confused. His eyes were swollen and red blotchy patches were all over his face. His hair, thick and wavy like Ig’s used to be and Sal’s still was, now stood on end, like he had been pulling on it. Unlike Ig and Sal, who still had black hair in middle age, Art’s hair was all white. It had begun turning right after Ma died, which had made him look middle aged by the time he was thirty. He dressed like an old man as well, wearing

only loafers, tan kakis, white t-shirts, and cardigans with zippers. Although he fiddled with the zippers almost nonstop, moving the slider up and down, it was better than years back when his cardigans had buttons and he'd constantly twist them off. Then he'd feel compelled to immediately sew them back on, correcting his mistake. The cycle had caused Art such stress that Sal had finally gone to Fandel's Department Store in St. Cloud and found cardigans that had thick, industrial-looking zippers. He bought one each in navy, gray, and brown. That was over ten years ago, but they still looked pretty good. Other than zippers, Art was fairly easy on clothes, but these zippers had held up well.

After getting Art to breathe slowly and drink a glass of iced tea, Sal and Ig told him a watered-down version of the robbery and promised that the reporters were only there because it was a slow news day and that they would most likely not be back. However, to be safe, they helped Art pack a bag and Ig drove him to his house down the block for an overnight stay. Art must have been good and scared because he didn't object to the plan. He only stayed at Ig's if it was absolutely necessary, such as when Sal had to go to Fergus Falls overnight for a boiler license recertification course or when he was in the hospital having his appendix taken out a few years back. After settling Art with Bernice, Ig returned to watch the coverage with Sal, and by flipping the channels, they caught most of the story on two stations.

Bonnie was in the footage. Sighing and sniffing, she repeated her Sal-the-hero angle. On camera, from the shoulders up, she didn't seem so bad. Maybe she had cried off most of her makeup, but she appeared fairly normal. It was Sal's first straight-on look at her since he always pretended to be reading magazine headlines or checking out the

ceiling vent to avoid eye contact with her. Tucked at a safe distance behind the screen, her personality was smaller. Sal even felt a bit sorry for her because she seemed genuinely traumatized, dabbing at her red eyes with soggy tissues and making her ratted hair bob around like a hedgehog each time she shook her head, still in disbelief. He supposed she made for good TV.

Ig himself made it on channel five's coverage, which tickled him greatly. The camera caught him shooing the crowd and shouting, "That's all he's saying for now. The horrible experience has practically incapacitated him." Sal was impressed with his brother's performance. He didn't know Ig knew words like *incapacitated*. Ig's Schlitz Beer T-shirt stretching across his ample belly didn't add much class, but his voice was gruff and stern. More importantly, his orders had been obeyed. Ig had pushed Sal back through the door and slammed it. Then he refused to take questions, offering only to take business cards or phone numbers of reporters, lying, saying Sal might call them tomorrow.

However, Sal knew it would be a short reprieve. He had heard two *Times* reporters through the window saying they were going to return in the morning for an in-depth interview. One said, "People love little-guy heroes and dumb criminals." *Little guy. The reporter certainly got that right.*

Sal came back from his thoughts when Ig returned to the living room. He had gone to the kitchen to call Bernice to make sure she had seen his big television moment. He was chewing his lower lip, uncomfortable. Sal could see he had news.

"What now?"

“Sal, you’re not gonna like this, but hear me out.”

Sal’s chest tightened. “Oh God. Now what?”

“That Pump n’ Petro gal called Bernice and asked you to lunch tomorrow...to say thanks.”

“What? Asked Bernice to lunch?” His throat was getting tight.

Ig rolled his eyes. “No, Sal. *You*. She said your line was busy so she asked Bernice to give you the message.”

“Bernice said *no* though, right?” Sal’s voice was a plea. His temples started throbbing.

“She said she tried, but that woman bulldozed over everything she said. Said she’s expecting you at eleven thirty at her place. There wasn’t a damn thing Bernice could do.”

Sal was now half standing, gripping the chair arms for support. “Well, what am *I* supposed to do?” Then with a sudden inspiration he said, “Have Bernice call her back!” He didn’t recognize the pinched voice coming out of his own mouth.

Ig rubbed his fingers through his well-oiled hair and hissed out a long sigh. Clearly irritated he said, “Sal, Bernice is not gonna wipe your damn ass for you and neither am I. You have two choices. Call her and cancel or just be nice and eat one lunch with her.”

“Ig!”

“One damn lunch. It wouldn’t kill you.” He put on his usual blue hat, the one loaded down with VFW pins and medals, and turned to go. Sal followed him to the back

door but knew it wouldn't do any good to beg. Ig went out and let the screen door slam. But after a few steps he stopped and turned around. His face looked tired and his big gray eyes misty in the moonlight. Through the screen he spoke quietly, laboring over the words. "Sal... I got a wife and two kids. I know they are grown and in college, sure, but I'm already taking care of a lot of people. Bernice's mom and dad are not healthy. And there's always Art hanging over us. I don't want to be a jerk or anything, but I need to worry a little less about *you*." He slapped a mosquito against his ear and brushed it off to the ground. "You know, even when you're scared sometimes, you just have to step up to the plate. I'll help when I can, but no more than that. And no more than is good for you. Okay?"

The brothers blinked at each other through the screen. Then Sal nodded, mostly to end the conversation and wash the strain from Ig's face. Ig stood there for a moment longer, then smiled a little and turned to go. Sal watched him walk down the street to his house on the next block. It seemed miles away.

#

Ig's words stayed with Sal that night as he tried to sleep. The truth of them had stung, even though they contained no big new flash. The familiar and dreaded shame washed over him, and the same old reels played in his head. *What's wrong with me? Why can't I be with people, make the small talk, play the game...the simple things every other human does? Except for Art, of course.* Sometimes he envied Art. Sal wished he were invisible. Nothing expected of him, no preconceived notions.

He hadn't always been this bad. As a boy he tagged along with Ig, playing ball with the guys, seeing matinees at the old Stockton Theater that was now a fiberglass shop. Even though he was a year older than Ig, Sal followed in his footsteps, joining the Navy with Ig when Ig had Ma sign permission papers to let him join early when he turned seventeen and Sal was eighteen. She only signed because she knew that Ig would sign up when he turned eighteen anyway, and she naively thought the Navy would keep the brothers together if they started at the same time. Sal had even been dating that year, his one and only girlfriend ever. He had grown up with Rose living right across the back alley from him, and he had finally gotten up the nerve to ask her out. They had been a couple for almost a year when he left for boot camp. Although he was scared, he knew Rose respected him for enlisting like all respectable men of Stockton did. Plus, everyone knew the war was wrapping up. The most dangerous business had already been faced by the boys a few years older. Two from Stockton had died in North Africa, and one had come back with no legs from fighting in the Pacific. The dead boys were Charlie Eiden and Frankie Parker. Frankie had been a head altar boy at St. Mary's and had trained Sal and Ig to serve at mass. Sal remembered how straight Frankie sat, his eyes on old Father Hoeschen during the whole service while Sal couldn't seem to stop wriggling. Ma would shoot eyeball daggers at him, but Sal felt so exposed by the altar, wearing his starched vestments, that he couldn't help but squirm. Ig was worse. No matter how heavily Ma slicked down Ig's hair with oil, his heavy sweating, especially in summer, made his hair curl and frizz in odd directions. Plus, he would forget where he was and

audibly sigh or even yawn loudly. Eventually, Ma had him taken off the server list. But she made Sal serve until he was sixteen. Art serving was never even considered.

Sal wanted to hate Frankie Parker for always looking so saintly, cool and *interested*, his face glowing. But he couldn't. Frankie's love of the mass was genuine. Ma always said that he looked like an angel, *eine engel*, and then she would encourage Sal to be more like him. People said Frankie might have become a priest if he had survived the war.

When word came of his death, they tried to keep the news from Art, but during the intermission for *The Gang's All Here* that Saturday at the movie theatre, he overheard talk about it and was a mess for over two weeks. Ma had called Father Hoeschen, and he visited with Art every day during that time, praying with him and assuring him that Frankie was in heaven and that Art would indeed make it there too someday. That was the first bout with Art washing his hands too often, making them chapped and scaly, but it was nothing like what was to come later.

Sal felt guilty for enlisting because he worried about Ma having to deal with Art alone, but not enlisting seemed a cowardly choice. Pa had served and was extremely patriotic. Plus, those were patriotic times. The worst part was that Sal hated to leave Rose, but he knew it was temporary, and a part of him was excited to communicate through letters. Maybe he could say what was in his heart if he were writing it from far away.

Sal and Ig went through training together in Norfolk, Virginia, but to Ma's great agitation they were assigned to different ships. At first Sal was extremely unsettled by

not having his brother nearby, but he got over it. He sailed to the South Pacific as the war with Japan came to a close in 1945. Neither his nor Ig's ships ever saw real battle, which was fine with Sal. When docked, sometimes Sal's shipmates talked him into seeing the sights, having a few beers. Sure, he felt awkward at times, but he'd sit in the dark bars, laughing along with the guys. Nobody cared if he didn't say much. There were plenty of guys who wanted to do the talking. If things got too wild, he'd slip out back to the base or the ship, write letters home. His Navy years were good years. He always knew what his job was. He felt fortunate.

That was until Rose stopped writing. The gloom that snuck in then made him feel lost and unsure about everything. When it came time to reenlist, he wanted to re-up and never go home again. But Ma reminded him of his promise to do only two years. He went home to consider his future. Ig was already there, catching better flight options the week before, much to Bernice's relief since their wedding day was set for the next month. The event had been meticulously planned by Bernice and her mother, but Bernice had kept Ig well informed through constant letters.

During the wedding, for which Sal stood as best man, Ma seemed lighter and happier than Sal had ever seen her. She made it through the whole wedding, including the dance, during which she waltzed one number with Ig. Her mood rubbed off on Art, who stayed after the mass to eat dinner at the main table before Sal snuck him home. Luckily Bernice's family was also small, so the wedding was little by Stockton standards. German Catholic weddings tended to be long and large. The full mass was followed by a heavy dinner at about noon with an afternoon reception and dance to follow. A lighter

supper was then served before everyone left. With many farm families having eight or more children and relations tending to stay in the Stockton area generation after generation, weddings often exceeded 300 people. Bernice and Ig had only invited 100. Plus, the odd timing of a January wedding and slippery roads that day kept some out-of-towners from traveling. Only 75 people actually made it.

The smaller number was not only good for Ma and Art; it came as a great relief to Sal. He kept up a good face, but he was hardly in the mood for a wedding. He was relieved that Rose didn't show up even though her family, being close neighbors, had been invited. No one mentioned Rose's name since Sal's return. Not even Ig, although Sal sensed several times that Ig wanted to bring up the subject. Sal was glad he didn't. He had pushed her name deep down, tied into a knot in his stomach.

Exactly ten days later, Ma was dead. Sal stayed on in the house to piece Art back together. Ig began his life with Bernice in a fixer upper a block away. Early on the couple, mostly Bernice, tried to introduce women to Sal, friends of hers, setting up double dates, but it was too overwhelming for Sal to keep up the necessary chitchat with women who seemed to only remind him of what he lost with Rose. After a dozen or so such uncomfortable evenings together, Ig and Bernice gave up.

Ig landed a job as foreman at the turkey processing plant the day after he returned from the Navy and seemed to be good friends with everyone in town. Sal had watched him in awe. Ig seemed so sure about every move. For Sal it was different. He took a maintenance job at the power plant, a job that meant mostly working alone, inspecting and repairing the machinery. He retreated even more. At first he'd stop at Homer's for a

beer with his brother or sometimes hit a VFW chicken fry, but over the years he stopped going. Other than work, he pretty much stayed in the house or the garden, sometimes taking solitary walks or sprucing up family graves at the cemetery. There were the weekly trips to the bank to deposit his checks or basic errands to run, but that was about it. He kept up with the town happenings through the free *Stockton News and Shopper* and Ig's daily gossip he picked up at Homer's or work.

As the first daylight began to filter through his bedroom curtains, the same green-checked curtains that had hung in his same room all his life, Sal wondered if his existence qualified as living.

Chapter 3: 1974

The next morning, Sal fed Stubby his bread, milk-soaked, thanks to Ig bringing over a jar of milk from his house. Sal kept a wary eye on the view outside the front window. Only two reporters had come back that morning, the ones from *The Times*. They rang the doorbell off and on, but mostly they sat in their car, sipping sodas and munching chips. Sal kept the phone off the hook. *Hopefully the story is old news already*, he thought. He knew that, if he waited them out, these last reporters would give up too. However, he felt a little cooped up, even antsy. There was a difference between staying indoors and *having to stay* indoors.

Suddenly, he became aware of a spreading dampness on his pant leg. “Shit,” said Sal, realizing Stubby had peed on his thigh. The dog whimpered a little then put his paw over his nose as if embarrassed. Sal felt sorry for the smelly bundle of bones on his lap. Stubby was miserable, and Sal was failing him. He whispered into the dog’s drooping ear. “That’s okay, Stubs. We’ll just clean us up as good as new.” The matted tail thumped a little.

#

Dog settled, pants changed, Sal dialed the phone.

“Stockton Vet Clinic.”

It was the prickly one. Kissinger.

Sal had half hoped the clinic was closed on Saturdays, but apparently, compared to people clinics, vet offices offered better hours.

“Hello. This is Sal Schmidt. Stubby Schmidt’s...owner?” He had almost said *brother*.

“Yes, Mr. Schmidt. What did you need?”

“I’m ready. I mean, to make the appointment, that is.” His upper lip was sweating. He could hear dogs barking on the other side of the phone as if yelling, “No, don’t do it!”

“We can get you in next Monday morning, the 7th, nine o’clock, if that works for you.”

“So soon?” He realized he sounded panicked.

The receptionist sighed. “Mr. Schmidt?” She was softer now. Almost nice. “I’m sure this is not pleasant for you, I love my cats too, but it’s for the best. You are right in making the appointment. If you want, I’ll stay with you the whole time. Walk you through it.”

Sal’s face was wet. He looked down at Stubby through blurry eyes. “Okay. But can you push it back a little. I need to get some things settled first.” By *things* he meant Art, and the thought of telling his brother about Stubby’s looming demise made his insides contract. “Maybe one month?”

“A *month*?” It came out in a squawk. Then she was silent for a moment. Sal imagined she was swallowing her disgust. Then she said, “How about *July 7*, same time?”

Sal couldn’t form the word.

“Mr. Schmidt?”

“Okay,” he whispered. “Thank you.” He hung up the phone.

One month. That gave him a long window of time to prepare Art, most likely in the form of a well thought-out lie.

Now all that was left to do was to cancel his lunch appointment with Bonnie. It was already after eleven o'clock. Sal knew he had waited too long, she must have started cooking already, but he just kept putting it off all morning. He *could* simply not show, but that wouldn't be right. He couldn't be *that* rude, so he steeled himself for the hopefully short conversation. Dialing the number from the book, he realized that by talking on the phone to Ig, Kissinger, and now Bonnie, he was participating in more calls in two days than he had in the past month. Ig usually swung by in person and rarely needed to call.

On the third ring he almost hung up, but then she answered. No turning back.

"Hello?"

"Hello? Bonnie?" It was the first time he said her name aloud, and it felt like he was chewing a lump of grizzle.

"Yes? Is this Sal?"

He wondered why she knew it was he. "Yes. Hello. I was just calling to..."

"You're canceling, huh?"

"I..."

"Well," her voice sounded wobbly, "at least you called."

Sal was home free. She had even expected it. He should thank her for understanding and end the call fast. But the wobbly voice made him feel ashamed. She had expected him to cancel, not because she knew she was dealing with the king of all

weaklings, but because, as he could hear in her tone, she assumed *anyone* would cancel.

Sal's voice took over.

"Actually, I...I need directions."

"Directions?"

"To your place." He steadied himself, gripping the refrigerator handle.

"Oh. You mean, you're gonna come?"

"Yeah. But I have to drop off my...my dog at my brother's place. I might be a bit late."

"That's okay. You just take your time, darlin'. No rush. I'm in the mint green house across from the Credit Union...with the ceramic giraffe in the front yard. I hope you're ready to eat. I cooked enough for five of you!"

"Okay then. I'll see you in a bit."

"Hot dog!"

Sal put down the receiver. He resolved not to hyperventilate, and he refused to allow his legs to shake. A flood was coming, and he could either swim against it or else flow with it. Ready or not, he grabbed his keys, gently lifted Stubby's box with Stubby in it, and pushed through the screen door.

#

"Don't say anything," said Sal as he kicked open Ig's back door and settled Stubby and his box by a kitchen cupboard.

"You're actually going?" said Ig. He held a beer can up near his chin. He had been mid swig when Sal entered. He looked somewhere between confused and stunned.

“Not if you say one damn word.”

Soldier-like, Sal spun on his feet and marched out the backdoor, making sure it slammed.

#

The ceramic giraffe was indeed yellow. It stood at least seven feet tall. Bonnie hadn't mentioned the pink flower behind its ear or that it was winking and puckering for a kiss. Sal wondered how he had never seen it before, but he realized he never came down Bonnie's street. He kept his money in the Stockton State Bank, not the Credit Union. He had done so since he was a newspaper delivery boy. As Sal was wondering why anyone would sell, much less buy, such a lawn ornament, his attention was suddenly sucked in by Bonnie, who stepped out of a door on the side of the house and *yoo-hoed*. She was waving him in with swirling arm gestures as if he were a 727 looking to land. He got out of his Chevy as quickly as he could, hoping they could go inside before any Stocktonites saw them.

“Well, you are looking too good for having recently fought off a criminal!” said Bonnie as she grabbed both of Sal's sweaty hands and led him through the door, tripping slightly on the doorjamb since she was walking backwards. “Ha! Maybe we should dance since I can't walk!” She burst into overloud laughter.

Inside the house, hot and damp air hit Sal hard. *Damn...no air conditioning*, he thought. A clanking fan was oscillating on a short bookshelf. Sal freed one hand to wipe his already sweating brow.

Bonnie leaned closer. "I hope you like it hot and steamy," she cooed as despair flooded Sal. "My window unit went kerplunk and I've been cooking...a lot."

They entered her small kitchen. It was strangely normal with its blond wood cabinets, circa 1950, and tan linoleum with swirls of maroon and black. The walls were off white. Everything looked busy but clean. Sal looked at the enormous amount of fried chicken and mashed potatoes on the table that sat four when he noticed a teenage boy slumped in one of the chairs. He was in a plain blue t-shirt and had shaggy hair. His eyes shot venom at Sal.

Sal cleared his throat, preparing to greet the boy, but Bonnie jumped in. "Well, my two favorite men finally meet."

The boy transferred his venom to Bonnie. "Yeah right," he said. "Let's eat and get this over with."

Bonnie looked embarrassed and talked under her breath even though Sal clearly could hear. "I said *nice too*...not just eating with us."

"And you said one o'clock, not midnight."

"Yeah, I know. I know." She looked at Sal and forced a smile. "Teenagers...but I'm sure we were naughty too."

The boy rolled his eyes.

Sal saw a chance to establish that *lunch* did not mean *date*. “Well, my teenage years were a lot longer ago than yours, Bonnie. I hardly remember mine. I think old age is creeping in.” He forced himself to give a pleasant laugh. Sweat began running down his back in a tickling stream.

The boy’s eyes lost a little of their glare.

Bonnie sat Sal across from her son. She introduced him as Jasper.

“Jay,” corrected the kid. He was the son Sal had heard about too many times in the Pump n’ Petro.

Bonnie poured wine into small juice glasses. She even poured one for the boy although he could not have been of age. “No stems. The European way,” said Bonnie.

She held up her glass to clink it with those of her men and Sal obliged. The boy did not. Bonnie drained her glass and then passed the heaping plate of fried chicken to Sal. Next she half stood, reaching way over the table, bosom almost spilling out of her v-neck, and scooped and plopped a large ladle of mashed potatoes onto each plate, hollowed out a crater in each mound, and then poured a lake of gravy into them. She also served freshly baked dinner rolls and peas swimming in butter. No wonder it was stiflingly in the room. After two bites, Sal’s shirt was soaked with sweat and sticking to his body. He thought he might pass out, and so, like Bonnie had, he drained his wine. Bonnie quickly refilled both glasses.

The food was good...greasy and heavy, but delicious. The boy inhaled every morsel on his plate and served himself more. Sal wondered how he could be so skinny if he ate like this every day. He was now surprised Bonnie was merely plump, but he did

notice that she talked more than she ate. She told how the boy would be a senior at Stockton High School that fall and how he would be a heartthrob to all the girls there.

The boy completely ignored her.

“But his grades have to come up. He doesn’t seem to try anymore,” said Bonnie with fake sternness, giving the kid a meant-to-be-funny grimace. Then she laughed nervously. The boy didn’t look up but kept shoveling in food. Bonnie kept up her chatter until the eating slowed.

When his plate was clean a second time, the boy said, “I’m done.” He rose to leave.

“But I have pie, sweetie.”

“I’m full. Where did you hide the keys?”

Bonnie glanced sideways at Sal, giving him an embarrassed half smile. “In the coffee pot.” She picked up her napkin and dabbed at her forehead. “Too hot for coffee anyway, right?”

In three seconds the kid had the keys and was out the backdoor. Bonnie, too late, hollered, “One a.m.!” Then she picked up her wine glass again, shoulders slumping. “I wonder what that boy does all day and all night. I only see him when he drags himself out of bed and eats lunch. He only talks to me when he’s short on money.” Her eyes were watery as if she might cry, but she shook her head, downed her wine, gave a cackle, and stood up. “Time for pie!” When her back was partly turned while she stood at the counter, Sal saw her stretch her apron to her face and wipe her eyes.

“Why don’t you go sit in a lawn chair out back,” she said without turning to him.
“I’ll bring your pie. It’s way cooler under my tree.”

Outside he looked toward the back alley and saw the boy’s lowered body over the front of Bonnie’s car, his arms and chest hidden under the opened hood.

Reluctantly Sal called to him. “Need Help?”

The kid stayed under the hood for a moment, and Sal sensed him deciding. Then he stuck his head out and said, “Can you hold this screwdriver in place for a second?”

“Ah, ignition issues,” said Sal. He moved to the car and took control of the screwdriver. “Okay, start her up.”

The car started. The kid began backing up as Sal rushed to close the hood, screwdriver still in his hand. As the car reached the alley, the kid stopped suddenly and leaned out the window. “Hey, thanks.” He didn’t smile, but his attitude was a bit friendlier.

“You bet,” said Sal.

The boy looked at him for a moment and then announced more than asked, “You’re not a perv.”

Sal flushed. “Good God...no. That’s not what this...” He trailed off, flustered.

“You don’t seem like the others,” he said. “She wants someone so that she’s not alone all the time. Especially since I’m going back to my dad’s as soon as I can.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. When? After the school year?”

The boy's sneering attitude returned. "Ha! I'm not going to school in this shithole. I'm leaving as soon as possible, as soon as dad has a place big enough."

"Where's that?"

"Rapid City. He moved there with his girlfriend, but there isn't room yet. When they get a bigger place, Dad is going to call me and I'm outta here." He turned his eyes to the back stoop where Bonnie stood, holding two plates with slices of pie and forks on them. With that he gave a nod and stepped on the gas hard, kicking up gravel as he finished backing into the alley. Then he tore forward, making a wild exit for her benefit.

Bonnie smiled. "Men and their cars! It's a wonder any of you are still alive!"

The comment was meant to be light, but Sal could hear the edge. Like the runny, melting mounds of whipped cream on the slices of coconut pie, Bonnie seemed spent. They talked little as they ate. The silence made Sal even more uncomfortable than Bonnie's chatter. He gulped down his slice in order to speed toward the finale. Then he handed Bonnie his plate as he looked at his watch and said, "Wow, I've gotta get a move on!" Before she could protest, he walked to his car in hurried strides while gushing his thanks, telling her there was no need to get out of her lawn chair. In his rearview mirror he saw Bonnie still sitting under the tree, holding both plates and staring after him, a deflating balloon in tight denim shorts.

Chapter 4: 1931

“Jungen, brude auch zehen!” hollered Ma when she spotted them. Her three little boys, seven, five and four, all with wavy bowl cuts that needed another trim, stood midway up the staircase, eyes like full moons. Pop was leaning on Ma as she lowered him into the chair. His hair was matted with blood, which had trickled down his face and dried in several streaks. One eye was swollen completely shut and looked like the big, juicy plums that they sometimes swiped from Mr. Kruchner’s trees. The boys stood frozen, all three gripping the railing. Ma ran to the kitchen and shortly came back with a bowl of water and some rags.

“Rausch!” she hollered when she saw them still on the stairs, “or the paddle for you!” Art grabbed little Ig by the shirt and dragged him to their bedroom. Sal followed. Art was shaking as he hoisted Ig into bed. Although so young, Ig already understood the joint family effort required to keep Art calm, so when Art crawled in next to him, Ig placed his arm across Art’s chest, as if shielding him from the scene below. Sal hovered in the doorway, his curiosity too strong. Art looked at him with a wary eye. “No, Sal. Ma’s told you.” Agitation made his whisper extra breathy.

But Sal had to know. He tiptoed back to the landing. If he stooped low, Ma wouldn’t notice, but he could see Pop and Ma and hear what was going on. Pop was talking. Every so often he would cough up bloody phlegm and spit into a white handkerchief, already half sodden with rust-colored blotches. Sal wondered if Pop had lost any teeth.

“They actually dug in the shit,” said Pa. “I had to walk from Stahlberger’s.” He winced with pain from the effort to speak. He seemed to be holding his ribs in place with his right arm.

Stahlberger’s? thought Sal. He knew the place, a farm that was a mile from town on the way to New Munich. Sal often made a habit of eavesdropping enough to know that Pop was running deliveries for Chick Molitor’s outfit that supplied booze in the area. Sal didn’t know exactly what booze was, but he knew it was something grownups drank that was transported sometimes in mason jars and more often in brown glass jugs. When Pop brought home the empty containers, Ma washed and dried them, then returned them to the crates for Pop to have filled again. The crates were always covered with old towels so that no one could see the containers as the crates were carried outside of the house. Where exactly they were filled, Sal didn’t know.

Pop didn’t own a car, but Sal overheard Chick and another guy talking to Pop one day in the alley behind the bar. The two men were dropping off a pickup for Pop with a manure wagon hitched to it for deliveries. Several times after that Sal saw Pop driving through Stockton with the pickup and wagon, and one day he decided to spy on Pop by following the truck and wagon on his bike until Pop pulled up behind the bar. Sal dumped his bike behind the haberdashery two doors down and then sneaked up to watch Pop from behind some garbage cans. He saw Pop put on rubber gloves that went up to his elbows, pull out several jugs from within the smelly manure, rinse them with water from a hose connected to a tap at the back of the building, and then bring them into the bar. A few minutes later, he returned to the truck and headed out again.

Sal realized it was now dusk. Watching Pop had made him forget the time, and he had to skedaddle home. Ma didn't tolerate her boys playing outside after dark.

After that evening, Sal made spying on Pop one of his favorite pastimes, finding an even better hiding spot behind some crates by Schultz's Flooring, which was adjacent to the bar. Sal knew from talk he overheard in the alley between Pop and the other man that had dropped off the truck with Chick that Pop drove to various places, *stills* Pop called them, throughout the countryside or wherever he was told to go, where he picked up filled bottles in exchange for crates of empty, clean ones that sat in the bed of the pickup. He then delivered the filled bottles to various places where the stuff was sold to customers. Sal began to figure out why Pop's bar was called John's Soda Shop. The business of booze was a secret affair. The filled bottles were buried in the manure to keep them safe and hidden. The hope was that, as he had overheard Pop say, "Federal agents would never rummage deep into that mess to simply confiscate a little moonshine." Now, as Sal crouched at the top of the stairs, he realized that an agent must have finally done just that.

Ma had wiped away most of the blood and was wrapping Pop's head with a long bandage she had ripped from a tattered dishcloth. "How did you get away? Did you tell them anything?" she asked, her voice tight.

"No. I faked like I had passed out. I think it scared them a little after the hoopla they caused when they nearly killed that runner in Holdingford. I thought they would drag me with them, conscious or not, but they took the bottles and left me there. At least they rolled me to the side of the road."

“Well, the gash isn’t bleeding so much now. You need to eat something and get into bed.” She turned to bring the bowl to the kitchen.

“No, Mary, I need to go back out.”

Ma froze a moment and then slowly turned back to Pop. Sal saw panic in her eyes. “Was ist lose? Nein, you are hurt too bad.” She wiped her hands on her apron. “You have no more liquor anyway.”

“But those feds took the truck and wagon. By morning they will trace the license plate. I know it’s not registered to Chick, but they’ll follow the trail until they get to him or someone else we don’t want them to. I heard them say they were heading to the hotel for the night, I’m thinking probably to Sauk Centre since they headed west. I’ve got to warn Chick.” He began to stand up but buckled over and sat back down, holding his ribs.

“You can’t,” said Ma, tears forming. “You’ll end up dead! You should see a doctor.”

“But I’ve got to tell Chick. I have to go to the bar and use the phone. I only came here to clean up so I wouldn’t draw stares downtown...or pass out and leave Chick in a serious lurch.”

“You might be bleeding inside somewhere!” Ma was now shaking and crying.

Pop tried to stand up again but gave up halfway and sat down.

Ma knelt by him and cried into his knees. Pop ran a hand along her hair, which was snarly from her habit of constantly twirling it around her fingers. It had gray streaks in it. Sal knew she was thirty-two years old, which seemed pretty ancient to him, but Pop was even older.

“Mary. I don’t think I can make it all the way to the bar,” said Pop in a gentle tone. “I’m gonna need you.”

Ma didn’t look up but began to cry harder.

Pop continued, more sternly now. “You don’t have to go downtown. Go to your brother’s instead and call Chick from there. Eddy won’t like being involved, but you know he’ll let you. Chick’s boys will be able to spot the agents because they have the truck and wagon.”

Ma was shaking her head. “Nein, nein...I can’t. I can’t.”

“Mary!” Pop sounded angry now. “It has to be. Du mottst!”

Ma was sobbing with her hands to her face.

“It’s your brother’s house, for God’s sake! It’s four blocks. Mary, you have to do this!”

Sal knew that four blocks might as well be four hundred miles when it came to Ma. Her only ventures outside of the house were to the garden in the backyard and to church on Sundays, and that was only if she was feeling well.

Ma hugged herself and began to moan and rock back and forth where she sat on the floor. Pop grabbed his ribs and leaned back in the chair. After a few moments with his eyes clenched tight, he spoke again. Sal could tell he was using great effort to make his voice calm. “It’s fine, Mary. Machs nicht. You don’t have to go. I wasn’t thinking straight. I’ll be able to go myself if you can wrap my ribs real tight.”

Sal was scared. He was quite sure Ma and Pop had never quarreled before, at least not in his presence. Pop always treated Ma as if she were as fragile as the little

almond cookies she baked every Christmas. *Vanillekipferl* she called them. Like Ma, they crumbled into a sugary dust if you handled them roughly.

Sal stood up from his hiding place. His voice came out braver than he felt. "I'll do it, Pop. I'll go to Uncle Eddy's and make the call." Sal had made a call from there for Ma before. He knew how to work the phone. Ma always told him he was smart like her father had been.

Pop's first expression was one of surprise and then anger because Sal had been listening. It had been clear to the brothers from their earliest memories that Pop wanted them to steer clear from his liquor runs. He was ashamed to be in the business, but it was how he put food on their table and shoes on their feet.

Sal watched Pop's face work through his hesitation. Then he seemed to shake off some mental obstacle and settle into action. Slowly sliding to the edge of the chair and still holding his ribs with his arm, he said, "I'm glad, Son. Kommen sie raush."

Sal scurried down the stairs and to Pop's side. Pop put his left hand on Sal's shoulder and looked directly into his eyes. Up close Pop looked even worse. His bottom lip was split and his whole right cheek was swollen and bruised. "Dial 7-103," he said. "Tell whoever answers that the wagon, number two, was jumped near New Munich. Say that the dogs have it all and are headed to Sauk Centre."

Sal nodded, using the most adult expression he could muster. "Sure, Pop."

"Repeat what I said."

Sal did.

Pop smiled. "You are a bright boy, Sal. Now go."

Sal snuck a quick glance at Ma, who didn't look proud of him, just sad. She now sat crumpled on the sofa, sniffing and red faced. Sal tried to give her a smile, but she wouldn't look at him. He went out the door and into the night.

* * *

Was it the robbery that was causing Sal to walk memory lane? He hadn't thought about the night he helped Pop for at least a decade. Sometimes he wondered if it really happened. He had been so young and yet brave, one of the only times in his life that he had stepped up. Sal looked at his alarm clock. 4:30. It was too early to get up, but he knew he was done sleeping. He thought again about that night so long ago. After that, Pop had treated him more like a grownup, letting him know what happened after Sal made the call. Chick Molitor's men had moved fast and found the Feds enjoying a cigarette outside of the Sauk River Inn on Highway 52. They beat up the agents, drove them, along with their government-issued car, out to a secluded spot in the country and left them and their vehicle there, but with the keys tossed into a nearby cornfield. Tom Pohlmann, the farmer who owned the field, reported that the two men had come up to his door at dawn, having just located their keys, to ask where they were and how to get to a main road so that they could find their way back to the Twin Cities. Tom let them wash up, and his wife served them coffee and fresh apple kuchen before they left. Little did they know that Tom was one of Chick Molitor's regular customers and most likely had several bottles of whiskey in the cellar, one floor below where the agents sat.

Pop had laughed at the image, and Sal laughed with him, feeling happier than he had ever been. As far as Sal knew, the Feds never came around again. However,

everyone in Chick's circle was more on edge after that. Pop asked Sal not to tell anyone, not even Ig. It was *their* secret. Sal walked around puffed up for days with Ig begging to know what had happened after he had left him and Art in the bedroom that night. Sal never told. Eventually, Ig forgot about it.

However, money became even tighter after that. Pop's game was up although he occasionally was still able to make a short night run. Only now he used an old car belonging to Chick with the back seat rigged so that it lifted and had storage space under it. He couldn't haul as much liquor and was paid less per run, but Pop needed the money, especially since the episode led to Pop purchasing a phone for the house...on credit. Up until then, Pop had refused to owe any money to anyone.

Ma loved that she could call the bar to remind Pop to pick up a few groceries or else just to be reassured by his voice whenever she felt the need. She had even laughed the first time she called him. And Ma rarely laughed.

Shortly before Christmas the next year, Prohibition ended and Pop and Ma rejoiced that Pop could call his soda shop "John's Bar" again. However, the celebration was bittersweet. By then Pop had let Howard Brinkelmeyer, another of Chick Molitor's buddies, become partners with him when it was either let Brinkelmeyer become co-owner or else go bankrupt and lose the entire bar. Brinkelmeyer made sure to point out at every chance that he was Pop's savior. Pop soon hated him. He was civil to Brinkelmeyer whenever the old coot stopped by to criticize the bar setup or some expenditure or other, but Sal could see the tightness in Pop's jaw when in Brinkelmeyer's presence. When

Pop complained to Ma and didn't think the boys were listening, he referred to his new partner as *Brinkelpecker*.

Sal often wondered how it would have been if Pop had lived longer, but one day, when Sal was fourteen, Pa simply dropped dead as he tried to rearrange some kegs in the cooler. "He was on the floor and bleeding from his mouth," the police officer explained to Sal, who had answered the officer's knocking since Ig was out fishing. Pop didn't even get to see his fiftieth birthday the following week. Art would turn 50 in less than two years, and Sal and Ig weren't far behind him. Sal wondered if one of the brothers was a ticking time bomb like Pop. He hoped it wasn't Ig, at least until his youngest, Celia, got her teaching degree in two years. He wouldn't mind so much if it were himself, but what would happen to Art?

After Pop died, Ma had gone to her bed and stayed there for a month. They lived on sandwiches and canned soup since none of the brothers had yet learned to cook. Art took over the cleaning since, by that time, his nerves no longer allowed him to hold a job. He had become almost as bad as Ma. Sal and Ig upped their hours at the bowling alley, setting pins and selling snacks. Pop had never let them be seen in the main part of the bar, only allowing them in the back room to help with carrying and stacking when a vendor truck arrived. Per the agreement Pop had been forced to sign during Prohibition, Brinkelmeyer bought out Pop's half of the business, but, by lawyering up and twisting words, he managed to buy it for a fraction of its worth. Pop probably never figured that the old snake would outlive him. Three teenagers and an unstable mother were not in a position to fight Brinkelmeyer.

Ig took it especially hard. When it came to business, he was most like Pop, even looked like him, and he had planned on running the bar someday. Ig and Sal always thought of the bar as a magical place. They loved to observe the customers from the back room while they unloaded crates or chipped ice for Pop. Sal usually did most of the work then because Ig was too busy eavesdropping, mesmerized, listening to the men's banter and the sounds of shaken and rolled dice. Ig always bragged to Sal about how smooth Pop was, asking the right questions to get stories out of the men, keeping them longer in the bar so they would buy more roasted peanuts, beer, or an extra shot.

Sal tried to shake off the memories as he rose to get ready for work. He was surprised by the sudden depth of loss he felt for Pop's bar. "Damn you, Brinkelpecker!" he muttered. Stubby raised his head and whimpered from where he lay in his box. "Not you, Stubbs," said Sal. "You're a good boy. Let's carry you down to pee." The old dog managed to give one raspy woof. Sal's anger vanished and he stooped to scratch Stubby behind the ears before hoisting him to his chest.

As Stubby did his business, which now took awhile since he hardly had the strength to squeeze out a poop, Sal's mind kept returning to the time of Pop's death. As he looked across the back alley to the Hinnenkamp's backyard, he remembered one Wednesday in May, not long after Pop died, when he had visited that yard, at that time the Lansing's backyard, trying hard to seem mature and capable since everyone, especially Uncle Eddy, kept telling him he now needed to be *the man of the house*. What they didn't add but implied was that Sal had to step up because Art couldn't.

The weather had turned unseasonably hot and humid the day he ended up visiting the Lansings. Already sick of school and anticipating summer, Sal had been miserable in classes that day, sticking to his seat by the time he was in history class last period as Mr. Romming droned on and on about the Industrial Revolution. Sal's ears perked up near the end of the hour, however, when Mr. Romming gave his "war update" as he labeled it, where he called attention to the progress or struggles in the war with Japan and Germany. All the boys and some of the girls acted brave and eager to enlist the second they were old enough and Sal tried to look as eager as any of them, but, inside, he hoped the war ended by the time he graduated. He feared battle, a scene he couldn't imagine being part of. Surely he was too chicken to fight in a war. He had a few friends with whom he could maybe enlist, but the truth was that Ig was his best friend. He didn't really feel close to anyone else. Even though Ig was ten months younger, Ma had insisted on putting the boys in the same grade even though Pop thought it was a bad idea. "They need to be independent," he had said.

Ma had switched to German to respond, which she often did for their adult discussions. "Nicht so Bald und es gibt Sicherheit in den Zahlen."

Sal was somewhat fluent in what Pop called *low German*, but Ma was talking fast. He was pretty sure, though, that she had said something about being safer as a group, and, as usual, Pop let her win the argument. Sal and Ig started first grade together. Now as sophomores, Sal was already sixteen, but Ig wouldn't turn sixteen until July. Many classmates believed they were twins.

Mr. Romming stated confidently that Hitler's army was sure to lose soon. The class whooped and cheered, but everyone grew quiet again when Mr. Romming paused and looked down for a moment. The students had learned early in the school year that this pose meant he was about to name a casualty... someone injured, missing, or dead...someone they knew or at least had heard of. Sal felt tension mounting throughout the room.

Mr. Romming began. "We have sadly lost one of our brave Stockton boys. Charlie Eiden was killed in North Africa." The room was silent as they all looked down in reverence. After a moment Mr. Romming cleared his throat and went on. "Charlie died a hero, fighting for his country, protecting each and every one of us from Hitler's evil and Japan's barbarism. His mom and dad, both good people of our town, have a lot to be proud of." Mr. Romming's speech seemed at an end, but, after hesitating a moment, he walked toward Linda Gruber's desk and stood in front of it.

"I remember Charlie as my student." His voice got shaky. He swallowed. "Just three short years ago, he was in my class. He sat right in this desk."

Linda's eyes grew wide. She looked horrified, like she was sitting on the lap of a ghost. She didn't dare stand up, but she sat upright and wrapped her arms across her chest.

Mr. Romming continued. "These brave boys are just like you. They are you, Tommy Pieders, and you, Pat Rademacher, and you, Sal Schmidt.

Sal felt his cheeks burn as eyes turned to him. Rose Lansing looked at him with a stricken face and put a hand to her heart as if she were looking at his corpse.

Luckily for Sal, who would rather hold a porcupine than be in the spotlight, Mr. Romming was finished with his oration. “Let’s think about that in silence the last few minutes of class.”

The students barely breathed the humid air, remaining rigid, sweating, while contemplating Mr. Romming’s words. When the bell rang, instead of popping up and instantly jabbering, students carefully raised themselves from their seats and slowly picked up their books, slinking towards the door. Sal and others stole quick glances at Mr. Romming as he sat at his desk, lost in thought, staring at his Abraham Lincoln paperweight with his chin resting on his clasped hands.

Mr. Romming’s speech hung over Sal for a while, and he became irritated by Ig’s chattering and upbeat pace as they walked home. Art no longer went to school because, as Ma said, “The pressure was too much.” He had stopped going after the first few weeks of eighth grade. Ma knew that many of the farm kids quit after the eighth grade, and she used this as Art’s excuse. Sal had dreaded eighth grade because of the horrors Art had experienced, but when he was finally an eighth grader himself, he never felt the pressure Ma had talked about, except, of course, when he had to give a speech or take part in any performance. Mostly he just quietly did his work and kept his eyes from locking with the teachers’. Hardly anyone noticed him. He got mostly B’s and a few A’s every year, so he didn’t get attention for academic excellence either, which was fine with him. Now in tenth grade, Sal was a bit shocked and maybe flattered that Mr. Romming had used him as an example in his tribute to Charlie Engle. He wasn’t used to being an example for anything.

For supper that night, Ma served cold sliced bologna in sandwiches with a side dish of raw carrots and green beans from the garden, so that they wouldn't have to turn on the stove. They ate in the living room because, by early evening, the room was usually cooler than the kitchen since it was on the east side of the house. However, even with two electric fans running, the air was stifling. The boys tried to listen to *Buck Rogers* on the radio while they ate, but it was so blasted hot that they couldn't really focus. The show was being interrupted a lot with weather reports anyway. Storms were coming their way. "Thank God," Ig had said and got a whack on the back of the head from Ma's dishrag for using *God* for something other than prayer.

Every window was wide open, but the house stayed damp and stale. The elms that shaded it and usually kept it cool had lost the battle. Ma poured iced tea for her three boys. They held the perspiring glasses to their foreheads and necks between sips. After awhile, Sal noticed that the room was getting quite dark. It must have gotten cloudy.

"I don't like that sky," said Ma, standing by the side screen door. "I better look out front." The front door faced south.

Ma had always been afraid of storms, especially tornados. She had been in one in Missouri when she lived there as a little girl before her parents, immigrants from Germany, had moved to Minnesota to farm land near other relatives. She paced the house whenever the sky looked threatening. However, this spring had been especially stressful for her with Pop gone and after reading about the horrible Midwest tornado outbreak in March that killed over 150 people and injured over a thousand. *The St. Cloud Times* had run personal accounts. One report told of a group of about twenty chickens

covering on Main Street of one town, their feathers all completely blown off. Ig and Sal had laughed at the image, but Ma hushed them. “If you laugh at others’ misfortunes, you’ll receive the same.”

“But I don’t have feathers,” Ig had replied with a naughty grin. Luckily Ma didn’t hear.

As Sal now watched Ma pacing back and forth between the big bay window and the front door, he wondered why she kept reading the stories over and over when they upset her so much, but maybe it kept her mind off Pop and her own family’s problems.

“It’s too hot to eat,” said Ig, chewing on an ice cube and pushing away a half-eaten sandwich. His black hair was completely damp and curling even more.

Art looked somewhat less sweaty. “You shouldn’t waste food, Ig. Think of the soldiers.”

“No soldier’s gonna know if I toss out half a sandwich.”

“You’ll know,” said Art with a solemn face.

Ig looked like he was about to give a crabby response, but both he and Sal knew better than to upset Art, so he kept quiet. He picked up a carrot and twirled it between his fingers, then used it like a cigarette, blowing out a pretend puff of smoke. Sal joined him.

“Ahhh, nothing like a good smoke after a hearty meal,” said Ig as he leaned back and patted his belly.

“Yes sir-eee, my friend,” said Sal. “Some pork and beans and tobaccoe.”

Even Art laughed.

They stopped short as Ma hollered from the front door and raced toward them. “Schnell! The clouds are spinning. To the cellar, rausch!”

Art jumped up and headed with Ma toward the cellar door as Sal and Ig ran to look out the front door. The sky was swirling like a witch’s brew, greenish gray with orange swirls. The boys looked to each other and without words knew what they were going to do. They had to stay long enough to see it. As Ma yelled to them from the cellar door, beyond frantic now, they stayed put. Suddenly, there it was, a funnel cloud in the sky, maybe five blocks away. It was a little, skinny tornado, shaped like a hag’s arthritic finger. They could see it by looking over Mrs. Keel’s rooftop across the street.

Ma screamed, “NOW!”

They looked a second longer at the tornado and then ran toward Ma. Down in the dank cellar, they sat in the southwest corner as they all knew to do because of living in a tornado state. They could hear the wind howling, but it was pitch black, even with there being two little windows near the top of the ceiling on the east side of the room.

Art was sitting and rocking, saying Hail Mary’s in rapid fashion, eyes closed and arms wrapped around his legs. Ig and Sal kept their eyes at the windows, trying to see anything they could. Sal heard Ma monkeying around with something and wondered what she had brought with her. Then she struck a match. On the floor between them was her wooden crucifix with the golden-colored Jesus on it. Usually it hung in her bedroom. She had opened a sliding piece under Jesus’s left arm that revealed a small storage compartment. In it was a little candle. Ma lifted it out as her match burned nearly to her fingertips, and she quickly lit the candle. A softer but bigger glow lit their faces.

“We will be safe,” she said and then joined Art in mumbling prayers.

Sal did not feel comforted. The whole thing looked like a scene from *The Mummy's Tomb*. He and Ig had snuck in to see the film at the Stockton Movie House the month before. In it, Boris Karloff played a mourning doctor, trying to bring back his dead wife by giving electric charges to corpses and holding séances with them. Ma and Art did indeed look like they were in séance mode with a twisted crucifix and a candle between them in a dark cellar. Art and Ma's chanted praying added more creepiness. Sal and Ig exchanged glances.

“What the hell?” Ig whispered. “I'm ready to go up and take my chances with the tornado.”

Then the wind and noise stopped. They waited for about five minutes, listening. Off in the distance they could hear a couple of sirens. Then, to their surprise, sunshine streamed in through the windows. Ig said, “Ma, should Sal and I go up?”

“Ya, but slow and careful.” She and Art followed, all four slowly ascending the rickety stairs.

As if the tornado might still be lurking and suddenly pounce, they tiptoed throughout the house, looking for damage, but they found none. Sal headed to the back door. The yard looked fine except for a few small to medium branches lying on the ground. Even their dilapidated outhouse, which became a storage shed when Pop had installed indoor plumbing a few years before, looked undamaged. Across the alley, however, at the Lansings' place, an elm had tipped over onto the back porch roof. The

roof was partially collapsed. Mr. and Mrs. Lansing and their children, Butch, Pete, and Rose, were staring up at the mess.

“You boys go help,” said Ma.

By *boys*, she meant Ig and Sal. Art would stay home.

Feeling a bit shy, but proud to be the men of the family now that Pop was gone, the two brothers headed across the backyard.

“Hey, boys,” greeted Mrs. Lansing. “You all okay over there?”

Ig answered. “Yes, ma’am. We thought you might need help.”

“That’s nice of you. As you can see, the porch got a bit roughed up.”

Butch took a couple steps toward them. He was a senior and Pete a junior. Both usually ignored the younger Schmidt boys. However, the excitement made Butch want to talk.

“The tornado never did touch down. Me and dad watched the whole thing fly over. We’d just pulled into the driveway and didn’t have time to run into the house.” His pupils were still huge from the memory.

“We heard sirens,” said Sal.

“Us too. We could hear them heading north of town. Maybe it hit there.”

Mr. Lansing called from the top of the ladder. “All right boys, I’m ready for you. I’m going to start cutting and dropping. You boys pile it up by the garage. Rosie, hold my ladder steady.”

Rose gripped the ladder tightly. Sal stole small glances at her. He always thought she seemed nice and smiley. She didn’t act silly like other girls he knew. She was

thoughtful and asked good questions in class. She had asked Mr. Rommel just that day, before he gave his war update, why the workers in sweat houses didn't just swarm around the boss and demand better wages. Couldn't their large numbers scare him into signing a binding document of some kind? It was a good question. Sometimes her questions got her in trouble with teachers less patient than Mr. Romming. When Mr. Langhauser had finished a tedious lecture on the value of short, clear sentences in essays, Rose raised her hand and asked, "But isn't a longer sentence sometimes nicer to listen to, like you're hearing a winding story?" She had no motive other than honest curiosity, but Mr. Langhauser told her to sit in the hall for being impertinent. Poor Rose had looked mortified. Now, seeing Rose holding the ladder with her pretty face tilted up toward her father, Sal decided to tell her she didn't deserve what Mr. Langhauser had dealt her.

He grabbed a piece of branch from the ground close to where she was standing.
"Hi Rose."

"Hi Sal." She smiled and her eyes crinkled.

Before he lost his nerve he said, "Langhauser sure was a jerk to you last Friday."

She seemed surprised and looked directly into his eyes. Hers were shiny blue.

After a moment she said, "It was stupid. I know he hates being questioned. I just didn't think."

"Yes you did. You *did* think. That's exactly what Langhauser doesn't want us to do."

Rose laughed. The sound was bubbly and musical. *Like a bird*, he thought.

Sal, smiled back. "You always ask smart questions, Rose."

She kept smiling, but her cheeks turned pink. “Thanks, Sal,” she said, looking at her shoes.

Her dad hollered from the roof. “Here comes Frank and his boys.” Frank Thomas, a neighbor to the north of the Lansings had four huge boys. Sal and Ig would be forgotten and wouldn’t be the rugged heroes today. Sal was disappointed. He would have liked to look strong in front of Rose. He carried a last armful of branches to the garage. Frank Thomas started up his gas chainsaw and his big brutish boys took over the operation. Rose stood by her mother now, watching. Ig and Sal felt silly standing idle and headed to their yard. Sal stole one last glance at Rose and saw her looking at him with that thoughtful expression of hers. She gave a small wave. He nodded to her, trying to look cool and collected, and turned for home.

That was over thirty years ago, but as Sal looked across the alley to the Lansing backyard, now the Hinnenkamp yard, longing made him feel heavy. He rarely spent time in his own backyard because of the view, especially after Rose and her husband sold their rambler on Molly’s Hill and moved into her childhood home. Her parents had retired to a senior apartment in St. Cloud. Sal knew they had practically given Rose the house after it was clear that Bill would never recover much from a massive stroke he suffered at the age of 43. Rose gave up her job at the Stockton Hospital to nurse him full time. She must have also received money from the sale of Bill’s insurance agency. Sal supposed that by living frugally and receiving disability and other assistance money for Bill, they could make ends meet. Their two daughters were even able to attend college. Like Art,

Rose kept a huge garden, which often placed her out in her backyard on summer days, weeding or harvesting. She always wore a straw hat with a yellow band. Sometimes Sal couldn't avoid having to acknowledge her when he brought Stubby outside or went to and from his car that he parked by the side curb so the tree in the front yard couldn't drop chestnuts on it. He would give a friendly wave but try to look like he was running late so that they wouldn't have to talk. She would smile and wave back. It was a silent routine.

Sal was brought out of his thoughts when Stubby scratched his shoe and whined. *Time to go in for breakfast and join reality again*, thought Sal. He needed to get a grip. Sifting through memories was exhausting.

Chapter 5: 1974

Sal loved his job. Most people would consider him nuts for feeling so because he almost always worked alone, his only companions being the rumbling motors that kept electricity flowing. He was on the town's maintenance crew, but he was the only crewmember assigned daily to stay at the Stockton Power Plant, which housed the town's electrical substation as well as the garage that held the fire trucks, city vehicles, and equipment of various types. He had worked there since 1950. Maintenance worker in a small town like Stockton meant he was a jack-of-all-trades or, as Ig called him, the plug-the-hole guy. He fixed plumbing, replaced leaking shingles, and oil changed and cranked on the two fire engines and the ensemble of city trucks, keeping everything at the ready and adding plows or mowers as the season dictated. Every day was different, but solo. Sometimes he ate lunch with the road guys, but usually he just stayed alone among the pipes and electrical units and ate tuna or bologna sandwiches and an apple that Art had brown bagged for him. He also took two short breaks each day for drinking coffee from his trusty steel thermos. Although the job offered a decent pension, it did not pay particularly well, about \$9,000 a year, but he didn't need much money. He and Art lived simply in their long-ago-paid-for home. Sal had the same car that he had bought in mint condition from a widow in 1963, a red Chevy 2, which he kept running just fine. His uniforms were supplied by the city. He had managed to put away a healthy sum in savings and he had purchased a basic life insurance policy. Dead or alive, Sal had Art covered.

He knew that the city workers, especially the two young office ladies, liked him in an out-of-sight-out-of-mind sort of way. Ma had taught him good manners and he didn't get in anyone's way. No one could ever accuse him of that. He could say hello, mention the weather or a happening in town, and then make his exit. He sometimes tried to add a little pizzazz for the office girls. They both wore the same bright red lipstick and had big, toothy laughs. He had heard they never left the dance floor during evenings at the New Munich Ballroom. Sal felt a little naughty when he would smile at them and say, "Well, I guess I'm being paid to work, so I better move my gears. Have a good day, ladies."

"Bye, Sal," they would purr in unison. They reminded him of the Lennon sisters, minus two.

One day when Sal stepped outside the power plant with plans to touch up the paint on the front window trim, he recognized Bonnie's vehicle parked at the curb with the hood open. He could hear, though not see, the kid under the hood, letting fly a few choice words. Steam was spewing from the front of the car with a loud hiss.

Sal walked over and stood, waiting. The kid seemed not to notice, so Sal cleared his throat. The cursing ceased, and, after a pause, the kid came out from under the hood. After considering Sal for a moment with an undecided frown, he said, "Oh. It's you."

"Having some trouble?" asked Sal, trying to sound light and friendly.

"Every damn day. This piece of junk never works. " The kid was holding a rag around one hand.

"Did the steam get you?" asked Sal.

"It's nothin'," said the kid.

“You probably just need to let the car cool down and add water.”

“Wow, you think?” His sarcasm was thick.

Sal wanted to smack him. He took a deep breath, pointed to the power plant, and said, “We can get a can of water inside for the car and you can rinse your hand in there.”

“In there?”

“This is where I work. Do you think you need a bandage?”

The boy said nothing, just looked at Sal, still measuring him. Sal turned and headed back toward the power plant. At this point he didn’t care if the damn kid followed him or not. After a moment he heard footsteps fall in behind him.

“Do you work on the fire trucks? I bet it’s kinda cool in there.” The kid sounded slightly humble now, younger.

Sal smiled. As a boy he had thought the same thing about the power plant. “Yah, sometimes I have to repair the fire trucks, but mostly it’s maintenance. C’mon. You can look around while I get the water. Just don’t touch anything, especially dials or levers.”

“I won’t.”

The boy was true to his word. However, he had a million questions. Sal began to respect the kid’s brain a bit more. He wanted to know how everything worked and understood when Sal explained.

“My dad can fix anything. He’s a plumber. I bet he would take me on as his assistant and teach me if I wanted him to.” Sal noted the bravado in the kid’s voice.

“But I want to fix trucks, cars too, but mostly trucks. I’m the only reason Mom’s car runs

at all. It's a piece of crap. I already put in two different carburetors that I got from the junkyard. But the transmission is going to pot and I don't know how to work on that yet.

Sal surprised himself by saying, "If you need help, I'm pretty good at that stuff. I haven't fixed a transmission ever, we hire mechanics here for that, but... two heads... you know the saying."

The kid looked at him with suspicion but didn't comment.

Sal didn't know why on earth he felt the urge to win over the little snot, but he added, "I only work until five and never on weekends, unless there's trouble here."

"I'll think about it," said the kid.

After a fifteen-minute tour, Sal suggested that they get the car going. The kid agreed, although reluctantly, and they went outside. The car had cooled enough, and, after they added water to the radiator, it started right up. As the kid pulled away from the curb, he stopped and looked at Sal through his rolled down window.

"Thanks, ahh..."

"Sal."

"Okay, Sal...thanks for the water and the...um..."

"No problem. Where you headed?"

"Just driving around. There's nothin' to do in this town."

"You should try fishing." He waited for the kid to roll his eyes, but instead he looked interested. Sal continued, "We used to fish, my brother and I, at the dam or off of the foot bridge when we were young."

“Fascinating,” the kid said, sarcasm resurfacing, but he instantly seemed to regret it. “Did you do anything else for fun?” he added in a friendlier tone.

“Well, when no one was looking, usually at night, teenagers around here would swing from a rope that was attached under the footbridge. They’d get a running start on the rocks along the edge of the river, swing out, and land in the water. Everyone knew to tuck the rope up into the concrete beams when they were done so that the cops wouldn’t find it.”

“Why would the cops care?”

“Back then, before they rebuilt the dam, the water was higher and full of rapids at the bridge. It was pretty dangerous business to be jumping in there. The cops didn’t allow it.”

“It looks pretty tame now.”

“Ya. Nobody jumps there anymore.”

The kid seemed to be thinking. Then he suddenly grinned and said, “I never pegged you for a law breaker.”

Sal laughed.

With that, the kid pulled off, giving a small salute.

He’s not so bad for a shithead, thought Sal.

Chapter 6: 1974

“I haven’t been in this closet since right after Ma died,” said Sal as he felt in the dark for the pull string to turn on the bulb.

“What the hell? It still stinks like mothballs,” said Ig. He scrunched up his nose and took a step back. “That is the most god-awful smell. I’d rather have moth holes. Remember how she used to put those stink bombs in our sweater drawers? I thought we threw them all away when we packed up her stuff.”

“There must have been one that we missed.”

“Maybe. But that was decades ago. How can it still stink?”

They looked at the neatly stacked boxes on the floor and on the long shelf above the clothes rod.

“Get ready to sneeze,” said Sal.

“I wonder why Bernice doesn’t clean in here,” said Ig, waving the air to clear dust that had been disturbed and lifted by their opening the door.

Bernice had insisted that her bachelor brothers-in-law did not know how to do a thorough cleaning job, which was true, so she kicked them out of their house one weekend each spring while she cleaned the house to the last crevice.

“She knows to skip Ma’s room,” said Sal. “It bothers Art when we disturb anything in here. I could tell it bothered him when I said we were going in here today.” He shivered. “I don’t like it either. It kind of gives me the creeps...still.”

Ig nodded solemnly. “I get you there, brother.”

The boxes held Ma's things that at the time of her death seemed personal in ways that the brothers were not able to face. Bernice had quickly gone through most of it and packed up Ma's few nice dresses and shoes for the mission drive at St. Mary's. The only clothing item kept was Ma's wedding dress. Bernice thought Celia might want it someday and moved it to their house. Most of Ma's other items were religious in nature...rosaries, prayer books, and small statues. Bernice had packed some into boxes and donated the rest. She boxed other personal items such as pictures, letters, and documents and put them in the closet where they remained untouched for nearly a quarter of a century. Sal had only been in Ma's bedroom once every month or so since she died, usually to dust and sweep a little. Unless there was a specific reason to enter the room, he didn't, and he never opened the closet. He wasn't keen on looking through her personal stuff. It would be like opening a tomb. The thick layer of dust on top of the boxes indeed made the scene crypt-like. Empty hangers still hung on the rod.

"What kind of pictures does Celia need?" asked Sal as he reached for a box that looked like it could hold photographs. It was a sturdy hatbox. Ma's hats had been donated, so the box had to be filled with something else.

"I don't know. It's for Karen, Cousin Lois's daughter. You know, the Hansons out in Colorado? Karen's trying to put together some memory collage for Lois's 50th birthday. She's looking for any fun pictures... wedding, Christmas, whatever... from the good ole' days."

Sal wasn't surprised that Karen had called Ig's house. Most of their relatives, if they wanted to contact the brothers at all, went through Ig, Bernice, or their two kids to avoid awkward silences with Sal. He wasn't a conversationalist.

Sal sat on the floor, blew off some of the dust from the box's cover, and removed the lid to peer inside. Ig grabbed a different box and sat next to him. Sal's box held a couple of Catholic missals, one old Baltimore Catechism book, and Ma's statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary appearing to the three children of Fatima. Sal remembered the statue from his childhood. It always made him uneasy. When he was a boy, it sat on a shelf in the hallway. He always looked at the other wall or lowered his eyes as he walked by it. The last thing on earth he'd want was a visit from the Blessed Virgin. It would scare the living crap out of him. The Catholicism he grew up with did not exactly make one feel worthy of a holy visitation.

"No pictures in here," said Sal.

Ig found old report cards in his box and was getting a chuckle out of them.

"Man, did you stink at penmanship or what! Sister Martha Alice gave you a D. Ha!"

"I still stink," said Sal as he returned the hatbox and took a rectangular box from the shelf. "Hey, look at this one," he said as he showed off the sides, which advertised Kirpatrick's Canned Spaghetti, or K Hash, as Ma had called it. Pop had brought home a free case of it when the boys were still in grade school. He had a buddy who worked for a grocery chain, who would sometimes give him food that hadn't sold and was getting old. The company would let its workers take what they wanted before discarding the

rest. The K Spaghetti Pop had received must have had something wrong with it because the contents of each can smelled like a chemistry lab and had a soapy taste.

Ig groaned. "I wonder if they still make that shit."

"I sure as hell hope not! It was awful. Even the dog wouldn't eat it."

They relived the memory of Mike, their golden retriever, refusing to taste it, even though he had once eaten a bucket full of night crawlers, mud and all, when Sal left it out after a fishing venture. Ma had even tried spoon-feeding Mike the coagulated meat and noodles, cooing, "Come on, boy. You'll like this." She had finally given up. "Verruckt hunt," she had said and then did the unthinkable...she threw away food.

By now the brothers were laughing hard. When Ig snorted, they roared. Ig asked if Sal had any beer. When Sal returned to the bedroom with two cans of Schlitz, Ig was back to looking through his box. Sal opened the K Spaghetti box and said, "Bingo." It held photographs and what looked to be a collection of letters. The pictures were haphazardly thrown together and were mostly of the three brothers growing up. Ma and Pop were in a few of them, but mostly just the boys. Sal looked at a couple shots and showed Ig some of the funnier ones. Ig and Sal walking on stilt shoes they had made out of tin cans and twine, Art watching, laughing. Ig and Sal in the apple tree with big dopey grins, dropping apples down to Art who was holding a bushel basket. Most of the pictures showed Ig and Sal doing the action, Ig hamming it up in almost every shot. Art, as always, was the onlooker.

“Maybe we should call in Art to look at some of these,” said Ig, laughing at a particularly hideous shot of himself in his bathing trunks, his belly spilling over the top of them while he held a hose, shooting water into the air and creating a shower for himself.

“He doesn’t like pictures, Ig, unless they’re of your kids. You know that. He can’t stand to look back earlier than that.”

“Ya, you’re right. Let him be. He’s watching *Gunsmoke*.” They could hear muffled sounds of horses and gunshots from the living room.

Ig pulled out a cigar box from inside a Sears Robuck bag he was rifling through. The box had a picture on it of men in 16th century Dutch costumes. He began to chuckle again. “Remember when we stole a couple of Pop’s cigars and smoked them behind the outhouse?”

“You mean, when *you* stole them.”

“You smoked them; didn’t you?”

“... and puked my guts out.” Sal winced at the memory.

“What were we? About nine and ten? Definitely no older.”

“I could tell that Pop knew right away, probably from the smell...but he never said anything.”

“That’s because he could see how sick and green we looked. I bet he was laughing his ass off inside.”

Sal was enjoying memory lane, but, as always, sadness seeped in. Ig read his mind, and he, too, grew quiet.

After a minute, Sal spoke. "Ig...it wasn't all bad. I mean, you and I had fun, at least before Pop died. Didn't we?"

"Hell ya. We had fun after he died too. Not so much at home after that, but we still got out a little." Ig took up a few more pictures in his hands. He cleared his throat. "Sal, I always wished you'd have moved somewhere. Just got out from under, you know? Sometimes I feel like I got to go and you had to stay."

Sal didn't like where the conversation was going. "Nah...come on, Ig. Don't think like that. Where would I have gone?"

Ig kept his eyes on the contents of his box but said, "I sometimes wonder if you are all right, Sal. With how things turned out."

Sal gave him the answer he needed. "Things are good. I like my job, and you know I was never a social butterfly like you." He smiled. "Let's keep looking or we'll be here all day. I'll grab another box. There's got to be photos of Ma and Pop when they were younger." He stood and grabbed one of the last three boxes. As he turned to sit again, he saw that Ig was holding an envelope in one hand and a piece of stationery in the other, looking pensive.

"What is it?" asked Sal.

Ig hesitated and then said, "A letter. But why would Ma have this one?" He looked nervous. He replaced the letter and held the envelope out to Sal.

The envelope had only "Sal" written on it, but Sal recognized the handwriting even after all these years. His heart started pumping blood fast. It was from Rose. Why would Ma have one of Rose's letters? He had thrown the whole batch of them into the

Sauk River that summer when everything had fallen apart. He remembered watching the letters float downstream and over the dam, feeling his dreams sail with them.

Sal slipped the letter from its open envelope and discovered a handkerchief folded into a tight square and tucked inside as well. After blinking his eyes a few times, he swallowed hard and began to read what Rose had written.

Dear Sal,

I was so happy to get your last letter. Your mom gave it to Art to give to me. Art has been so nice about being the postman for us. I think it was sweet of your mom to let me send my letters in her care packages to save on postage. She knows I'm saving every penny for school, but I can afford stamps. I just didn't have the heart to say no to her. She seemed so insistent on helping me.

I'll be done with school in less than one year if I go full time through the summer. I already passed all of the bookwork and am on the floor. I was placed with the meanest nurse for my rounds, but she is so good at everything, so efficient, that I don't care. I'll learn more from her. Once I'm an LPN, maybe your mom will let me buy her postage stamps!

I would send cookies with this, but your mom is such a good baker that you would think mine were awful. That's why I'm sending you this handkerchief instead.

Sal looked at the handkerchief. He felt the embroidered letters. SJS. She had embroidered a handkerchief for him. *Why did I never receive it?* He was growing more apprehensive, but he read on.

Actually, I'm kind of scared to write what I want to say in this letter, but I've been doing a lot of thinking lately with you so far away and me getting close to finishing school. Nurse Stevens (that's my superior's name) always says, "Don't go playing guessing games with patients. Just report the facts precisely and let the doctors make the decisions. We are not playing Florence Nightingale in a Hollywood movie." See what I mean? She's a real hag, but she makes sense.

Well, it got me thinking that I've been playing guessing games with some things, and I really don't have the facts. But Sal, you are a difficult patient.

Sal felt dizzy. The letter seemed to blur, and he squinted his eyes to focus. *Why was this letter in Ma's cigar box...with her own letters? Why was this never sent to him? Was it kept by mistake? On purpose? Were there other letters Ma hid from him?* He looked up at Ig, who was watching him with a worried expression.

"You better take a swig or two of that beer," Ig advised. "You don't look so good."

Sal did so, several gulps before returning to Rose's words.

But Sal you are a difficult patient. I love that you are sweet and never brag about yourself, but you really never tell me what's in your heart. What are your dreams? We have gone out together to movies and dances and we have always had a great time. But it has dawned on me that you never say anything. I mean, about us. I feel like we've known each other forever, and maybe to you I'm just part of the scenery of your life, but I have invested my heart, Sal. I can't think of my life without you, and I see us together...always. Since you've been gone, I haven't let myself have a moment of stillness because I instantly cry or feel so blue that I can't breathe right because I miss you so much. But you haven't ever promised me anything. I don't even know if you think of me as your steady. We haven't even kissed other than on the cheek and that one quick kiss under the mistletoe at the Christmas party because everyone was egging you on.

It has occurred to me that I could be living a complete fantasy in my mind. And I need to know the facts. Please write me when you get this. Give me the facts, Sal, whatever they are. I love you so very much, Sal. I need to know if you love me too.

There, I said it. And I'm glad.

Love Always,

Rose

Sal sat frozen, beyond shocked. He had written her a letter to ask why she stopped writing to him, but he had never received an answer. His very existence had come to a standstill when first one week, then two, then a month passed and still no letter

from Rose came. He had hoped it was because of a military snafu, the Navy not being able to catch up to his ship, but he was still receiving Ma's letters, so he had to admit it wasn't that. Finally he had written to Ma to ask if she knew anything. Ma didn't answer his question in her letters, and Sal thought her silence on the subject said it all.

Rose. When he first saw her after his deployment was over, she stiffly said hello to him. He and Ig were leaving the Red Owl, and she was walking in. She turned red in her cheeks and said, "Hello, Sal. I'm glad you made it home safe and sound." Bill was with her. Bill Hinnenkamp. He said, "Hey Sal," then lightly touched Rose's elbow and guided her to the soda pop display near the front windows. Rose didn't even look back.

Sal checked the date she had written in the upper corner of her letter. August 8, 1947. Then rage began to fill him. He searched through the rest of the cigar box's contents. Only letters from relatives, some in German, plus a couple of funeral cards. He turned the K Spaghetti box upside down and dumped everything. More prayer books, some doilies, the boys' confirmation candles. He grabbed the last two boxes from the closet shelf, dumping them too, not caring where things landed. He used his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his brow, the tears of frustration from his face. Dozens and dozens of funeral cards...great uncles and aunts, church members. Another statue, one of St. Bernadette, he tossed aside. It smashed onto the linoleum, Bernadette's head and raised arm breaking off. He dug through the growing pile, frantically. Then he froze.

There they were. The letters he had sent Ma that always included another letter folded smaller and tucked inside for Rose, letters Ma was supposed to have Art bring across the alley. His hands shaking, Sal picked up each envelope, looking at the postage

marks for the dates until he found the later ones. He turned the envelopes upside down. In the last two, out fell his letters to Rose. “No!” He screamed inside his head. “No!” He raised his arm and swept it violently across the piles of papers and memories, spewing them in all directions. Then he lay on the braided rug aside of the bed, looked up at the ceiling, and cursed his own mother, which he was sure would classify as a mortal sin. But that didn’t matter. He was already in hell.

A movement caught Sal’s eyes and he realized that Ig was still there, sitting on the floor with his back against the dresser. He must have left the room for a bit because he had retrieved a pint bottle of whiskey and now held it out toward Sal. Sal shook his head to decline. Ig shrugged his shoulders and took a long swig. Then he said, “You don’t need to say anything. I’m pretty sure I can guess how you feel.”

Sal groaned. “Why would she do it? She liked Rose.”

“Of course she did. Who didn’t?”

“Then why? Was it an accident?” he said hopefully, but he knew better. He looked around the room at the mess he had made, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Ig again offered the whiskey bottle. Sal took it and drank two swallows. Ig nodded in approval as if Sal had taken his medicine like a good boy.

Then Ig said, “The way I figure it, she already knew what she was going to do.” He looked up to the three-armed light fixture on the ceiling, the same one from which Ma had hanged herself so many years ago. Sal’s glance moved there too.

Ig continued. “She had to make sure Art would be cared for.”

Anger again began bubbling up like bile in Sal's throat. "Well that's just great. What about me?" He set down the whiskey bottle hard. It made a loud clank on the linoleum. "I was crazy about Rose. When she stopped writing...." He didn't have words to describe the pain. "I wanted to marry her, Ig, every bit as much as you wanted to marry Bernice."

"You should have told Ma. You should have said it aloud, Sal. As far as I know, you never said one word to any of us about anything certain."

"Don't you dare make this my fault!" Sal felt his hands clenching into fists.

"I'm not. I'm just saying that you made it a little easier for Ma, I think."

"Was I supposed to declare my love from the mountain tops? Be flashy about it like you were with Bernice?"

"Why didn't you just ask Rose why she didn't write? When you got home? If Bernice hadn't written to me, I would have marched right up to her and said, "Hey, Bernice! What in the Sam hell kind of business is this? Give it to me straight, sister!"

"I am not you."

"But you loved her!"

"I am not YOU!" Sal grabbed the whiskey bottle and hurled it at Ig, who leaned to the left to avoid the assault. The bottle hit the metal radiator next to the dresser and broke, big brown glass shards falling onto the linoleum and golden whiskey splashing, some of it landing on Ig's cheek and shoulder. Ig wiped his face with his flannel sleeve.

Sal instantly felt his adrenaline level dropping, replaced with nothing. He became aware of a shadow in the doorway. Art.

Sal made his voice calm. "Hey Art," he said. "*Gunsmoke* done?"

Art scanned the dumped boxes and spewed debris. Then he looked at both of his brothers with wary eyes. "Is something going on?"

"No," said Sal. "I just knocked over a whiskey bottle."

Art looked unconvinced, but said, "I'll get the bucket and mop." He left.

Ig looked at Sal. "You're right," he said in almost a whisper. "You're not me. You're better. A really good guy...and Ma knew it. "

"If I am," said Sal, "a fat lotta good it's done me."

Chapter 7: 1974

As Sal lay awake that night, he let himself remember a warm May evening long ago in 1948.

He watched her swinging back and forth. The half moon lit her enough so that he could see her expression. She was lost in thought with her eyes slightly crinkled and her brows in a frown. He had seen that expression many times, in math class as she worked a problem, in the library while she read her favorite mystery novels. She loved mystery movies too and often dragged Sal to them at the Sauk Centre Theater, even though he could take them or leave them. He remembered how he'd muster courage to hold her hand, but she would hardly notice because she was so wrapped up in the plot. However, once their hands were intertwined, she would absentmindedly clench his tightly during suspenseful parts. She stared at the screen while he stole looks at her, just like he was stealing one now.

She must have sensed him because her gaze slowly moved to where he was hidden in the shadow of the lilac bush.

“Sal? Is that you there?”

He froze for a moment, unsure what to do. Then he stepped out into the moonlight with a sheepish grin.

“Sal Schmidt, what are you doing?” she asked. “How long have you been spying?” She sat up straighter, embarrassed to have been observed. She reached up to tuck her hair behind her ears.

“Not long,” Sal lied. “I didn’t want to disturb you. You looked kind of serious.”

He knew he was slurring his words.

Her eyes narrowed a bit as she wrinkled her nose. “Have you been drinking?”

“Just a few beers. Maybe I should stop.”

“Were you out with Ig?”

“No. Just had a few here.” He was having a hard time standing still. His legs and hips wanted to sway.

She looked over to the street. He could see that she was uncomfortable, puzzled.

The beer gave him stupid courage. “Rose, are you really going to marry him tomorrow?” He hated his slurring, but he was glad he said it.

Her eyes widened and she turned to stare at him. He willed himself to keep eye contact. She seemed to be struggling to remain calm.

Then she spoke. “Why are you doing this? Why now?”

The cold tone of her voice threw him. He struggled to form words, then managed to say, “I...I just can’t stand to think of it.”

She glared at him, getting up and out of the swing to face him square on.

“Suddenly, *tonight*, you can’t stand to think of it?” she said, her voice trembling with barely controlled rage.

“I didn’t think I had the right to say anything.”

“Until now?”

Sal looked to his feet, regretting the scene he had begun.

She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her voice was a dagger. “ You are weak, Sal. The weakest guy I know. “

His world was crumbling.

“And you are too late.”

It was over. She turned and marched to the house. Sal watched her rigid back until the screen door slammed shut behind her.

He went home and drank some more. He sipped beer into the night, not bothering to go to bed, afraid of his dreams. His drinking was not in a rush, but rather in a steady line, maybe one or two beers per hour. At two a.m., after the television stations played the National Anthem and went off air for the night, he switched to radio and finally dozed on the couch. He woke again a little after sunup, his stomach churning with dread.

Rose’s wedding day.

He picked up drinking again where he had left off.

The bridesmaids arrived first. Through the kitchen window he could hear them laughing and see the curlers in their hair as they carried garment bags up the back steps and into the house. Then Rose’s grandparents arrived, followed by the groomsmen. He switched to a pint of whiskey when Bill Hinnenkamp showed up, looking scrubbed and handsome in a gray suit.

The posing for pictures began. The Lansing’s backyard had been manicured for the occasion and was decorated with a maypole sporting ribbons and cascading flowers, which made a festive background for the pictures. He took a big gulp of whiskey to numb his nerves as Rose stepped carefully out of the door with her simple dress, short

sleeved and calf-length, a strand of pearls at her neck and a short veil clipped to her swept up hair. *Her soft, wavy hair. Golden brown.* She was smiling. Smiling like she meant it.

Sal watched as more pictures were snapped. Rose and her bridesmaids, who wore dresses similar to Rose's, but blue. Next were Bill and his groomsmen. They had been the cool guys in high school. *Jerks, thought Sal, and Bill was the jerkiest of them all.* Sal noticed that Rose's brothers had been demoted to the role of ushers.

The posing continued.

Bill and his parents by the lilac bush. Click.

Rose and her parents. Click.

Rose and Bill with their maid of honor and best man. Click.

Rose and Bill by the elm tree.

Rose and Bill on the swing, where Sal and Rose had spent evenings together, talking about memories, graduation, dreams.

Sal couldn't take anymore. He left the kitchen. Art was in the rocking chair, listening to *The Adventures of Sam Spade*. Sal lay on the couch until his eyes grew heavy and he fell into oblivion.

He wished he could pass out again. Thinking about Ma's betrayal and what Rose must have thought of him, probably still thought of him, kept him awake. Why was falling asleep so hard for him? Even as a boy he would feel envy while listening to the sounds of Ig and Art's heavy slumbering. Sal would toss and turn for hours, trying to shut down his racing brain.

By three a.m. Sal gave up altogether and moved downstairs to the kitchen. There he sat at the table, staring at a glass of milk, not wanting it after having poured it. He listened to the house...the ticking pendulum of Ma's clock from the hallway, the running of the old General Electric refrigerator that still worked after thirty-five plus years. He was ten years old when Pop bought it for Ma's birthday. Before that they had used a small icebox for most food needing to be chilled. They had also kept a square hole in the kitchen floor that had a metal bucket suspended under it on a pulley system. They kept eggs, cheese, and milk in the bucket and lowered it to the cellar to keep it cool, raising the bucket as needed. That way Ma didn't have to navigate the rickety cellar steps every time she made a meal.

When Cecil and Corban Rausch pulled up in their truck from their hardware store and began unloading the refrigerator, Pop was so pleased with himself while watching Ma's surprise. She loved her present, and it ran and ran...far outlived her.

When the new fridge made the cellar bucket obsolete, Pop left the hole in the floor, simply covering it with a cutout square of wood and a braided rug. The bucket was still suspended there as well. It had never been removed. Sal knew this because in the bucket was where he put Ma's suicide note in 1947. After that he had never looked at it again. At the time, his anger over what her action did to Art almost drove him to throw the letter in the trash, but the idea seemed sacrilegious. However, he knew he couldn't risk having Art find it. Art was mentioned in it twice, which would have put him over the edge permanently. So Sal hid it in the bucket. As he sat in the kitchen now, the

compulsion to look at the note overtook him. He knew it would only make him feel worse, but he knew he would look.

The note was folded into a small rectangle and wrapped in a dishrag. Other than it being slightly yellow, it was in good shape. Sal took it to the table, sat down, and unfolded it. He saw that it was in Low German. He had forgotten...or maybe he had never noticed back then within the turmoil.

*Ich weiß, dass ...Dass schlimmer machen für Art. Aber Ich verkrafte es nicht mehr. Bitte, verwahren seine bruder. Vergeb Art mich (*needs to be checked yet)*

Ig and Sal had tried to find deeper clues in the letter, comforting meaning hidden within it, but, in both life and death, Ma didn't elaborate. However, her words had new clarity now. Ma had cleared Rose out of the way. With Sal's dreams stopped cold, he could follow Ma's marching orders. She counted on him to be a good soldier.

And it took a soldier's steadiness to get Art through it all. With Ig newly married, it mostly fell to Sal to patch up Art, who cried almost constantly and couldn't eat or sleep. Art never worked after that day. He had only been able to work a few hours here and there anyway, at the feed mill in town, stocking shelves, sweeping, that sort of thing, but after Ma's death, he couldn't even handle that. He slipped into Ma's role...staying at home, cleaning, cooking, and gardening. At first he would attend mass and other events at church, but it wasn't long before no amount of persuading could get him to leave the yard. Sal became Art's connection to and protector from the greater world. No longer did Sal need to contemplate the future. It was set.

However, as the months went on, Art became a skeleton. At first, when Art still allowed Sal to bring him weekly to meet with Father Gebhart, the young priest would assure Art that there was an afterlife and that Ma's illness would excuse her and allow her into paradise. She would not rot in hell because of her suicide as the church still preached in those days. But Art remained skeptical, so the visits didn't help much. Then he began washing his hands again, but this time constantly until they cracked and bled. He prayed hours and hours of rosaries, hunched over on his knees and in tears. When Art would no longer visit Father Gebhart, the priest began stopping by every few days for an hour each time. In a calming voice, he talked on and on about God's love, all the while holding Art's hand. But nothing alleviated Art's pain. His heart was in a constant state of panic for Ma's soul...for his own soul, too. Sal remembered the chill he felt the winter after Ma had been dead two years and Father took him and Ig aside to "discuss their next step." It was more like a leap, and it involved the Willmar State Hospital.

Chapter 8: 1950

From New London onward, Art didn't speak. Sitting in the passenger seat and holding tight to the door handle with his right hand, barely audibly he hummed three cascading notes, hmm, hmm, hmm, over and over, only pausing intermittently to sigh, all the while staring straight ahead. Art hated leaving the house. Riding in a car for an hour was taking intense mental effort. Ig leaned forward from where he sat in the middle of back seat, as usual doing all of the talking. "If Father Gebhart said to go, it's got to be a good place. He must have counseled others to go there, Art. I think you're making the right choice."

Sal kept his eyes on the road and his lips closed. He didn't like this one bit.

Ig continued, "Father has been talking with you for months and months, Art, and things don't seem to be getting better for you. Frankly, we don't know what to do anymore. Ich machst nicht."

Sal knew Ig's use of German was meant to be soothing.

Art went on humming his three notes, but now tears ran down his face and the humming sounded phlegmy. They went on a few more miles until Sal couldn't take it any longer and needed to get out of the car. They were just reaching the outskirts of Willmar, so he pulled over to a gas station parking lot. "I'm thirsty," he said. "I'll get us all Cokes."

Ig gave Sal a frustrated glance while he reached to pat Art's shoulder.

Art sniffled, then used his hanky to wipe his nose. "A Coke sounds good," he said.

When Sal returned with the frosty bottles, Ig had the windows rolled down

although the April day was a cool sixty degrees. They all needed fresh air.

Through the passenger window, Sal handed Art his bottle, the one with the straw. Art couldn't drink directly out of bottles because of his fear of germs. Since he thought he would be burning in Satan's bonfire after his demise, he didn't want to risk catching a vicious bug and facing an earlier-than-necessary arrival at the devil's gate.

"Was it wrapped?" Art asked of the straw.

"No, but I rinsed it," said Sal. "I promise."

Art considered this, looking at the straw, but then he seemed satisfied. He took a long sip. "Ah, nice and cold," he said.

Art stayed in the car, but Ig and Sal stood outside by his door. For a long time, no one said anything.

Finally, risking Ig's wrath, Sal spoke. "You know, Art, I can drive us right back to Stockton. You just say the word, and I'll head for home." He could feel Ig's eyeballs shooting laser beams at him. Sal continued anyway. "Father Gebhart isn't a psychiatrist, you know. He's a good guy, but he doesn't know anymore about this kind of thing than we do." He felt Ig's fat thumb dig into his ribs.

"But," said Ig, trying to keep his voice slow and steady, "he's trying to help, to suggest something to do instead of just sitting around and...festering."

Sal countered. "It's only been two years. People take a long time to deal with loss."

That undid Ig. "*Only* two years?" he barked. "You try living like Art. He's miserable, and you know it." He threw his empty bottle football style into the nearby

garbage can.

“Don’t!” It was Art, alarmed. He couldn’t take fighting. He never could, but after Ma’s suicide he couldn’t take loud noises or chaos of any kind. He looked stricken.

“We won’t, Art. We won’t,” said Sal quickly.

“Ya,” added Ig. “Ignore us. We’re idiots. We’re just worried about you.”

Now all three became teary. Art held his bottle so tightly that his knuckles turned white. After a moment, he sighed heavily and lowered his head. “I’m just so tired, Sal,” he said, his voice flat, like there was no air left in him.

Sal turned away and wiped at his eye with a knuckle. Art was too naive, too good for the world. He would be eaten alive at the State Hospital. But what else could they do?

He turned back to Art. “Then please let me sign for you, or else Ig can. If one of us commits you, then they can’t do anything to you unless we say okay. They couldn’t talk you into anything without us knowing.”

“Talk me into what?” asked Art.

“Like physical stuff...treatments or strong drugs. I want you to only accept rest and talking things out with the specialists, at most taking a tranquilizer or two.”

Ig whispered under his breath, “You’re scaring him.”

Sal went on anyway. “I just want you to be careful. Call us whenever you are unsure about anything and talk it out with us. Okay? Don’t worry about any cost. Call us collect so that it’s easy.” Sal worried that he was about to cry again.

Art nodded and took the last sip of his Coke. “Whatever they do there, it can’t be

worse.”

Sal wondered if that were true.

#

When they walked through the front doors of the Willmar State Hospital, Sal was surprised to see several people at the front desk. Ig flashed him raised eyebrows and whispered, “How many loonies are there? I hope we don’t recognize anybody.” Art stared straight ahead, expressionless, which was the look he most often wore.

At the desk an older man was hugging a younger woman who looked a lot like him. Then a nurse began escorting him toward an adjacent hallway. The woman waved to the man and said, “I’ll see you on Sunday, Uncle Joe. I’ll bake something for you.” The man waved back.

As the young woman turned to leave, there was a sudden commotion at the door as three people entered. Two of them, young and in mud-spattered coveralls, held the arms of an older man who reeked of alcohol and piss and kept shouting, “I’ve got to bale that goddamn meadow hay!”

One of the younger men said, “It’s all right, Dad. We’ll get it done.”

The receptionist picked up the phone and called someone she referred to as Phil and told him to bring another person. Within seconds, two orderlies entered through the swinging doors located at the back of the room. The receptionist asked a young couple that was ahead of Sal, Ig, and Art to please excuse the interruption and to step back. One of the sons of the shouting man leaned over to sign a thick book that seemed to be the official register. The sons then watched the orderlies firmly but respectfully escort their

father through the double doors from which they had appeared. The son who had signed the registry said to the receptionist, “We’ll be back in two weeks. Who knows, maybe it’ll stick this time.” His tone wasn’t very hopeful. With that, the two left. The whole scene took about two minutes. All that remained of them was the scent of sweat and silage.

Now it was the young couple’s turn. Art would be after them. Sal began to feel his pulse pick up speed. The woman of the couple seemed to be the prospective patient. She was no more than thirty and was accompanied by a man of about the same age. *The husband*, Sal assumed. The man was speaking softly to her, all the while gripping her upper arm with one hand and wrapping his other arm around her back to hold her steady. She shivered every so often and her shaky legs seemed like they would give way at any moment. Sal noticed a green suitcase that sat upright on the floor to the side of them. He realized Art’s suitcase was still in the trunk of the car. He wondered if he should get it now but decided to wait in case Art changed his mind.

The receptionist tried to help the woman. “Mrs. Hastings is it? If you think you could sign here, we can find you a comfortable place to sit down. Mr. Hastings could sit with you awhile before you go in.”

The man gave the receptionist a grateful nod. He turned to his wife. “How about it, honey? Do you think you can sign? Or should I do it?”

Sal thought about the huge step the woman must be seeing before her, like she was looking out of the door of a plane, wondering if her parachute would open. He knew that some Willmar patients ended up staying for more than a year, a few for several years,

maybe more.

The woman picked up the pen with a trembling hand and began to sign her name. After slowly writing her first name, which from Sal's angle looked like Maria or Marcia, she suddenly stopped and said, "Not yet." Then she scratched out her name, turned her body into her husband's arms and broke into sobbing. The receptionist looked at the husband and mouthed more than said, "Do you want to commit her?" Then she said aloud, "Should I get a doctor to talk with you, Mrs. Hastings?"

The man shook his head. "No. Thank you. We'll have a seat awhile and gather ourselves." He led his wife gently to a vinyl couch in the waiting area. It was a tranquil sea-green color. Meanwhile, the receptionist penciled in "changed mind" by Mrs. Hastings's scribbles. Sal could see that the other names on the list were marked one of two ways...inebriate or insane.

That's it? he thought. *No other options?* He also noticed that most were marked V and a few C, which he assumed stood for voluntary or committed. On two consecutive lines he saw signatures with the same last name, Paul Lipsner and Francine Lipsner, both with "inebriate" written by them. *Husband and wife alcoholics?* According to the date and time column, Art was the seventh person registering that day.

Ig was craning his neck to peruse the list as well. "Say, Maam? Do they keep the drunks and the others separate? They're not all together are they?"

The receptionist didn't take kindly to Ig's wording. A bit icily she said, "Our residents who are suffering from the *disease* of alcoholism stay in a different building from our residents suffering from other sorts of breakdowns. Now, you are?"

“Ig Schmidt. I called about my brother, Art, last week. He’d be registered under his full name, Artemus.” He had picked up on her annoyance with him, and he was flashing his humblest smile to soften her up again.

“That’s right. I have a note here.” She picked up the phone and this time talked to someone named Donald, telling him that Mr. Schmidt had arrived. After hanging up the phone, she said, “I understand this is voluntary?”

“Yes,” said Ig, a bit too quickly, probably to keep Sal from speaking first.

It was strike two with the receptionist. She looked at Ig with open disdain. “I’d like Mr. *Artemus* Schmidt to respond. I’m sure he can speak for himself. Which of you two gentleman is Artemus?” This last she said in a gentle manner, looking back and forth from Sal to Art.

Sal was a little taken aback. He thought it was obvious who the patient was. Did he look like he could be needing mental help? He pointed at Art.

“Mr. Schmidt?” she said to Art with a smile.

Art slowly turned his face to her and asked, “Should I sign the book?”

“Only if you want to,” she said.

Art blinked several times as if mulling things over. Then he said, “I think I will.”

She handed him the pen. Art signed his name carefully in his painstakingly neat penmanship, making sure not to cross the t’s like crucifixes but instead put little tepee-shaped marks above them.

“We don’t know what happened to him there, Ig.”

“Don’t say it.”

“He’s different now. Something’s not right.”

“He wasn’t right *before*, either. You aren’t remembering.”

It was November 1952, and Art had returned home from Willmar exactly two weeks prior.

“He’s...”

“Don’t.”

“He’s a zombie. He barely reacts. It’s like he’s in slow motion.”

“You don’t know...and he’s been like that, slow to speak, slow to move, since Ma died, maybe always. Certainly since he’s been on those tranquilizers.”

“It’s more so now. Something happened there. I told you that he described something to me that sounds like electroshock. You act like I made it up. Sometimes I even worry that they might have given him...”

“Stop.”

“...a lobotomy.”

“A lobotomy? You’re nuts!”

“Okay, probably not, but we don’t know if he’s told us everything or if he even remembers.”

Ig sighed. Sal could tell he was about to say something uncomfortable.

“What is it, Ig? Spill it.”

“Sal, I didn’t want to tell you, but you were right.”

“Right about what?”

Ig sighed again. “Electroshock.”

Sal froze. *It was true.* A slow anger began to simmer in his chest.

Ig continued. “Now, just cool it, Sal, and hear me out. I asked the doctor, just like you wanted me to when I visited Art that last time. At first the doctor said he couldn’t talk about Art’s treatment without his permission, but when Art said it was okay, I got the story. If you could see your face right now, you’d know exactly why I didn’t tell you.”

Ig’s words only pissed off Sal more. “You knew this for two months and you waited until *now* to tell me?”

They stared at each other. Ig sat down on a kitchen chair. He rubbed his face with his large, bear-paw hand. Then he said, “The doctor told me that Art had two treatments of electroshock, but only at low doses.”

“Oh,” said Sal, sarcasm flooding his tone, “only *two* and at *low doses*, so no big deal.”

Ig’s patience was running thin. His voice now icy, he said, “I don’t want to *disappoint* you or anything, but the treatments actually stabilized Art so that the pills could began working well enough. The doctor decided to discontinue treatments.”

“Well that’s great. Art’s so damn stable that he is a blank line.” Sal opened a cupboard for no reason and then swung it shut with a thud. “And what about those pills that doctor has had him on forever? Maybe they’re what’s making him so groggy.”

“Bernice told me that she knows at least five ladies in town who take the same thing. Margie Frank, who is on every committee and board available, even takes them. She calls them her happy pills.”

Sal stared at Ig in disbelief. “Are you kidding me? You think it’s that easy? All we have to do is zap him and drug him and we’re all good to go!” Sal sat down hard on the chair across the table from Ig and looked at him dead on. “We never should have brought him there.”

Ig’s eyes turned dark. “You mean *I* shouldn’t have brought him. *You* never wanted him to go.”

Sal tried not to say it, but he couldn’t help himself. “No, I never wanted him to go.” He was angry. He had been angry for a long time.

“It’s so easy for you to blame me; isn’t it?” Ig said through clenched teeth. “You didn’t see them. Ma hanging there and Art screaming and trying to lift her up so the rope wasn’t tight.” He looked off into space. His voice became flat. “You weren’t there. You didn’t have to get her down, pull the rope out of her skin where it had cut into her neck. Scrape Art off the floor. You think I just went on all fine and dandy? Believe me, there were times I probably needed to be in a nuthouse too. Couldn’t sleep. When I did, I kept dreaming that Ma’s body was swaying with its back to me. When it swung around to meet me, it wasn’t her face. It was Art’s.”

“I didn’t realize...”

“No you didn’t. I just wanted to do *something* to keep Art sane enough. I thought anything was better than him doing what Ma did.” He lifted his hand and gave his eyebrows a rub. “Sometimes now I’m not so sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s true that Art’s in a fog most of the time, but you’re the one that kinda died, Sal. All you do is worry about him. You feel so responsible for Art’s happiness that you have given up your own.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t do anything, go anywhere. Plus, I think we’re the ones who have made Art into a zombie. We never press him to do anything. How do we know he can’t take on more, more...”

“Life?”

“I was thinking *activity*, but I think you just nailed it.” He took a handful of cashews from the nut bowl on the table and tossed them all into his mouth in one shot. He chewed them vigorously, deep in thought.

Sal felt his anger dissipate, replaced with shame. “I’m sorry, Ig. I’m an asshole.”

Ig looked at Sal, his big eyes droopy. They had bags under them lately. “We did the best we could do without knowing a damn thing. Didn’t we? Even if we disagreed?”

Sal felt horrible...and afraid. *If Ig went bonkers, then what?*

“I’m sorry. I never gave you much thought, I mean about finding Ma and all. I guess next to me and Art, you seem so able to handle things.”

“Ha! Here’s a secret. I’m as lost as you are...and that’s pretty damn lost.”

Chapter 9: 1974

On the first of July the police found the kid who had tried to rob the Pump n' Petro. Skip Heinen called Sal with the news.

"His name is Walt Whitman," said Skip.

"Like the poet?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Is he being held somewhere?"

"Ya, St. Cloud," said Skip. "I guess he goes by the name Whitty. He's only nineteen but married with a little kid and another on the way any day now."

"Wow. From around here?"

"No. Parkers Prairie." Parkers Prairie was about forty miles away, which to Stockton's residents was not considered *around here*. A town had to be in Stearns County to be considered local.

"How did you catch him?"

"Well, we didn't actually catch him. His wife called us and said he wanted to turn himself in. I went to fetch him."

Sal heard dogs begin barking on Skip's end. They sounded like yippy little rat terriers or Chihuahuas. The image didn't seem to fit Skip with his cop's uniform and heavy, six-foot-four-inch frame.

"Shut up, you mutts!" yelled Skip without bothering to remove his phone from his jaw area.

Sal winced from the jolt his ear received. He then heard a ruckus, ending with a slamming door and an end to the barking.

“Those damn dogs are pushing their luck,” said Skip. “I’m the only one who disciplines them, and I’m never home. They’ve become royal pains in the ass.”

Sal looked to Stubby, lying on his side in his box. He looked dead except for the faint rise and fall of his chest cavity. The vet appointment was in six days, but he and Ig still hadn’t come up with a story for Art.

Sal turned his focus back to Skip. “So, this Whitty, he’s pleading guilty, huh?”

“That’s right,” said Skip. “From the looks of it, he’s pretty shook up. He and his wife were losing their home because he got let go from his job in Alexandria and he couldn’t seem to find another one.”

“What’s going to happen to them? His family, I mean.”

“The wife and little girl are staying with her mother until this can all be worked out. The house is being foreclosed.”

“Oh.” Sal felt blue, sort of like he had just received bad news about a distant cousin or an old acquaintance.

“We’ll need you for the hearing,” said Skip.

Sal felt a jolt in his blood pressure. “Hearing? If he pled guilty, why do we have to go to trial?”

“Jacob Lenneman is pressing hard for a tough penalty, claiming damages to his store. He thinks he’ll land more insurance money if he can get his sob story on the record.”

“But the kid didn’t actually steal anything. Nothing was broken. What exactly does old man Lenneman think was damaged? His ego?” Sal knew he sounded too angry.

“Jacob says he lost business because people thought his store was unsafe.”

“Bullshit! It’s as busy as ever.”

“Well, this is why Jacob is rich and you and I aint. He knows how to *maneuver*. Anyway, I think you could do some good at the hearing. Bonnie Ranoli, too. Plus, you’ll probably have to testify if Lenneman brings a civil suit.”

Sal harrumphed.

Skip paused a moment, then went on. “The kid feels terrible. Says he didn’t even know how to use a gun. Never held one before. It’s his uncle’s gun.”

“That’s probably why I could grab it from him so easy.”

“He says he never would have actually shot at anyone. However, that gun *was* loaded. Who knows what could have gone wrong under stress or if he got cornered.”

“I get that, but can’t they cut him some slack? It sounds like he was just mixed up a bit. He’s probably already guilting himself enough.”

“That’s exactly what Bonnie said.”

Sal was surprised. Bonnie had been terrified during the holdup. He wouldn’t have expected her to be charitable toward Whitty. His opinion of her inched up a notch.

“Well, she’s right. Maybe the two of us can talk to the judge and keep the sentence shorter, maybe head off a civil suit altogether.”

“I’ll speak up too and suggest some mercy,” said Skip. “But at the same time, we can’t let people think it’s all right to lose their marbles and hold up a convenience store. He’ll have to do some time.”

“Then he’ll *never* get another job.”

“And Sal...” Skip hesitated.

“What?”

“This... Whitty... he’s talking about you.”

“Me? Why?” It couldn’t be good.

“He’s calling you his hero. He says that your grabbing the gun may have been what saved him from shooting himself. He says that his real plan was to knock off a couple of stores, get a money order, put it in the mail to his wife, and then shoot himself in the woods somewhere. Since you took the gun...”

Sal felt sweat beads forming at his hairline. “Well, I had no idea he wanted to do himself in. He can’t pin the hero thing on me.”

“It’s more than that.”

“Jesus!”

“Actually, you got that right.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jesus. He gives thanks to Jesus for you. He says you’re a regular angel that Jesus sent to save him. He’s all religious now and wants to study the Bible and maybe have his family become missionaries in Africa. You know, the whole sinner to saint thing. He seems sincere.”

“Well, that’s not so bad. Is it?”

“Except...” Skip hesitated again.

“Just tell me.”

“He’s blabbing his tale of salvation to the media. He was on the phone with *The Times* when we picked him up. I’m thinking you’re about to get some reporters up your ass again.”

#

He was right. That night on WCCO, the story was the first local news story, right after an update on Watergate. However, the station must have just found out about the arrest because the coverage was a short blurb with the anchor saying, “We’ll have a follow up tomorrow.” Sal knew that meant the telephone ringing and reporters on his doorstep at dawn. He had already made up an excuse to a *St. Cloud Times* reporter who had called right after Skip had. He brought Art and Stubby to Ig’s house as a precaution. He felt it best to stay home himself. Wouldn’t they track him to Ig’s if he were hold up there? Ig rolled his eyes at the whole thing. “I would just give the interviews and get it over with.” However, the thought made Sal’s stomach roil.

It was six-thirty the next morning when the phone started ringing. Minutes later, Sal heard knocking at the front door. He took the phone off the hook and stayed away from the windows. He had to crawl on his hands and knees under the front bay window in the living room to get to their only bathroom unseen. He needed to pee and could wait no longer. After that, he got himself a bowl of corn flakes, turned on the television with the volume down low, sat in the chair away from the window, and waited them out. As

eleven o'clock drew near, he stole a peek and saw only two vehicles still there. Sal was restless and needed to escape. He began to devise a way to slip out.

He opened the side door of the house, just enough to squeeze through. If he stayed flat against the siding and moved slowly, he didn't think the reporters would notice him. His plan was to get to the back alley, cut through lawns of neighbors, head east toward the hospital, and take a long walk. Sal sidled inch by inch until he got to the edge of the house and then he whipped around the corner to stand in the grape vines that ran parallel to the house in the backyard. Holding his breath, he waited a moment, listening to see if anyone had seen him. He didn't hear talking or footsteps, only the chirping of birds and the laughter of kids playing a few yards away. He slowly worked his way along the back of the house, darting when shrubs were not available, until he made it to the line of lilac bushes and fencing that separated his family's lot from the lot next door. Now he had to squeeze tight, but he could just fit between the bushes and the fence to sneak to the old outhouse, now used as Art's garden shed. Once behind the outhouse, he'd be home free. He would cut across the Hinnenkamps' yard at an angle that kept him hidden by the outhouse.

However, the branches of the lilacs were not cooperating. As he tried to push them out of the way as he crept, they kept swinging back, scratching his face and tangling his wavy hair into a blinding mop across his eyes. Sal was sorry just then that he preferred his hair a bit long. It was the style anyway, no longer considered sloppy or disrespectful. Even Dick Cavett's hair touched his collar. Sal thought it looked fine, but Ig thought the style impractical and said, "I always mow it down at a number one setting

on the electric razor. I do Art's at number one, too. That way we don't even have to comb it. When it needs combing, it's time to mow again."

The truth was that Ig's baldness was spreading so fast that soon he wouldn't need to mow at all. Only his dark bushy eyebrows seemed determined to grow as if fertilized. His nose hairs were hardy as well.

"My hair is short compared to almost everyone else," said Sal.

"Yah, but it's always hanging in your eyes. Use some Brylcreem for Christ's sake. Even Tommy said you needed a haircut last time he was home."

"Great...and that's coming from a boy with a ponytail." That shut Ig right up. Ig's son, Tommy, was getting a little too *hippy* at St. Cloud State, and Ig was embarrassed. He was a Navy man through and through. The teenage look of 1974 screamed *undisciplined* to him.

Sal knew his hair was always in his eyes, swept loosely to the side like a curtain. It had become a means of security. When he looked down and the hair swept forward, he found it easier to pretend he didn't see certain acquaintances in the grocery store or at the gas station when he felt disinclined to participate in the expected repartee. He hid behind his hair, and he was not willing to give it up.

Now, groping his way along the fence, he was regretting his choice. By the time he pushed through to the back of the outhouse, he was a sweaty mess with hair sticking to the sides of his face.

Then he saw Rose. She stood in her garden, waist-high in sweet corn, wearing her usual straw hat with the yellow ribbon and leaning on her hoe handle. Her amused expression told him she had observed his escape effort.

She put a finger to her lips as if to say “shhh” and then used the same finger to motion that he should follow her.

Not knowing what else to do, Sal did as she bid him. Rose led him to her back steps and right into her house.

Inside, she let loose giggles, spilling like musical notes, as she removed her hat with one gloved hand and smoothed her hair with the other. Sal had to smile. She was still so beautiful. Wrinkled around her eyes and a touch saggy by her jawline, but beautiful.

“We made it!” she said with a satisfied grin, her eyes squinting wickedly. He liked that she said *we*.

“We did,” said Sal, smiling back. “Thanks for the help.”

“Those reporters have been harassing you again? Is Art okay?”

“He’s with Ig, until things cool down.”

“Art’s such a sweet man. It’s a shame he’s forced out of his cocoon.”

Sal raised his eyebrows in surprise. She had summed up Art pretty well. “You know him a bit from gardening talks across the alley, I think. He’s mentioned your tip for getting rid of potato bugs.”

“Yep, I swear by Hamm’s Beer. They climb right into the bowl to drown, happily. They probably get a tipsy little kick before they die.” She giggled again. Sal

smiled. A short silence followed and Sal looked at his feet. He was going to thank her again and head out. He would ask to use her front door so that his escape would be assured.

But then she said, "Since you're trapped, I hope I can keep you here for lunch. It's just Bill and me, and I made a huge tuna salad with radishes and baby cucumbers. You'd be helping me since I'm about to have cucumbers coming out of my ears. I need you to eat some."

"Sal hoped his face didn't look as astonished as he felt. He stood there stupidly, wondering whether or not she was just being hospitable but really hoping he'd say no. However, her demeanor seemed innocent and open. Plus, Sal wasn't able to come up with a plausible excuse. After a moment he nodded yes.

"You sit and look at the paper while I clean up and get Bill. I bet you didn't step outside for your *Times* today, so you haven't seen that they caught that robber of yours. Oh, wait. That's why the sharks are circling your house again, of course."

Sal nodded and then did as he was told. The story was on the front page.

"You know," said Rose, "that was brave what you did...and maybe a little stupid."

Sal's glance flew up to Rose. She was smiling. She had meant to give a teasing compliment. Sal watched her turn and go down a hallway. She was still tiny, no more than 5' 2", a little heavier now at age 46, but trim.

The newspaper article had a picture by it of the young man. It was a typical mug shot with an embarrassed, wide-eyed expression. The article said the kid, Walt “Whitty” Whitman, was “reborn with the help of an angel.”

“Ya, right,” said Sal. He wished Whitty had been reborn without a mouth. He became aware of voices from a nearby room.

“Time to get up now, sleepyhead.”

“Is it time, Rosie? Is it time?” The voice, most certainly Bill’s, was wobbly and garbled. “Hold me good now.”

He had spied on Rose and Bill through the years, peeking out the kitchen window as Rose wheeled Bill to their car that usually was parked under a rickety, freestanding car port at the back alley that Rose had someone haul in. The one-car garage that had been on the property for all of Sal’s memory burned to the ground from a mishap with a space heater shortly before Bill’s stroke. It had never been rebuilt. Sal sometimes watched as tiny Rose hoisted Bill from wheelchair to car, tucking and belting him into the passenger seat and then folding the wheelchair to fit it into the trunk. Sometimes Sal gloated a little. *Good old playboy Bill. You’re not a lady’s man anymore.* Ig used to tell Sal about the rumors swirling among the guys at Homer’s Bar about Bill’s various affairs. Only a complete asshole would cheat on somebody like Rose. He deserved his stroke. *It should have killed him.*

Bill had joined his dad’s insurance agency when he and Rose married, and he took full control of the business when his Dad’s emphysema became acute. When Bill had his stroke, leaving Rose to care for him, their two girls were only twelve and

fourteen. At the time people whispered about how she should put him in a home and be done with him. But Sal had known that Rose would stick it out.

After Rose moved her family into her childhood home, having bought the house from her parents in what was most likely a compassionate deal, Sal spent guilty moments clandestinely watching them from the same kitchen window that, all his life, had given him a grand view across the alley to Rose's back door. So many times when they were young, Sal had waved at Rose through that window, giving the signal that they should meet at the wooden swing in her backyard. The swing now needed a good whitewash.

Shortly after they moved in, Sal witnessed a scene that only his respect for Rose's dignity kept him from intervening in. A woman, Sal later found out from Ig that she was the wife of the owner of the roller rink in Sauk Centre, showed up drunk at Rose's back doorstep, loudly demanding to see Bill. She was hollering that she didn't believe that Bill had suffered a stroke and that Rose was just trying to keep Bill away from her. Rose had to call the cops and endure neighborhood stares as the officers escorted the woman back to her car. One officer drove her away in it as the other followed in the police car.

Sal snapped out of the memory as he heard Bill and Rose in the hallway. Using his peripheral vision while pretending to read the paper, Sal snuck a look at Bill. The once handsome man sat slumped in his wheelchair. He was long and lean still, but his skinny arms hung loosely from his sleeves like necks of geese. His shoulders stooped and his head seemed to come out of his sternum. Harness straps were the only reason he didn't bend completely over with his face on his knees. Everything about him sagged.

Why didn't Rose divorce him all those years ago or at least leave him to someone else's care? No one would have faulted her for tucking him away in a home somewhere to avoid what must be monotonous hard work with all of the physical care that he needed. The town would have sided with her. Sal was sure of it. He wondered if it was worse to have a cheating husband or an invalid. Both meant loneliness. He rarely saw anyone visit the Hinnenkamps. No one feels comfortable hanging around misfortune. Both of Rose's choices, to marry a cheater and then to stay with him, had made her a social leper, and no one deserved it less.

"Here we are," said Rose as they entered the kitchen. "And look, Bill. We have a guest."

Sal could see only the top half of Rose's face as she pushed the big, lounging wheelchair, which barely fit through the doorway, up to the table at a sideways angle. She took a tray that was leaning against the wall and connected it to Bill's wheelchair so that it fit securely over the arm rests, above Bill's legs, which were covered with a lap quilt. Sal noticed that Bill's hair had been combed and that he had been shaved that morning. He smelled faintly of Old Spice.

"Hello! Hello!" said Bill. He had his elbows resting on his tray now with his hands clasped. His head shook as if he had Parkinson's disease. The left side of his face drooped significantly more than the right side, and he leaned to that side a bit. Drool began to pool in the corner of his mouth.

Rose bustled to set the table, refusing Sal's offer to help. "You remember our neighbor, Sal Schmidt," she said. "Don't you, Bill?"

Bill's confused eyes revealed that he clearly did not. "Sure, you bet. Sal Shhlick."

"I appreciate your sharing lunch with me, Bill," said Sal, hoping he sounded confident.

"Rosie cooks good, real good," said Bill, his slurred speech creating more drool. He separated his hands, and the left one dropped to the tray. He slipped a bit more to the side.

Without missing a beat, Rose set a salad bowl and a plate of little square sandwiches on the table, then swiftly stepped behind Bill. She managed to slip her arms under his armpits and, in one upward tug, boost him straight again. She took a towel from the counter, rolled it quickly, and used it to prop up Bill's left side. Then she used Bill's bib to dab away his drool. All the while she chatted warmly, telling Sal to scoop himself some salad and asking if he'd like lemonade or ice water. Sal opted for lemonade.

The salad was light and delicious and the sandwiches tasty, but Sal had trouble focusing on his food because he soon became absorbed in Bill's actions. Rose had put a lipped plate, like a toddler would use, onto Bill's tray. She scooped salad onto his plate, making sure to mix extra dressing into it, making it stickier. Then she cut two sandwiches into even smaller, bite-sized pieces for him. She held a deep plastic spoon near his right hand, which he took, and she said to him, "You know I'll help. Just ask if you want me to."

"No, I'm ookay. I've got it, Rosie."

He began to scoop. It took a full minute and several attempts for him to maneuver the spoon at the right angle, slide some salad noodles to the lip, and successfully lift the spoon, keeping the food on it. But each time he lifted, he twisted his wrist slightly and the spoon tilted, dropping the salad to his plate. Sal tried not to notice, and Rose kept a sunny conversation going about canning in the old days and how she had become lazy and only froze things now, and she asked about what Art did with his cucumbers and whether or not Sal helped with the produce. Sal kept answering but found himself distracted, especially since every time Bill dropped the salad back to his plate, he said, "Oh dear." But he said it in a long drawn out moan. "Ooooooooooh deeeeeaaaaar."

He'd scoop, get a bit on his spoon, begin shaking as he moved it higher toward his mouth, and inevitably drop the food. Some of it missed the plate but hit the tray.

"Oooohhhh deeeearr!"

Finally Rose leaned to Sal and whispered, "I hope you don't think I won't help Bill. He just insists on trying awhile first."

Sal nodded. They both looked to Bill, who was just then dropping food again on what must have been a seventh or eighth attempt.

"Oooooohhhhh deeeearr."

Finally, the next attempt looked hopeful. Bill seemed to have a solid lump safely in the middle of his spoon for a ride to his mouth. Rose and Sal had completely stopped eating, both their faces turned toward Bill in anticipation. His hand trembled mightily, but somehow this particular bit of tuna salad was hanging on. It clung to the spoon all

the way to Bill's face and was almost home. Bill steadied the spoon for a moment against his chin.

Sal willed the salad to stay put, to get to that mouth. He sensed Rose next to him, leaning toward Bill, hoping against hope for victory. With his hand shaking, Bill slowly and deliberately moved the spoon a little away from his chin and upward, opening his mouth and stretching his lips toward the spoon as it approached.

The tension was a bubble waiting to pop. Bill looked down at the spoon tip, crossing his eyes to focus. It was now at his lower lip. All he had to do was maneuver it over the mound of his lip and flip it into his mouth. Sal and Rose held their breath. Bill rotated the spoon, so close now to gloriously accomplishing his task, but then a sudden tremor in his wrist made him panic. Overcorrecting, he jerked the spoon up and over, causing a catapulting effect and tossing the lump of salad into the air, directly onto Sal's cheek, where it bounced off and landed in the lemonade pitcher.

"Ooooh shit," said Bill.

They looked at each other a moment and then all three burst out laughing. Bill's shoulders shook and he let out a rumbling chuckle. Sal laughed so hard that he had to wipe his eyes with his napkin. It felt good to laugh hard. He hadn't laughed like that in months.

But then he became aware that Bill's laughter had shifted. The sounds had turned to moans and then sobs. Sal stopped short.

Rose jumped to her feet. She leaned down by Bill, her face close.

"It's okay, Bill. Salad was a stupid choice, too many chunks. Now let me help for today.

Tomorrow it'll work." She used a cloth napkin instead of the bib to wipe his tears and then held it to his nose so that he could blow.

They talked very little and in quiet tones after that until Bill had been fed his lunch. Then Rose washed his face gently with a washcloth and rolled him off to the living room. Sal began clearing the table, listening. It sounded like Rose was lifting Bill into a different chair and then adjusting the television volume. All the while, Bill apologized and Rose comforted him.

"You're toooo good, Rosie, toooo good. I just don't know, Rosie."

"Now Bill. Everything's fine. We're fine. The girls are doing great. You're worrying for nothing."

Sal felt bad for hearing their private words, but he thought it would be rude or even mean if he were gone when Rose returned to the kitchen.

After about five minutes, she came back. Her eyes and nose were slightly red. Sal hated that she looked embarrassed.

"I didn't realize he was having one of his bad days," she said with a sad smile. "He gets emotional. He's okay now, watching *Days of Our Lives*. Can you believe it? It's his favorite show." She noticed the table. "Oh my, you cleaned up. How nice!"

Sal spoke in nearly a whisper. "Bill's right, you know." He couldn't believe he was saying what he was saying, but he couldn't stop himself. "You really are too good, Rose."

"Am I? Her eyes filled with tears. "Maybe I'm just being selfish. He would probably be more at peace if I had just left him like he deserved." She reached for a

napkin and wiped her eyes. “But that’s not the Stockton way, is it.” She forced a small laugh. “Well, look at that,” she suddenly said, pointing to the window in the back door. A white sedan with *The Saint Cloud Times* painted on its side was driving past Rose’s house, away from Sal’s. “The coast is clear. I don’t see a single car besides yours parked by your house unless one is around in front.”

Maybe I’m old news already.”

“We can only hope.” She forced another smile.

It was time to go, but Sal lingered. “I appreciate lunch, Rose, and it was good to have a hideout.”

She lowered her eyes and twisted the napkin in her fingers. “The hideout’s open anytime you need it.” Then she looked directly at him again with her shiny blue eyes and that brave expression he had first fallen in love with in high school. “I hope we don’t continue to avoid each other anymore. I think we’ve become a bit too old for that.” She raised her chin a notch.

Sal wanted to stand there, looking at those eyes for an eternity. Eyes that still held pain in them after all this time, maybe some of it because of him.

“Rose?” He needed to tell her. It was right to tell her. “I want you to know something that may or may not be welcomed information. I hope you don’t think I’m selfish telling you, but I have to. I want to.”

She seemed unsure, her eyes turning a bit anxious now. She tried to use a playful tone. “Will this just be a revisit of the night before my wedding?”

“No, but it might shed some light on how we both acted back then.”

Now Rose looked curious. She nodded to encourage him to go on.

Sal took a deep breath and dove in. “A few weeks ago, I found items kept from me amongst Ma’s things. Even though they involve you, I didn’t think I would actually tell you about them. Plus, it might be presumptuous thinking any of this would still matter to you. But maybe, like you once said, I’m just a weak, weak man and can’t stop myself from telling you what I found.”

Rose winced at hearing again the words she had hurled at him so long ago. But he smiled to show her he wasn’t angry, just making a sad joke at his own expense.

“Go on,” she said, listening intently.

There was nothing to do but come out with it.

“Ma kept a letter of yours from me. I found it in her closet. As I read it, I realized it was the most important letter of my life, and my own mother didn’t give it to me. After that letter, she also began keeping my letters I wrote to you, at least some of them, instead of giving them to you.”

Rose looked confused for a moment, but then, as the truth dawned on her, her eyes grew wide and her mouth opened. Shaky, she reached for a chair and slowly lowered herself into it.

Sal took steps toward her and his words came in a rush. “I can’t stand to imagine what you must have thought of me when you received my next letter or two, talking about nothing... the sights I was seeing, the guys in my unit. You probably thought I was avoiding the topic you had bravely put out there. Or maybe Ma didn’t even send any

letters of mine to you at all after your letter, making you think your letter, and feelings, had been completely rejected by me.”

Rose closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around her torso. She said, “I never received another letter from you after I gave that letter to Art for your mom to send to you. I tried to ask Art about it a few times, but he would get really nervous. I don’t know how much he knew, but he was aware that I was upset and he wanted to avoid me. Your mom began avoiding me too.” She shook her head as if to shut out the memories. Then she opened her eyes again and looked at Sal. “What was I supposed to think?”

“And you gave up on me because you thought I had rejected you but was too chicken to write it. You thought I was just being Sal the coward again, unwilling to face having to turn you down gently. That’s what I would have thought if I were you.”

Rose was crying now.

Sal went on. “But I wouldn’t have turned you down, Rose. I need you to know that. I never thought I was even close to being good enough for you, but I would not have had the power to turn you down. Even in that I would have been too weak to resist you and would have taken what I didn’t deserve.”

He knelt by Rose, grabbing her hands and looking up into her eyes. “I thought you simply stopped writing me. That you didn’t want me. And, of course, I never confronted you.” He looked away, ashamed. “Why you ever loved me...”

Rose whispered, “It hurt so much to be rejected. I couldn’t just act like your friend when you returned from the Navy. Plus, I’ll admit it. I was so angry, so disappointed in you. I felt duped, like I was a big fool.”

“No one should ever make you feel that way. I was always so proud to be seen with you.

Rose reached out a hand and touched Sal’s cheek. He put his hand over hers and they looked into each others’ sad eyes.

Rose spoke. “Oh Sal, what did I ever do to your mother?”

“Nothing. It had nothing to do with you.”

“Then why?”

“It was Art. She needed to keep me with Art after she was gone. She had already planned her grand exit.” He heard the bitterness in his voice and stood, turning away from Rose to hide his dark expression. Facing the kitchen counter, he placed both hands on it and lowered his head, trying to gather his composure. He felt like cursing Ma and never stopping.

He hadn’t heard Rose stand and walk to him. He started a little as her hand touched his arm. She turned him to her and looked up at him with her tear-stained face. He could see a few gray strands on the top of her head when she leaned forward then and put her cheek on his chest. He wrapped his arms around her.

They stood like that for what seemed a long time...not speaking, just feeling the loss together. Bill’s voice brought them to reality.

“Rosie?” his voice was loud and happy as it came from the living room. With effort, Rose pulled her head from Sal’s chest and looked up at him. She didn’t take her eyes off of Sal’s but said, “Yes, Bill?”

“I could use more lemonade.”

“Okay, Bill. I’ll get you some.”

Sal whispered, “I’ll leave.”

She nodded and gave him a smile. He knew he was crossing boundaries, but Sal bent down and lightly kissed her forehead. Rose let him. Then they untangled, and Sal, after looking back once more, quietly slipped out the door and headed across Rose’s yard towards home.

Chapter 10: 1974

Sal thought he would be up all night, replaying the scene at Rose's house, but he found that bearing one's soul was exhausting, and he slept like dead wood for more than ten hours. He woke stiff but rested on Sunday to the sound of knocking. When he looked out his open bedroom window, he recognized the car of Don Wenker who usually delivered communion to Art on Sundays. Sal forgot to call him and tell him to go to Ig's instead. He saw Don heading back to his car, so he called to him from the open window.

"Hey, Don. Sorry. Art's at Ig's house."

It took Don a minute to locate the origin of the hollering. "Oh, hi there, Sal. I thought you were the voice of God for a second!"

"Oh no. Give God more credit than that."

"Ha! No problem about Art. I need to see Ig anyway. He owes me five bucks from cards last week." Don set the golden bowl of hosts on the roof of his car, took a hanky from his pocket, and wiped his brow before retrieving the bowl again and climbing into his vehicle. That was what made Sal aware that he, too, was sweating. The humidity of the day was thick.

Sal realized that he had forgotten to check for reporters before yelling, but there didn't seem to be any today. Better news must have happened elsewhere. Feeling suddenly free, even giddy, he shut the window and pulled the curtains to keep out the damp and the sunlight. He would get dressed and pick up some rolls from the Red Owl

to share with Ig, Bernice, and Art. The Stockton Bakery wasn't open on Sundays, but Red Owl was until noon. The store sold day olds from the bakery for half price.

Red Owl was especially busy that morning. People were buying snacks and ice for a day at one of the several lakes north of town. All of the rolls were gone. *Great. The one day I sleep in, I am punished for it*, thought Sal. He reached for a box of Hostess powdered doughnuts instead. He also grabbed a jug of orange juice because powdered doughnuts didn't taste right without it. As he approached the checkout, he saw Bonnie and Jasper. He quickly got in line in the other row and busied himself with looking at a battery display so he could turn his back on them. He made himself small and avoided movement. Soon he became aware that Bonnie was having some kind of problem with her payment, and he cautiously turned his head around to see.

"What would you like to do then?" the clerk, a teenage girl with a bored look, was asking.

"Mom, I'll put back the crackers and chocolate," said Jasper. "Then you'll have enough to cover the rest." His cheeks were red and he was trying to speak in a tone he thought only his mother could hear. He glanced at the clerk, uncomfortable.

"But I said I'd bring stuff for s'mores. I can't just bring marshmallows."

"God, Mom, who cares?"

Bonnie opened her billfold and pulled out some pieces of paper. They were food stamps. Jasper was nearly purple now. He stuffed the chocolate bars and crackers into the grocery bag filled with other items, not waiting for the bag boy to do it. Then he

grabbed the bag and a sixpack of soda bottles they were also purchasing, and bee-lined it for the door.

“That should do it,” said Bonnie, handing two stamps to the clerk. Sal could hear tightness in her voice.

As Sal stepped up to the counter in his row, he watched Bonnie grab a bag of ice from the cooler and head for the door. He heard the customer that had been behind her say loudly to the clerk, “I’m glad you and I could buy her some candy bars with our tax money. After all, that’s why I’m busting my ass every day.”

The comment was lost on the clerk, whose expression didn’t change one iota. However, Bonnie looked back before exiting, her face pained. Sal wanted to punch the man. He wished he could say something, but he didn’t know what. He paid for his items and left the store.

In the parking lot, he saw Bonnie standing by the back of her car. Jaspar was sitting on the cement parking stop, smoking a cigarette. Bonnie was trying to reason with him as she loaded the ice, soda, and chocolate bars into a cooler in the trunk.

“I didn’t know I wouldn’t have enough.”

“Can’t you do simple addition? You *promised*.” With that Jaspar stood up, dropped his cigarette to the concrete, and smooshed it violently with his sneaker.

“It was just this one time. I needed the s’mores.” She closed the trunk.

Jaspar walked to the passenger side. “Why? Because *Leeeerooooy* wants smore’s? So you have to jump for him like a dog?”

Sal sidled up to his car, hoping they were too caught up in their argument to notice him.

Bonnie sighed. “No. I need them because I promised to bring them.”

Jaspar’s eyes narrowed as he talked at his mother across the roof of the car. “So *that* promise matters, but not the promise you made to me to *never* use food stamps when I am with you. That cashier is in my grade. She’s a major bitch, and she will tell everyone.”

“Do you think I like using food stamps?” said Bonnie, her voice gaining volume. “Don’t you think I cringe every time I use them?” She reached through the open window on her side to open the door, using the inside handle.

Great, thought Sal. *Now that hunk of tin has a busted door handle too.*

Jaspar turned his back on Bonnie and began walking away from the car in Sal’s direction. Sal quickly bent over, trying to look like he wasn’t listening but was only trying to open his car door. He didn’t think Jaspar saw him.

Bonnie yelled after him. “Fine, walk home. Don’t think I’ll buy you any more cigarettes. You can ask your dad for the money. Maybe if he paid your child support I wouldn’t have to use food stamps!”

Jaspar whipped around and faced her. With venom he said, “Better hurry and get those s’mores to Leroy. I heard he likes marshmallows with his cheap sex.”

Sal watched Bonnie’s face crumble. Pure adrenaline made him drop his bag of donuts to the concrete and take three strides to Jaspar. He grabbed the boy at the nape of his neck with a one-handed grip, making him yelp from surprise and possibly pain. Sal’s

momentum made it easy to walk the boy like a puppet, propelling him right up to where Bonnie stood.

Still gripping Jaspár's neck, Sal said with deadly clarity, "This is your mother. And you WILL apologize, no matter what you think she has done, you conceited little shit!"

Bonnie's mouth gaped open and her eyes bugged out. Some of Jaspár's senses were coming back to him and he began to wiggle, trying to get out of Sal's hold, but Sal was invincible. He squeezed tighter and yelled, "I mean NOW!"

Jaspár's struggling ceased. He said rigidly, "I'm sorry."

Bonnie wilted. "It's okay, honey. I know it wasn't fair to embarrass you. You can let go of him, Sal."

Sal turned the kid's body in order to get face to face with him. "Your mother is too soft on you because she knows you've had it rough." He still held the kid by the neck. "And you repay her by being a jerk. You need to shape up." He released his grip. Sal thought the kid might haul off and punch him, but instead he turned and walked away from them, down the street, not looking back.

Bonnie opened her mouth to yell after him, but Sal put a hand on her shoulder to stop her. He had to reach upwards to do so, and he looked to see that she was wearing chunky platform sandals. They were worn but had shiny sequins on them.

"Let him walk," said Sal. He needs to be mad awhile before he'll begin to think straight."

"But..."

“Bonnie, it’s okay for him to be told off once in awhile. He won’t break.”

Bonnie wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her yellow beach robe, leaving black smudges on it. “I just don’t know what to do with him. He can hardly stand to be in the house with me. He’s only with me now because I said I’d buy him cigarettes if he came with.”

“No kid that age likes to be with his parent.”

“He gets so mad when I go out with someone and imagines all kinds of bad behavior on my part. But I can’t just sit alone every single day. I’d die. And the only humans who want anything to do with me are of the male variety.”

Sal was at a loss for words. He was the last person on earth who should counsel anyone about navigating human relations.

Bonnie sensed his discomfort. She forced a smile. “Thanks, Sal. Maybe he’ll listen to you. He sure as hell won’t listen to me.” She began to get into the car but then turned to face Sal with a troubled frown. “You know, he’s right about Leroy and the rest. I only attract guys who order me around and are out for one thing. It’s always been like that. I don’t even like them.”

“Then don’t let them boss you,” said Sal.

“But then they dump me...and I’m alone again.”

“Bonnie, I’ve known those types of guys. They don’t leave because of *you*. They leave because that’s what they *do*. From day one they already know that they will not be staying around. Nothing you can do will change it.”

Bonnie looked off to the road where Jasper was now a speck midway down First Street. “Do you think that was true with my dad?”

“Your dad?”

“He left for good when I was eight years old, but he had been disappearing on and off before that. Mom and I would be so good to him when he came home, but it was never enough.”

“That’s just it, Bonnie. It was always already never going to be enough.”

Bonnie looked at him as if he were giving her the antidote for a fatal disease. “Oh Sal, I want that to be true no matter how much it hurts to think of my dad that way. He was so handsome and funny.”

“But not loyal, and we can’t choose our parents.” Sal thought of Ma.

Bonnie looked at him with clear eyes, no flirtation evident. “You know, Sal, if you weren’t so old, I would want you to like me.”

How old did she think he was? Was that supposed to be a complement?

“But I realize I’m only 31 and you’re, you’re...”

“Ancient.”

They both laughed.

Sal said, “But there are younger Sals around, guys way better than me. It’s just that you are kind of hooked on trying to keep the other type of guy. You’ve got to break your habit first. Beginning with your dad, I think.”

Bonnie's eyes began to fill again. She reached down and wrapped her arms around Sal, and he could feel her exhaustion in the hug. He patted her back and then helped her get into her seat, closing the door when she was settled.

He gave her what he hoped was a supportive smile. "I'll stop by tomorrow evening and fix that door latch for you. I once had to do that job in an old 1942 Ford Super DeLuxe, so yours should be a breeze. How about 7:00?"

Bonnie smiled. "You are the nicest guy on earth."

Sal laughed, embarrassed. "No, not even close. You just haven't noticed the boring throngs of us everywhere."

It wasn't until he was driving towards Ig's house that he did the math for Bonnie's age. If she was only 31, she must have had Jasper when she was 14 or 15. *Could that be possible?* It was possible, but thinking about it made him sad. He was glad he had offered to fix the door handle.

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Sal expected Jasper to be anywhere but home when he stopped by Bonnie's house the next evening, but there he was, sitting on the back steps and smoking a cigarette as Sal pulled to the curb by the yellow giraffe, which now wore a pirate's eye patch, probably compliments of Jasper. Maybe the kid was waiting for the door to get fixed before taking the car out on the town. Bonnie was already in the alley, standing by the car with a tray that held a pitcher of a bright red concoction and three glasses.

She's wishful thinking. I doubt we'll need three glasses, thought Sal.

She set the tray onto a dilapidated card table that had seen one too many rainstorms, and she began waving like mad to Sal.

“Yoohoo! Back here, Sal! I knew you'd come, so I made Kool-Aid slush!”

“I see that. Thanks. I'll just grab my toolbox.”

“I hope you don't mind that I put just a teensy splash of rum in it. You'll love it. It's a poor gal's daiquiri!”

It only took Sal half an hour to fix the door handle. The whole while Jaspar sat on the back steps, chain-smoking. When Sal was finished with his work, he put his tools in his car. He saw that Bonnie had a charcoal grill going up near the house and wondered if he had delayed their dinner.

Bonnie said, “I can't thank you enough, Sal. Please sit with us a bit and have a slushy. Plus, since I decided not to go to the lake yesterday, I have the makings for s'mores. She looked into Sal's eyes after saying this, hoping that he caught what she said about skipping her date.

So Leroy lost out. Good, thought Sal. He gave Bonnie a smile of approval.

As Bonnie roasted marshmallows over the grill, Sal lined up graham crackers and pieces of chocolate bars. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Jaspar slinking over to them.

In his friendliest tone, Sal said, “Just in time for the best dessert ever invented.”

Jaspar didn't meet Sal's eyes, but he said, “No. That would be pumpkin pie. But s'mores are good too.”

Sal held up a cracker with a piece of chocolate bar on it for Bonnie to scrape on a roasted marshmallow. Then he gave the first s'more of the evening to Jasper, who took it and mumbled, "Thanks."

Jasper said no more as he ate three s'mores, but he stayed. When Sal rose to leave, Jasper said he was going to see if any of his friends were down at the softball fields. There were games going on down there. Bonnie didn't object.

As Sal and Jasper headed across the yard to go to their cars, Jasper abruptly said, "I've been trying to be nicer."

"I've noticed," said Sal. "Thanks."

Jasper stopped and looked directly at Sal for the first time that evening. "I thought I better shape up a bit in the time I have left with her. My dad put in an offer on some property outside of Rapid City. He said the house on it is a dump, but it has a pole barn that he could run an electrical business out of."

"You mean that you'll be moving out there soon?"

"That's my plan."

"Does your mom know?"

"Not yet. It all needs to be finalized."

Sal thought a minute. Then he said, "I think she'll be sad."

Jasper looked down at the grass. "You kidding? She'll be glad to get rid of me."

"I think you're wrong, so break it to her gently."

Jasper looked back at Sal. He seemed to be weighing Sal's words, but he said nothing. Then he headed to his car. Sal wondered, *How did I get tangled up in this?* He

knew he would have to be the one to comfort Bonnie when she was, once again, dumped by a male.

Chapter 11: 1974

After telling Rose about the letter, Sal only saw a few glimpses of her bringing garbage out to the can by the alley or getting her mail from her box by the street. He assumed that the persistent rainy weather since the day of their lunch had kept her out of the garden. Plus, one of the Stockton's road guys broke his ankle, so Sal was working some overtime. He hoped she didn't think he was still avoiding her like he had for twenty-five years.

The extra hours Sal was working made him feel his age. Early one Saturday, when he finally had a whole day off and was lying on the couch, not quite sleeping, he heard a knock on the side door. He opened one eye to take in the dim sunlight shining through Ma's lace curtains. He saw Art fidgeting in the doorway, not wanting to wake him but certainly not wanting to go to the door. When Sal wasn't home, no door knockings were answered. If Ig stopped by, he didn't knock. He just walked in.

"I've got it, Art." Sal slowly sat up as he heard another knock. Rubbing his eyes, he headed for the kitchen and froze when he saw who was at the door. At first he thought it was Rose, but Rose as she used to be when she was young. The beautiful young woman smiled, Rose's smile, but her hair was almost black and her eyes, though also blue, were darker.

"Hi Mr. Schmidt. Remember me?" she said.

Still shaking the cobwebs from his brain, Sal managed, "Why, yes. It's Dee Dee. Is that right?"

“Yes, very good.” She clapped her hands and laughed musically, like bubbling water. “I don’t think we’ve seen each other up close for years.”

“It sure has been awhile. Are you back from college?” He realized she was still standing on the other side of the screen. He swung open the door. “Please, step in.” He used his other hand to smooth down his hair, realizing he must look like a slob. He tucked in the back of his shirt.

“I’ve been out of college a year,” she said as she stepped through the door. “I’m a nurse at the St. Cloud Hospital. You’re thinking of Kim.”

“Yes, that’s right.” He paused. “Is everything okay at your house?” He tried to imagine what she could want.

“Well, it’s been a bit crazy... moving Dad to the nursing home this week and all. I mean, Mom feels so bad and wants his room to have *everything* he likes.”

Nursing home? Sal wasn’t sure he heard right. “Did your dad have a turn for the worse?” he asked.

“Oh, I guess I thought you knew. He’s had these mini strokes for about a year, but last week he had a pretty bad one and can’t even stand now.” She looked out the door to her house and her eyes turned sad. Then she looked back to Sal and gave a brave smile, the same smile he had seen Rose give countless times.

He realized he had been staring earnestly at Dee Dee’s face when she cleared her throat a little to snap him out of his daydream. He could feel his face burn as she looked at him with a bit of confusion. Then she continued. “We’re telling Dad that the move is

temporary until physical therapy can get him up to snuff, but realistically...” her eyes clouded. “We’re not sure he even understands much anymore.”

Sal wondered if Rose’s girls knew about what a schmuck their father had been. He expected not. Although gossip flowed like beer in Stockton, people were careful to keep it behind the backs of those being discussed. And most likely Rose would never have told her girls anything to upset them. Sal remembered driving by their other house through the years sometimes when he helped out with the road crew. It was a brick rambler in a newer part of town. One time he saw Bill playing with the girls in the yard when they were young, probably in grade school. Bill was letting them spray him with the hose as he feigned outrage, both girls giggling uncontrollably. He also remembered orange cones set up on the side street by their house and seeing Bill in the passenger seat of the car that Rose still drove, practicing parallel parking with Dee Dee. His stroke had come about that time, before Dee Dee ever got her license. Sal had heard that she was the one who found her dad collapsed on the floor when she had returned from school. Rose was at work. Dee Dee had called the ambulance and then ridden with Bill to the hospital.

No, he could see in Dee Dee’s eyes that she only felt love for her father. He was surprised and ashamed that a sudden jealousy washed over him, and he tried to shake it off.

A voice came from the doorway. “Is Rose okay?” Sal whipped his head around to see Art. His brother had actually come out of hiding to ask his question. Art looked distressed.

“Oh, yes. Mom is fine. Thank you.” Sal looked back to Dee Dee and saw that she was surprised as well. Surely she had seen Art in the yard from time to time but most likely had never spoken with him. Rose must have told the girls about Art’s preference for hermit living.

“We have a couple of items we need to bring to Dad’s room at Pine Cove. The room is small, but we’d like to bring a rocking chair and a dresser... his TV...you know, to make it more homelike. I borrowed a friend’s pickup, but Mom’s back is pretty sore. She waited too long to have him moved. I was wondering...”

Sal jumped in. “I would be glad to help. Do you need more people? I could call my brother, Ig.” He saw her look to Art, so he quickly added, “Art’s health would probably not allow him to come along.”

“No, I think I’d like to help,” said Art. His voice was firm.

Sal was genuinely shocked. “Art, are you sure?”

“I’d like to help Rose.”

It was decided.

The three of them set out across the lawn toward Rose’s house. Sal could see she was expecting him, but she was a bit flushed. Then she smiled wide when she saw Art, and she stepped forward to hold the door for all three of them.

“How nice,” she said softly, looking gratefully into Art’s eyes.

Shyly, Art smiled back at her. “What are friends for?” he said.

Rose laughed. “I guess they are for doing unpleasant tasks. I can’t believe I pulled a muscle in my back, after lifting Bill for years with absolutely no trouble.”

“He used to be able to help more, Mom,” said Dee Dee.

“Follow me,” said Rose. “The dresser is in Kim’s room.” She was avoiding Sal’s eyes while he tried to decipher her expression, to see how she had processed the news of the letter. To see if it mattered to her as much as it did to him.

For not doing any physical labor or exercise except gardening for most of his life, Art was amazingly strong. The brothers lifted the dresser easily, even though it was made of oak. Rose had offered to take the drawers out first, but Sal and Art declined after a test lift with the drawers in. The rocking chair and TV were even easier, and they had them loaded in the back of the pickup in no time, both feeling a bit impressive.

“I can ride in the back to hospital and help you lift them there,” offered Sal. He knew better than to offer Art’s help. Art was amazing him today, but he would never venture to a nursing home. All those germs and illnesses.

Rose said, “Thanks, but I’ve already got a custodian and an orderly lined up to assist us. Your work here is done. I really do appreciate it so, so much.” On an impulse she leaned over and grabbed a hand of each brother. “You really are good guys.”

Art nodded and said, “Any time.” It was such an un-Art-like thing to say, that Sal had to chuckle. Rose looked at him and they smiled at each other. Their eyes lingered a moment longer.

Dee Dee broke the moment. “It’s almost 10:00, Mom. They’re expecting us.”

Sal said, “Let’s get out of the way, Art.” The brothers stepped out the door and walked back to the house. They turned around when Dee Dee tooted the horn and Rose called out a last thank you through the open window.

Art gave a wave. “She’s my friend,” he said. “We’re garden buddies. That’s what Rose calls us.”

Sal looked at Art’s smile and felt as light as dandelion seed.