

BUCHANANTHOLOGY
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A memoir of an idyllic childhood

by
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PREFACE

The City of Buchanan: Population 4,800. Settled in 1833 and named for the fifteenth president of the United States. Cradled amongst the gentle hills of rural, Southwestern Michigan.

Anthology: A random miscellany of stories. Names only half-heartedly changed to protect the innocent. Eight stories plucked from a thousand memories of an idyllic childhood in a story-book home-town. I'm sure I've gotten some of it wrong. But this is how I remember it.

A childhood so amazing that we still go back and drive the old roads from time to time just to reassure ourselves that it actually existed. Not just a romantic figment of the imagination.

Peek in the windows of Colvin school. Deserted. Desks stacked up in the corner. Nothing changed inside in fifty years. Spooky. Wait—is that an old black snow boot with metal clasps up the front that I see in there?

Doors to our homes were never locked. Everybody's kids were all over the neighborhood at all times. No one worried about them. Everybody's dogs ran loose. Telephone party-lines—listen in on your neighbors' conversations. No fast food—Mom cooked for the whole family, and anyone else we might bring home, every night. Milk delivered to your door in glass bottles with cardboard caps. Fresh baked goods—delivered to your door by the bread man. Rolling hills blanketed with tall corn and golden wheat swaying in the late summer breezes. Getting in trouble at the Oronoko church. Watermelon eating contests with the Boy Scouts. Building the new church with all the neighbors. Water skiing on the brown water of the St. Joe River. Baling hay in the summer. Spending the whole day playing in the woods. Picking cherries on 20-foot ladders—eat as much as you pick. Have spitting contests. Fresh-picked, crisp apples right off the wagon when the brisk days of autumn set in. One-room school houses—with outhouses. “Olli olli oxen free.” Dirt roads. Ice in the winter. Mud in the Springtime. Friday night dates to Silver Beach. The 31 drive-in theater in Niles. The Sweet Shop. White Christmases.

I'm sure I've gotten some of it wrong. But this is how I remember it.

Skip

September 28, 2007

HANDS

Charles was 10 years old. It was nineteen fifty-six. And, fortunately, South Bend was famous. It seemed outsiders could never quite understand where Buchanan, Michigan was, exactly, without explaining its proximity just twenty miles north of South Bend, Indiana.

South Bend was the home of Bendix, the company that made, most notably, all manner of airplane parts for the military and God knows what else, and from where his paternal grandfather, a die maker, had earned a living for his family for over twenty years. In those days, dies, which are inverted, hardened sand sculptures used as forms for molten metal parts, were made by hand, and those who sculpted them were considered craftsmen.

South Bend was also the home of the Studebaker automobile, which was favored by his dad for its practical engineering and low cost, and South Bend fishing tackle, which was favored by many an angler throughout America. And, of course, South Bend was, and remains, the home of the “Fighting Irish”—the University of Notre Dame.

It was Christmas Day and, as was customary at this time of year, Charles, along with his parents, his younger brother Edward and his kid sister, Jean, joined his mother’s three sisters and two brothers and all their children, his mother’s mother and various great aunts and uncles to celebrate the birth of Christ at the small country farmhouse of his maternal grandparents.

The old house was chock full of people of every age and size, with everyone enjoying the exchange of family news and gifts and, later in the day, a huge Midwestern farmhouse dinner of oven-roast chicken and turkey, home-baked ham, mashed potatoes and gravy, sweet potatoes, cranberry stars (a family specialty involving lemon gelatin, walnuts and cranberries, among other ingredients—Charles’ favorite), green beans, lima beans, cream peas, cut garden vegetables, homemade biscuits with fresh farm butter (Lite ‘anything’ had not yet been invented), ice cold whole milk, pumpkin pie, apple pie, homemade cookies, marble cake, chocolate cake, fresh whipped cream and ice cream and dark, black

coffee, all prepared from scratch by the noble women of Charles' extended family, easily some of the finest culinary experts in the world. The house was filled with heavenly smells as oven doors were opened and pot lids removed.

When the sumptuous meal was ready, as was the custom, all the men were called to the kitchen to get their plates filled. The kids were next, situated at folding card tables in the kitchen and every other available flat surface in the house, with miniature feet adorned with patent leather shoes and frilly-edged socks along with rarely-worn, toe-pinching brogans, all dangling from too-tall chairs. And then, finally, the women joined their men and elder children at the main dining room table.

After dinner some of the gentlemen settled into college football in the living room on Grandpa's black-and-white console television, and others gravitated to the card table set up in the dining room for nickel-ante poker while the ladies gathered in the kitchen. Meanwhile Charles' siblings and cousins entertained themselves with their Christmas gifts.

Charles was the eldest of all the children—at the difficult age of being too old to play with the younger kids and not yet interested in the adult activities. So it was about this time that he wrapped a brand new, red-and-green scarf around his neck, donned his heavy winter coat, knit mittens and black rubber boots with metal clasps up the front, and quietly exited the farmhouse by way of the back door.

Charles headed for the path behind the house that led to his family's home, located about a half-mile up the hill to the south. But the path, now concealed beneath ten inches of newly fallen snow, had to be forged anew. With puffs of steamy breath at every step, he laboriously made his way up the gentle slope.

Charles, with cherry nose and fingers tingling from the cold, entered through the back door into the kitchen. He left his outerwear on the back of a chair and went down the hall to the small bedroom he shared with his younger brother. Charles passed the rest of the afternoon in his room, quietly working on his model airplanes and contemplating the wonders of the world, which he suddenly seemed to be discovering on a daily basis.

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As evening grew near, the rest of his family erupted through the door in the hallway leading from the garage laden with opened gifts and covered dishes of leftovers. But Charles remained in his room. And while working on his Cessna 150 balsa model at the small desk facing the window between the two single beds, he took notice of his own hands working in front of him. He stopped for a moment and splayed his hands on the desk—palms down, digits extended. They appeared almost pink in the soft incandescent light from his bedroom ceiling fixture. The flesh was firm and smooth, and two or three pale purple veins were only just barely visible tracing across the three prominent tendons. The nails, with small half-moons at the roots were perfect—well, except for the nail biting. When he turned them over, he noticed the palms were moist, soft-thick and translucent. These hands were clearly unlike those he recalled seeing last summer.

Charles raised his eyes and peered out the window in front of him. He discovered that while he had been attending to other matters Christmas Day had quietly slipped into Christmas Night. He could see his face and the room behind him reflected in the glare of its shiny, black surface.

He got up from his chair, turned off the overhead light and then returned to the window. When he looked through the pane again he could now see that it was a clear, still and moonless night. The air was crisp as ice, and a billion stars shone down on the surface of what had been just hours ago ten inches of fresh, virgin snow. The huge, fluffy flakes had blanketed the countryside in a pristine, white cloak that now, at day's end, bore the scars inflicted upon it by people and dogs and cats and sundry other warm blooded animals, all of whom had left behind their foot prints, snow angels, tail prints and paw prints as well as a criss-cross profusion of seemingly Pollock-inspired renderings from their sled runners, ice skates, snow shovels and tire chains—all the innocent defilers now curled up in their toasty-warm nests for the night.

Charles, with palms on his cheeks and elbows on the desk, looked out on the night and recalled being at his grandparents' home on a scorching hot afternoon the previous summer. He remembered racing down the hill across the abandoned grape arbor, between the two houses—over the same worn and narrow path he had forged earlier this very day through nearly foot-deep snow. But on that afternoon the sun had blazed down from an empyreal azure sky adorned with big, white, cotton candy clouds, while eight-foot high grasses and weeds flourished on either side of the path in the heady month of August.

The deep summer air had been thick with heat as Charles, shirtless and drenched in sweat, raced full tilt down the hill, weed pollen clinging to his tousled, curly hair and to his naked arms and back. Swatting sweat bees and gulping deep breaths all the while, he quickly reached the ancient wood frame chicken coop where his grandpa was about to turn over the engine of the old John Deere tractor.

#

Grandma and Grandpa still lived in the same farmhouse in which Charles' mother and her brothers and sisters had been raised. It was here his mother had spent most of her adolescent and teen years. It was where she brought Charles's father-to-be home to meet her parents, the man from whom she would sometimes allow a goodnight kiss, but only through the protective wire mesh of the closed screen door. It was where she had owned the most memorable car of her youth, "Esmeralda," a yellow Chevy with a rumble seat. It was here that his grandfather had risen from his warm bed hours before the dawn each winter morning for so many years. Where he then descended into the small farmhouse basement to feed, first kindling, and then larger pieces of wood and, finally, chunks of black, shiny coal into the furnace so that the house would be warm when his family finally arose to begin another wintry Michigan day.

Charles had been fascinated by the coal. It was stored partly outdoors in a large, untidy pile just beyond a narrow, rectangular basement window—covered all

winter in snow—and partly in a smaller pile, as limited space would allow, in a dark and musty corner of the cellar.

The coal chunks were mostly about the size of Charles' small fist. Some were crumbly and almost soft to the touch. They would soil his clothes if he touched them, like a black chalk. Others, though, were hard as stone, with shiny flat facets. They had been snatched from their resting place deep within the bowels of the earth, depriving them of what might have been a dazzling future when their facets would, perhaps, have been transformed into diamonds, endowed with the power to separate the colors of the rainbow. Charles could see his face in the facets, like a mirror: never-to-be diamonds reflecting only the features of a yet-to-be young man.

It was here that Charles's grandmother had kept a light in the window over the kitchen sink for many years until all her children returned home from the military; it was here that Charles witnessed his grandmother standing just outside the back door of the farmhouse on a late summer afternoon, firmly grasping a plump, struggling white chicken by the neck. Using the small paring knife she held in her right hand, she had severed its head with a quick twist of thumb and forefinger and then tossed the headless body of the feathery beast into the huge backyard to flap and spew its blood all over the ground. The chicken's head, eyes still bulging, was tossed to the feral cat waiting in the bushes. Charles never looked at his grandmother quite the same way after that.

It was here that Charles learned from his Aunts Elizabeth and Joyce, and many years later passed on to his own son, how to make a mixing bowl milk shake, or "cauldron," as his son would one day call it, by vigorously stirring the chocolate into the ice cream with a spoon until the whole concoction reached the perfect consistency. And, finally, it was here at the chicken coop, about fifty paces from the back door of the old farmhouse, where he watched his grandfather rattle with the hand crank on the old John Deere tractor.

#

Charles's grandfather, for whom he was named, had always seemed tough as leather to Charles. Deeply tanned, gnarly and strong. He and Grandma had survived the Great Depression. They had lost their home and family business—a barbecue restaurant—and spent a summer living with their small children in a tent in the woods on the property of a deceased relative.

Grandpa's sister, who had been seeing an executive at Clark Equipment Company, managed to arrange for Grandpa to find work as a welder at the company. He dutifully sent his earnings to his wife, who remained in Syracuse, Indiana, with the children, and lived with his sister in Michigan until he could afford to bring his family north. It was an uncomfortable arrangement. He was required to bathe in the cellar before coming upstairs and, without fail, when he began to seat himself in her home, his sister would have newspapers under him before his rear end could hit a cushion.

Grandpa and his family eventually migrated to rural Buchanan, Michigan, not far from Elkhart, Indiana, where Charles's mother had been born, raising grapes, pears and a house full of children.

Grandpa was retired and working odd jobs as a carpenter by the time Charles was a boy. He spent all day, every day, in the sun. Smoked a pipe till the stem wore his teeth away and chewed toothpicks in the evening while reading the newspaper and waiting for dinner.

The old John Deere had already been around for a good while by then. It was Kelly green, had four in-line cylinders and a hand crank in the front, just under the radiator. (In 1837, Mr. Deere, a blacksmith by trade, crafted the first steel furrow plow, which had originally been designed to be powered by a draft horse under reins. One hundred and seventy years later the company named for him employs forty-seven thousand people and manufactures everything from eight-ton articulated, four-wheel drive prairie tractors with air conditioning, used routinely by corporate farmers in the nation's grain belt, to 6.5 horsepower mulching lawnmowers for the rest of us. Who would have thought?) One or two good cranks would usually set it off, if all the controls were properly calibrated,

not that there were all that many controls—they were pretty much limited to a gas line and a choke. Nevertheless, someone with an untrained ear could crank all day and never find just the right combination.

Charles watched as his grandfather, clad in a white, sleeveless undershirt and dark cotton pants, took the crank from the mount on the front of the radiator, inserted it into the slot and, with both hands on the handle down between his bent knees, made one vigorous, upward 180-degree “crank,” causing two of the four cold pistons to pass through the ignition stage in their cylinders. And then, with sparkling drops of perspiration forming on his forehead, and with shoulders, legs and back muscles tensed, another crank, and the other two pistons passed through the charges of their sparkplugs, warming the gasoline vapors in their cylinders.

It took three cranks this time to start the tractor. Charles watched his grandfather’s hands as he grasped the rotating handle with each turn and then quickly reached up to adjust the choke as the old John Deere sputtered to life. They were heavily callused, those hands, permanently darkened from the sun, with thick nails developed over years of hard manual labor. Large, bulging veins traversed his muscular forearms. Even in age, they were strong.

As Charles, sitting in his bedroom, looked down at his own hands, he could see they had a long way to go.

THE KISS

Charles's paternal Grandpa used to eat limburger cheese. Grandpa always smelled good though, even with the cheese and all. He smelled like his pipe, which he could never keep lit. He must have burned a forest of matches trying to keep that thing going—Prince Albert apparently produced very moist tobacco in those days. And most summer evenings, in the days before he retired from Bendix, Grandpa would enjoy a single long-neck Pabst Blue Ribbon beer on the front porch of their small house where he smoked and lit and lit and smoked his pipe and read the South Bend Tribune while waiting for dinner.

Grandpa tended to slouch in his later years. By his eighties he had lost some of his hearing (“selectively,” so Charles had heard) and height and most of his hair and walked with the aid of a wooden cane.

And Grandpa was a stranger to travel. Only a few years before his passing, his son and family would take him on a car trip to Canada for a summer holiday. He didn't like it: “Too many foreigners around here,” he said.

When Charles was still a small boy, he and his siblings, and sometimes his cousins, would from time to time spend the night with Grandpa and Grandma—usually on weekends. And an overnight stay by any of the grandchildren would, *every time*, require them to endure “The Kiss.”

#

Just before the kids' bedtime, Grandpa would be beckoned into the kitchen by the insistent whistling of the teapot to partake of his nightly supper, which typically occurred about three hours after the six o'clock dinner. Supper, often as not, included a cinnamon roll from Woody's grocery and a cup of hot tea.

Grandpa would pour the steaming water onto the teabag in his teacup, return the pot to the stove, and take his seat at the head of the yellow Formica table—yellow was grandma's favorite color. He would then proceed to pull one of the sticky, sweet rolls from the cellophane-covered package, and dip it in his

hot tea to soften it—he didn't like wearing his dentures in the evening. (Eventually he would pretty much give them up altogether.) And, as always, in the middle of this nightly repast, his grandchildren would be dispatched by Grandma to the kitchen to say goodnight to Grandpa.

When it was Charles' turn he would dutifully march into the kitchen, barefoot and clad in his pjs, stand just below eye-level with his seated grandpa, and await the inevitable.

Before he bussed his grandchildren goodnight, Grandpa could be counted on to exercise the obligatory wiping of his mouth with the back of his hand. Then, "The Kiss" would be imparted, still wet, regardless of the wipe, and seriously scratchy from his late evening beard. Then, back to his tea—and on to bed for his grandchildren. Every time.

THE HALF-WAY HOUSE

The small cottage in which Charles' paternal grandparents resided was over one hundred years old when Charles was a small boy. The two of them had raised four children in that tiny house, including Charles' father, the second eldest.

In the beginning, it had only one bedroom. Its total square footage today would be that of a kitchenette apartment. It was here that Charles' grandparents, along with their two daughters, their new daughter-in-law and first grandson, waited anxiously for their only son to return from the European theater during World War II.

Charles' father, Howard, who was only twenty years of age at the time, was serving his country as a lieutenant and B-17 bomber pilot with the United States 8th Air Force, 457th bomber group, 751st Squadron, operating out of Britain. On May 19th 1944, on mission 46, his fifth, his aircraft, the "Liberty Run," was attacked by German ME-109s and FW-190s. The plane was overwhelmed and quickly lost two of its four engines.

Howard and all of his crew except one bailed out and were eventually captured by the Germans. But Howard's radio operator had spilled his parachute in the airplane. Despite desperate pleadings from Howard and other crew members in the frantic chaos as the plane began its death spiral, he refused to jump with his parachute in his arms. Howard had to leave him behind.

Howard, who spent the last year of the conflict as a prisoner of war, did indeed, come home. And with him he brought back a smattering of the German language, a respect and deference for German shepherd dogs and a heavy heart that would never quite heal.

And then, at some point in time, a real kitchen and a second bedroom were added. And for some reason the new kitchen floor ended up about six inches lower than the original house. This development required the fashioning of a wooden ramp from one level to the next in order to accommodate Aunt Isabelle, Charles' father's eldest sibling, who was confined to a wheelchair.

Grandma had a big, dark green couch that folded out into a bed, practically filling the small living room, upon which the grandkids would sleep when they spent the night. Charles had spent many a night in this big old sofa bed and, as was the rule, had to go to bed before the adults. But since there was nowhere else for anyone to go in the little house, he would end up watching television from the under the covers until he finally dozed off to the monotonous voices of Jack Paar and his guests. Or, if it was Friday night, then it was “The Friday Night Fights,” which Grandpa watched religiously. *Brought to us by Gillette Blue Blades*. Some years later, when Charles would first begin to shave the peach fuzz from his chin, he tried one of those Gillette Blue Blades—it was no better than pulling the hairs out of his face with a pair of tweezers.

And then it was off to sleep under the ponderous, patchwork quilt, one of two hand-made by his grandmother’s mother in Scotland. The quilt, which seemed to the small children to weigh a ton, was made from fabric remnants discarded by local shopkeepers and salvaged by earlier family members of lesser fortune. The patches consisted of heavy, thick fabrics, most of which were likely manufactured to serve as furniture coverings, sewn to a cotton, maroon backing. They were all shaded in dark patterns of maroons, greens and browns, typical of those popular in the dawn of twentieth-century Scotland. The quilts were then carried to the new world by a strapping young thirteen-year old girl, one day to warm the dreams of her grandchildren.

The quilts would become bedraggled and worn over the decades from the wear and tear involved in protecting at least three generations of the family’s children from the chill of a cold night. And then they would eventually be lovingly refurbished by Charles’ mother, one stitch at a time, resurrected to last through another two generations at last count. More to come.

When Charles got older, the strategic location of Grandpa and Grandma’s house, which was on the north edge of town, and more or less half-way between his home in the Midwestern farm country and the high school in Buchanan, became

of utmost importance since he and his siblings did not have ready access to a car. In fact, it was pretty unusual for high schoolers to have cars back in those days. But the kids could *walk* to Grandma's after their extracurricular activities at school, spend the night, and then walk back to school the next morning. Other variations included finding their way to Grandma's after football or basketball games on Friday nights and being picked up later by Mom or Dad; or being dropped off there to be picked up later for one thing or another by their lucky friends who had access to wheels. You see how it worked. In the end, they spent a lot of time at Grandma's, which delighted Grandma and Grandpa as well as Charles' parents, who got a little relief from chauffeuring duties.

GRANDMA AND SMOKY'S

She was every kid's perfect grandmother. If Charles or any of his siblings or cousins announced that he or she didn't feel well, it was immediately off to bed in the bedroom next to the kitchen with Charles' paternal grandma waiting on them hand and foot. Meals, Chinese checkers and snacks in bed—all day, no less.

Grandma's maiden name was Christine Robertson. She had immigrated to America on a ship from Scotland when she was just a girl. As an adult, Grandma smoked Kool cigarettes, which eventually turned out to be the brand of choice, due to convenience, for certain of her grandchildren who decided to give smoking a try. Charles, as a small boy, gave it a whirl once while cleverly hiding behind the free-standing oil stove in Grandma's living room. Due to his disingenuous hiding place, he was promptly nabbed and forced by his father to smoke all the remaining cigarettes in the pack in order to teach him a lesson. Charles' dad figured he would get sick and lose his interest in the habit. Charles didn't get sick, but never smoked again until he graduated from high school. Fifteen years later he quit and never smoked again, except for an occasional cigar, which he doesn't inhale (much).

Grandma was about five foot, five inches tall, a little overweight, chewed Tums, which she kept in the old cabinet safe, for her heartburn, and wore a girdle when taking Charles or any of her small grandchildren to lunch in nearby Niles. She would often wear a flowery dress, the collar of which accented her shoulder-length gray hair, and her white nurse shoes, which comforted her chronically aching feet. When Charles was only five or six years old and barely three feet tall, he always knew a trip to Niles was in store when he arrived at grandma's and got a big hug against that rock hard foundation.

On some summer evenings Grandma would take her grandchildren for walks down the quiet streets of the small town. As she strode down the sidewalk with her young charges she would discreetly peek in the windows of the

neighbors before they got around to pulling the shades for the night. She was very curious.

And a visit to Grandma's was not complete without a trip with her and Aunt Isabelle up to Smoky's Drive-In for a root beer float, which was listed on the tattered and cola-stained menu as a "Black Cow."

Aunt Isabelle had been mentally disabled and confined to a wheelchair since she was a small child, so she couldn't speak normally. Further, what little vocabulary she had been able to garner was pretty much limited to exclamatory oaths that generally consisted of the more popular curse words of the day, which she would string together with aplomb whenever so moved.

In order for Isabelle to go along with everyone to Smoky's, she would have to be lifted to her feet by either Grandma or Grandpa, or the nearest, strongest adult, who would stand behind her wheelchair and grasp her under the armpits while she supported herself painfully on her atrophied legs and brutally cramped feet. They would then "walk her" the few remaining steps from her chair and into the back seat of the old green, four-door Buick. Since this whole operation was genuinely uncomfortable for Aunt Isabelle, she would, from the time she was rolled out the kitchen door and right up until she was finally seated in the car, and much to the delight of the children, spew forth a hail of expletives that would have shamed Richard Nixon.

Aunt Isabelle was of the same build as her mother, but with thick, black, bobbed hair and seemingly with the strength of ten men. The kids all loved Aunt Isabelle. When their grandparents weren't watching, they would grab the back handles of her wheelchair and race her breakneck all over the house, popping wheelies, back and forth over the ramp between the new kitchen and living room. Aunt Isabelle loved it—well, most of the time. She applied her limited vocabulary with gusto as the kids whipped her wheelchair around the house. A good time was had by all.

Isabelle's nephews and nieces never really noticed that she was handicapped. She was simply a part of their lives and their family. They loved her—she loved them. She'd laugh for a half-hour after they scared the poop out of

her. (She would have loved roller coasters.) She would give any one of them a great big sloppy kiss at the drop of a hat (by this time she, like her father, had no teeth). When Isabelle decided the time was right, she would get one of the kids in a neck hold and practically dislocate their vertebrae as she pulled them toward her, and then she would plant a big sloppy one on them. She died when she was about sixty. They all still miss her.

Grandma, Aunt Isabelle and Charles, and any of his siblings or cousins who happened to be there, would sit in the car at Smoky's with all the windows down, since air conditioning was unheard of in the Midwest in those days. The Buick was parked on the gravel drive horizontal to a covered, center walkway lighted with long, neon bulbs, yellow in color so as to be of less interest to the moths and other light-crazed, flying critters. Another row of cars occupied the opposite side of the walkway. Charles, Aunt Isabelle and Grandma and a half-dozen or so other cars full of families and teenagers enjoyed their burgers, ice cream and root beers in the mellow yellow lights and warm, muggy air as the summer sun finally slipped below the horizon.

The root beers and floats were served in heavy glass mugs coated inside and out with ice, which floated to the top when it began to melt, and the burgers were wrapped in translucent waxed paper marked with a grease pencil as "plain" or "Deluxe" or "CB" for "cheeseburger," all served by energetic teenage girls. It was a cool place for teenage girls to work. And the teenage girls attracted the teenage boys. Smoky knew that, of course.

Then the car hop would take away the window tray, Grandma would fire up the Buick, and it was back to the house. But the excitement was not yet over.

Since the driveway at Smoky's was one-way, grandma had to navigate the huge Green Land Yacht around the back of the building over an artificially built-up gravel lane. The lane had a drop-off of about thirty feet virtually straight down on one side and the back of the building on the other. It seemed only about two inches wider than the car. There was no room for error. Charles, with his nose pressed against a partially rolled up back window, was sure that sooner or later

they would meet their demise when Grandma misjudged her clearances, all of them winding up in a communal grave at the bottom of the drop-off, their bellies full of root beer and ice cream and halos of chocolate syrup around their lips.

Fortunately, Grandma was a better judge of distance than Charles gave her credit for. Which was good, since Charles would later need that car to practice his driving when he would turn fifteen and be awarded his learner's permit by the Michigan State Department of Motor Vehicles.

Grandpa would always let Charles drive the big Buick once he got his permit. He would tool down Red Bud Trail, the winding, two-lane paved river road with double yellow lines down the middle, with Grandpa in the passenger side—bug-eyed, pipe in mouth and holding the ever-present burned-out, smoking match to its bowl, stomping his right foot like a banjo player on his imaginary brake all the way home.

And when Grandma's visiting grandchildren were well, or not faking some illness, she always seemed to have a nickel or two for a Popsicle or a Fudgsicle from Woody's. Woody's was a tiny neighborhood grocery with three narrow aisles, bare wooden floors and a butcher who cut meat to order behind the white porcelain cooler at the rear (that would have been Woody back there with the cleaver). The store, situated about two blocks away and right next to the old abandoned railroad track, also doubled as a convenience store. Of course, Woody didn't know he was also operating a convenience store, since that cultural phenomenon had yet to be invented. There were enough popsicle sticks and match sticks in the gravel drive in front of the porch of the small, ancient half-way house to build a third bedroom. Charles' favorite was orange.

THE GRAVEL PIT

It was a place that no male adolescent with a bike could possibly resist. First and foremost, of course, Charles and Edward were forbidden to go there. And secondly, it was a fair distance from their home and largely isolated, at least in the early evenings and the weekends—read “hard to get caught.” No greater boy magnet could be created. It was...(drum roll) “The Gravel Pit.” In the more mundane world of adults, the gravel pit was a resource for high quality rock and gravel material, which was surface-mined from the area for use by local construction and road building companies.

The gravel and stone had been created eons before by the movement of glaciers as they passed over what would one day be called the State of Michigan. Rocks were crushed under the massive weight of the ancient ice floes as they made their inexorable journeys southward. They would eventually retreat back to the north, leaving us with the raw materials to build roads as well as the rolling hills and lakes for which Michigan is renowned.

But for Charles and Edward and an assortment of friends in the neighborhood who were also forbidden to go there, it was a majestic moonscape. Bicycle ramps may not yet have been invented, but it is unlikely that the urbanized kids of the 21st century with their dorky little hardhats would ever have the chance to race a speeding bicycle off a cliff of loose gravel, fifty feet above the ground, and slide down the side of a nearly vertical slope that tended to cave in with you as you slid. Which, of course, is *exactly* why they weren't supposed to be there. The gravel and sand were loose and dangerous, and even Charles and Edward passed up the chance to hop over some of the cliffs, a testament to their budding survival instincts and innate intelligence, neither of which seemed to be otherwise readily apparent at the time.

They lived to tell the story, but only, after an appropriate amount of time had passed.

THE FROG GIGGERS

Charles had never heard of “frog gigging.” It was a regional southern term he would learn of decades later when he decided his fortunes were best sought in the warmer climes. Frog gigging generally refers to the practice of silently cruising the inland swamps of the southern states at night in a flat-bottomed boat or canoe, powered only by oars or paddles, in the hunt for frogs of sufficient size to render fat, plump legs for the dinner table. At the tender age of eight years or so, Charles did not own a boat, and, had he owned one, under no circumstances would his parents have allowed him to captain it after dark. Nevertheless, he had become a frog gigger—if in a less conventional way than his southern counterparts.

Charles used to walk three miles to and from school every day—no kidding—just like so many before him had done in the in the small, rural community in which he lived, and as so many others all over the country routinely *claim* to have done when they were kids.

Colvin School consisted of one room with a small “mud room” just inside the entrance. That was where Charles and his schoolmates had to unbundle themselves from their winter coats, knit caps, mittens, gloves, extra pairs of pants (no such thing as ski or snow pants in those days), scarves and black rubber boots with those damned metal fasteners, at least one pair of extra socks and their shoes, which always seemed to stay stuck in those obnoxious boots. Those boots would haunt Charles throughout his school years. They were clearly the most repugnant, uncool, unfashionable outerwear ever imposed upon a teenager. Nevertheless, a lot of interesting things can happen to a fourth grader while walking to school three miles down a country road.

In the depths of winter that long trek could be especially arduous. But on a good day the big county V-plows, after operating all night, had already cleared the road by 7:30 AM when it was time for Charles and his peers to head out. On those days it was only the brutal cold that the kids had to deal with. In the warmer months, with a little luck, the youngsters could sometimes hitch a ride on either the milk or bread delivery truck on the way to school, depending on which day it

was. Charles liked to stand on the passenger step just inside the open door of the delivery vans, holding his lunchbox with one hand and the vertical hand rail with the other, as he watched the dust and gravel of the road flash by just below his feet. No delivery man would dare do that these days. Not that you could *find* a delivery man these days.

The route to and from school passed an artesian wellspring along the road at the corner of Glendora and Terracoupe Road. The spring was about five feet off the side of the road and filled a small pond, only about four feet across. Charles and his friend David, who passed the pond twice a day, were pretty sure it was bottomless and were cautious not to step in the “quicksand” around the edges where they would surely be sucked into the bowels of the earth, in which case they would be in major trouble with their moms.

That all seemed pretty scary until one spring day on the way home from school they noticed the frogs. Big frogs. I mean *lots* of *big* frogs. All over the place! Wow! Their fear of certain death quickly allayed, the boys found that if they wanted to *catch* the frogs, they would have to sneak up on them or the critters would leap unreachably into the pond. In no time, however, they learned that if one were to sit quietly for awhile, the frogs would come back to the surface. The two stalkers would wait patiently, or as patiently as any eight-year-old boys can be, until just the right second, and then zap!, they would reach out and grab a frog! Wow!

As time passed, frogs would be caught and frogs would be let loose. And the afternoon would silently creep by unnoticed until the cattail shadows became long and the warm summer day would be replaced with the cool, humid air of early evening.

And then they knew they were in trouble.

By the time Charles arrived home, his mother was worried to death and had called most of the neighbors. His frog gigging days were over, at least for the time being.

THE FIRST CAR

Charles got his first car during the summer between his junior and senior years of high school. He bought it with his own money. It had a lot of character. Actually, it wasn't a car at all, but rather a 1947 Chevy pickup truck. It had been the work horse around Bear Cave Campgrounds where Charles, and later his brother, would work for spending money in the summer during their high school years. Both brothers would end up with vivid memories of their summer days and nights working at Bear Cave—but that's another story.

The truck was used by Mr. Mallory, the owner of the campgrounds, to haul firewood to the campsites and to carry topped-off garbage cans away from the sites. It was also used to cart brush and tree trimmings and myriad other tasks not unlike those more typically assigned to a tractor.

Mr. Mallory was a retired ice cream company executive from Ohio. He acquired Bear Cave Resort and moved his entire family to the Michigan countryside to live out his dream of owning his own campground.

Mr. Mallory taught Charles how to use a chain saw when Charles' father thought he was still too young for such responsibility. He died of a heart attack on his couch in the mobile home he and his family occupied at the entrance to the campground. But first, he lived his dream for awhile.

Charles really loved his truck and the freedom of having his own transportation—he was done with bicycles. Mr. Mallory sold it to him for \$35, and Charles had to buy license tags for it before he could drive it off the property. The truck was one year younger than Charles.

After five years sitting outdoors in the rain and snow, its original shiny, dark green paint job had oxidized to the point where it was almost down to the metal—except, of course, for certain areas behind the cab and portions of the floorboards where there was no longer any metal at all.

Always the stickler for appearances, Charles' first order of business was to paint the truck. He used a plain, six-inch paint brush and royal blue gloss enamel

paint. Then he painted a six-inch white racing stripe down the middle of the entire cab. Looked great. Then he got his uncle Willard to show him how to tune the engine so that it would not die every time he took his foot off the accelerator.

Uncle Willard was Aunt Elizabeth's husband and a first-class expert when it came to automobile engines. He and his friends had built and competed with a D-Class drag racer, the body of which they built from scratch and which housed a rebuilt 350-cubic-inch, bored-out V-8 Chevy engine with lots of spotless, shiny chrome parts. It was dubbed the Tasmanian Terror, and Charles, who had displayed some talent in the graphic arts as a young man, had been given the honor of depicting an unauthorized, enamel paint rendering of the then-famous cartoon character on a flat panel on the front of the machine.

One day Uncle Willard would be piloting his dragster down the drag strip when the transmission, which was situated groin-high between his knees and, fortunately, behind a one-half inch thick steel firewall, would explode. Uncle Willard lost the race. But he managed to keep everything else important to him, and never raced again. He took up skeet shooting. He wanted to make sure that in the future he would always be on the friendly side of explosions.

With these adjustments, Charles was pretty much ready to go except for the engine compartment hood. Initially, he didn't know there was a problem with the hood. But one day while driving down Red Bud Trail lickety-split at 60 miles per hour with his right hand hanging lazily at the wrist over the top of the steering wheel, his left elbow out the window and day-dreaming about his girl friend, the front latch on the hood gave up the ghost.

Okay. Now two things happened here. First of all, that big heavy hood, when caught by that 60 mile per hour wind, in the blink of an eye slammed up against the windshield with such ferocity that it cracked the glass and properly scared the living bejeezus out of Charles. The hood, held in place only by the two aft hinges, had wrapped itself around the upper half of the truck like a map around the head of person trying to read directions in a tornado. In this same instant,

Charles' eyes went from sleepy glazed, half-opened to the size of saucers, and his heart gave a single, gigantic beat that nearly blew out his eardrums.

And then, before a second heartbeat could be mustered, he became aware of the fact that he was barreling down a two-lane highway at 60 miles per hour and all he could see in front of him was a really cool, six-inch white stripe about a foot from his nose! His instincts kicked in at this point and he jammed his head out the door window in time to avoid further catastrophe. Charles sometimes wondered how things might have gone had the window not been rolled down.

Charles was a natural musician. When he began piano lessons at the age of thirteen he quickly became enraptured by this newly discovered kaleidoscope of self expression. He would soon expand his virtuosity to include the guitar.

He had yet to become an accomplished player by the age of seventeen, but he had a band. They had dubbed themselves the "Outcasts," so named since certain of the members consisted of kids who had been kicked out of or otherwise denied participation in any other rock and roll band organized by their schoolmates. They were the bad boy Rolling Stones in a school of pink-faced, mamsy pamsy Beatles.

The most notorious member of the Outcasts was Benny. Benny was something else. He hung around with all the wrong crowd and did all the things no one was supposed to be doing. But he was one of the finest lead guitar players ever born. His mother loved his playing and bought him a Gibson Firebird electric guitar that was so awesome the rest of his band members felt honored just to touch it from time to time.

Charles, on the other hand, performed with an old Sears Silvertone electric guitar he borrowed on a regular basis from a friend and had to plug in with Benny on his amp. Humble pie.

Charles played rhythm guitar to Benny's lead guitar and vocals. They played "Louie Louie," "Land of a Thousand Dances" and "California Sun." That was the last band in which Charles would play second fiddle.

The Outcasts were a hit at the school dances, and sometimes they would perform for actual money at various Moose Lodges and the like. They got paid fifty dollars and split it evenly, \$12.50 apiece. One night, they had loaded all the guitars, amplifiers and drums into the bed of Charles' truck, and the four of them, including Edward, the drummer, headed for the Niles Moose Lodge.

All went well at the Lodge that evening. The Moose enjoyed the music and gave the Outcasts a little tip to boot. So, at midnight the boys broke down their gear and loaded it into Charles' truck, which was parked in a lighted lot next to the lodge.

The bed of the little half-ton pickup was nearly full, and with two of the band members in the cab with Charles and Benny riding shotgun in the back with the equipment, Charles began the process of starting the engine.

Now, this old Chevy didn't have any fancy ignition system and, over the years, had become pretty finicky when it came to being started up, especially in the middle of the night after the dew had already settled. Standard procedure was to unwind the nine gauge wire that held the front of the hood firmly to the grill, an addition Charles had made after his heart-stopping experience on Red Bud Trail, lift the hood, remove the air filter, and then pour a couple of shots of gasoline directly down the throat of the carburetor, all prior to turning the engine over for the first time. Anything short of this would simply result in a rundown battery.

Charles always carried some gasoline with him for this purpose. He found that the most convenient vessel for the gas was a discarded Scotch whisky bottle with a screw-top cap. He kept it behind the driver's seat where it rested safely on top of the remains of an old squirrel's nest, which he had never bothered to clear out. Now, this was a good storage place because the leaves and pine needles of the nest protected the bottle from breaking when driving over bumpy country roads, and it was easily accessible from outside through a hole rusted out just aft and below the driver's seat.

Usually, after pouring about two ounces of gas directly into the carburetor and two or three pumps on the accelerator, the old girl would turn over and everyone would be on their way. Of course, if the truck had been idle for more

than about eight hours it would also be necessary to pump up the right rear tire. Charles carried a hand pump for the purpose of pumping up the tire enough to make it to the nearest gas station where he could then use a motor-driven air pump to bring it up to pressure. Fortunately, that was not necessary on this night.

Charles managed to get the engine kicked off just fine after its wake-up refresher, only to find that the headlights didn't work. The truck had a tricky lighting system. Since the front of the left fender, which framed the left headlight, had pretty much rusted away, the headlight ended up aiming down to the pavement at a 45-degree angle. So Charles had jerry-rigged the headlamp so that it hung by a single wire from the top of the opening where the frame used to be, relying on gravity to keep it level. This was particularly entertaining when Charles would hit a bump in the road or come to an abrupt stop, since the headlight would then swing back and forth from its hanger, looking like the light of a trainman swinging his lantern to and fro as he walked down the tracks. One second the light would be shining in the treetops and the next it would be pointing down at the street, and so forth. It's a good thing recreational drugs were not available to these kids in those days or they never would have gotten past the first stop light.

Alas, even with these restorations, sometimes the entire electrical system simply didn't work. And having no headlights was a particularly vexing problem on this night. Finding another way home and leaving the truck to be picked the next morning was not an option since all of their musical equipment was in the back of it. Fortunately, the bass player's older brother, Mick, had driven to the dance in his own car. It was quickly agreed that Charles would closely follow Mick for the five-mile drive back to Buchanan, with Mick's car acting as the leading light bearer. So, off they went into the moonless summer night.

Well, about four-and-a-half miles into the trip a car pulled up behind the truck, riding on Charles' rear bumper with bright lights a-blazing. Benny, who was riding solo in the back, was particularly annoyed by this turn of events since the lights were keeping him awake. Benny never hesitated to share his emotions with anyone, and he proceeded to exhibit the standard one-finger salute, with both

hands no less, to the bothersome car while adding an unprintable verbal description of the driver's mental capacities at the top of his lungs.

About five seconds into Benny's tirade, the car suddenly displayed two eye-melting, red flashing lights on its roof. With his heart in his mouth, Charles pulled the truck to the side of the road. Unfortunately, Mick in the lead car didn't notice the state trooper behind Charles and kept on trucking, leaving the Outcasts to their own devices.

This was easily the biggest, tallest, baddest looking state trooper ever to grace the blue highways of southwestern Michigan. He was driving an immaculate, high performance, navy blue Chrysler with the words MICHIGAN STATE POLICE and other important information printed all over it in yellow. After stopping on the side of the road, Charles hopped out from the driver's seat only to find himself immediately nose-to-badge with his antagonist. That is, Charles' nose was exactly the same height as the badge worn on the crisply starched, navy blue, military-style shirt worn by this giant of a Protector-of-the-People of the Great State of Michigan.

The officer also wore one of those usually silly looking Smoky-the-Bear hats. However, there wasn't one ounce of "silly" anywhere on this guy. The officer was packing a blue-black revolver the size of a Volkswagen in a shiny, patent leather holster, which was attached to a shiny, patent leather gun belt wrapped snugly around his narrow waist. On the gun belt were a pair of shiny handcuffs and two rows of shiny bullets that seemed as big as mortar shells.

Since Mick had kept on driving after Charles stopped, the officer reasonably assumed that Charles was simply driving down the road in the pitch black night with no lights whatsoever. He was not impressed with Charles.

Meanwhile, in the time it took Charles to take all this in, Benny had become uncharacteristically quiet, clearly giving Charles the thumbs-up to take it from here.

"License, please," the officer demanded. That was it. No idle chit-chat.

Charles nervously pulled his driver's license from his wallet and waited patiently while the officer studied it in the brilliant beam of a shiny, two-foot long silver flashlight. After satisfying himself that Charles was properly credentialed, he began an inspection of the cab of the truck with his big shiny flashlight, while Charles pondered what it was going to be like to sit in jail the rest of the night waiting for his father to cheerfully bail him out.

About then the officer discovered Charles' scotch bottle. Of course, gasoline is about the same color as scotch, and to the officer's eye the boys now had an even bigger problem than being stupid enough to drive through the night with no headlights. Charles was quick to notice the trooper's back stiffen even more, if that was possible.

While considering what it was going to be like to surrender his driver's license until age twenty-one, Charles explained to the officer the truck's need for a "gasoline sniffer" to get started, and was also quick to point out the obvious utility of using a scotch bottle in which to store the engine elixir. The Trooper proceeded to open the top of the bottle and take a whiff. He handed the bottle back to Charles. So far so good.

Next, the officer walked around the front of the truck to the passenger side, no doubt on the way admiring Charles' handiwork on the hood latch. He wanted to have a look-see in the glove compartment. This took a minute because Will, the bass player, couldn't get the passenger door open. Charles, who had followed the officer around to the passenger side, intervened and deftly "lifted" and "pulled" on the door simultaneously, thus opening it with a loud creak for the officer's further inspection.

Had Charles' brother Edward, who been sitting in the middle of the cab between Charles and Will, been sitting next to the passenger door, he could easily have opened it for the officer. Edward became aware of the door's idiosyncrasies earlier that summer when one afternoon Charles had picked him up at Bear Cave in the truck. No sooner had Edward settled into the passenger seat, when Charles hit the gas and did a hard U-turn in the dusty gravel driveway. That was when

Edward discovered that it wasn't such a good idea to lean against the door from the inside, since that was the only condition under which it would open easily.

As Charles completed his 180-degree turnaround in the driveway he was quick to note that he had lost his passenger. Centrifugal force had thrown Edward completely out of the truck, leaving him lying in the gravel about twenty feet away. Although Charles found this hilarious, Edward, now with a raspberry on his elbow, was not amused.

It didn't take long for the officer to inspect the glove compartment since it had no bottom. All the trooper could see with his big shiny flashlight when he shined it in there was the tops of Will's shoes—and a little bit of the pavement, since Will's shoes didn't entirely cover the hole in the floorboard. Moving on, the officer rounded the back of the pickup, eyeing Benny with stony eyes as he sat quietly in the truck bed with arms across his chest and a stupid grin on his face.

Meanwhile, Mick finally noticed that he had lost sight of the crippled truck in his rear-view mirror and had backtracked to find the state trooper writing a citation for Charles. Although this may not have been the officer's most exciting experience of the night, it could easily have been the most interesting. After hearing of Mick's participation and the circumstances under which they boys had decided to try to make it home, Charles was given a ticket for driving without headlights and the officer provided a police escort the last half-mile or so to Benny's house, just a block from Front Street.

Two weeks later Charles had to go to see the local Justice of the Peace, who served as the traffic court in Buchanan. After hearing Charles' story, the JP levied a \$5 fine and sent him packing.

A few years later, Charles would leave home to join the U. S. Coast Guard. His Dad would sell the old truck for \$50 to two guys who wanted to race it in the demolition derby at the South Bend race track. The truck had a solid steel rear bumper. It probably won.

GRANDMA'S LITTLE CHRISTMAS HOUSE

The most memorable times spent at Charles' paternal grandma's house were always on Christmas Eve. Grandma absolutely loved the holidays. Somehow, she would save tiny bits of money all year long so she would have enough to buy incredible gifts for every person in the family. Christmas Eve was Grandma's most gloried day of the year, and all her young grandchildren started to count the days immediately after Thanksgiving.

When Christmas Eve finally appeared on the calendar, Charles and his family and his cousins and their parents arrived at Grandma's and Grandpa's house shortly after dark, which was barely past 5 o'clock PM in the month of December. Cars would be lined up in the small gravel drive next to an ancient forty-foot pine tree which grew in Grandpa's front lawn. With thick, heavy limbs its full length, the lowermost brushing the ground, the huge tree and the parked autos would become gently blanketed in fluffy snow as the evening wore on.

The house was soon filled with the smells and sounds of Christmas—noisy children running through the house and the adults all talking at the same time. A traditional roast turkey dinner with all the trimmings had been prepared by Grandma, working feverishly and joyfully all day, and, as the evening drew near, Grandpa would light a fire in the kitchen stove to keep the room warm as the cold wintry Michigan night set in.

The old-fashioned wood-and-coal-burning kitchen stove was situated about a foot from the wall between the sink and the new electric range. It stood slightly higher than the countertop and had an eight-inch stove pipe running directly out the back of it. The stove pipe took a 90-degree turn upward and then another 90-degree turn toward the wall and out the chimney vent.

The rectangular stove sat perpendicular to the wall and was about eighteen inches deep and ten inches wide, with a solid steel plate for a top. The dark steel surface had two removable cooking plates that covered the hot coals beneath, fore and aft. The body of the stove was shrouded by a white porcelain exterior to protect people from being burned on the hot surface, but there was a small

isinglass window in the front where the children could see the orange coals shimmering in the heat inside. The metal plates on top were round, about the size of a small frying pan, and each had a notch toward the edge into which grandpa could insert a wrought iron handle to lift them and add more chunks of coal.

It had been many years since the stove had been used to cook a meal, but it quickly re-warmed the room after everyone had entered through the kitchen door.

Since the living room was filled with presents, the children were not allowed to dwell in there for long without an adult in tow, at least until after dinner. But on this particular eve, Charles was asked to place the family's gifts under the tree before dinner.

There were no lamps on as he entered, laden with gifts. The first thing to catch his eye as he stepped into the room was the diminutive, four-foot Christmas tree. In such a small house, Grandma didn't have room for a big tree. Charles stood motionless. He could see, as was grandma's custom, that the freshly cut spruce was decorated solely with blue spherical glass ornaments and all blue lights, the old-fashioned kind with big, tear-drop shaped bulbs. The tree and the entire room were bathed in a soft glow. And with the mingling smells of pine needles and dinner and the joyous cacophony of familiar voices behind him, Charles became lost in the season.

On either side and in front of the tree were the gifts. Stacked practically chest high to Charles, there was a multitude of gaily wrapped packages of every size marked for each recipient from Santa. Grandma always signed the tags "from Santa Claus," and a lengthy and varied explanation was shared with the small children regarding the reasons Santa Claus would leave gifts for them on this night, and then leave even *more* to be discovered under their Christmas trees at home the next morning!

Charles gave up the idea of Santa Clause grudgingly. After all, he had been told that if he stopped believing in him, Santa would stop coming. He was still hanging on to this notion by the age of ten, in spite of some pretty obvious clues,

when his parents decided someone needed to just come right out and tell him. Charles was shocked at the news.

Discovering the true identity of this particular “Santa” was a rite of passage for the children of Charles’ family. After Charles learned the Secret he was allowed to help Grandma prepare and wrap all the gifts, a task which usually started shortly after the Thanksgiving holiday. He was sworn to secrecy, and Grandma had the brightly decorated packages hidden all over the place so no one would see them until Christmas Eve.

Traditionally, after dinner and after the dishes were done, everyone would gather in the living room. The children, the youngest sitting on laps, would all be shushed so they could listen for Santa’s sleigh bells. Sure enough, they could be barely heard in the far distance. This discovery caused every little heart to leap with excitement! And then, the bells became louder and louder, and then—a loud rap at the front door just to the right of the Christmas tree. Charles’ father stood, walked to the door and opened it to greet none other than Old St. Nick.

Now, early on, Grandpa went to great lengths to play the part of Santa. But as the years passed, his waning enthusiasm for detail became apparent. Although he still wore the old five-and-dime red costume, Santa had fallen back to wearing a simple “Santa” mask and work gloves and smelled suspiciously of Prince Albert pipe tobacco and limburger cheese. On top of that, it became more and more apparent to the kids that Grandpa always missed *being* there when Santa arrived! This only speaks to a small child’s determination, not to mention that of many adults, to believe in things deemed wonderful.

By the time Charles was a teenager, the parents had resorted to describing the traditional visitor to the smaller children as “one of Santa’s helpers.” Okay, so the younger kids would buy that for now. And Santa’s Helper would have a Hershey bar for each member of the family, and he would speak to every youngster and shake his or her hand before leaving through the front door, and

with a great “HO HO HO” and the loud ringing of sleigh bells, he would be gone into the night.

When Charles was older he was given the privilege of inspecting the sleigh bells Grandpa used. Grandpa kept them in the dirt-floor cellar of the house, accessible through a trap door in the kitchen hidden under an area rug, only to be brought out of the musty darkness once each year to the delight of his grandchildren. They were cast iron bells mounted on a leather strip which had been formerly part of an authentic sleigh harness. The harness was meant to be draped across the back of a horse, and even then had already become dry and brittle with age. The bells had three perfect pitches that rang as a triad chord when all were shaken at the same time. The highest pitched bells rang with such resonance as to be actually painful to the ear. Forty years later, Charles would salvage the bells from his father’s basement and keep them in a safe place until he could find someone to remount them on new leather.

Following Santa’s departure, the elder children would begin handing out the gifts to each excited recipient, child and adult, alike. In the beginning, everyone would wait to see what each received, but eventually, good-natured chaos would evolve and everyone would be opening gifts at the same time, sharing “oohs and ahhs” and “thank you’s” and “you shouldn’t have’s.”

And then it was over. Charles and his older cousins helped pick up all the wrapping paper and bows, some of which would be secretly saved for next year, and once everything was in order, it was time to hurry home so Santa could come and visit while the children slept.

With toddlers and kindergartners bundled up against the cold, Charles’ father and his Uncle would carry the little ones through the freshly fallen, foot-deep snow to the cars, now covered bumper-to-bumper, along with the big pine tree, in blue-white snowflakes sparkling like a million diamonds in the newly revealed moonlight.

As the interior of the cars warmed during the slow drive home on slippery country roads, the little ones' excitement would be overcome by a deep slumber, and dreams of sugar plums would dance in their heads.

On this night, Charles placed the gifts around the tree, and while everyone was still in the kitchen, he moved a few packages aside and eased himself down to the floor. He lay on his back with hands across his chest and with his head just under one of the front limbs of the tree. The room was filled with the smell of the piney fir, and immediately above Charles' face was one of the shiny, blue glass ornaments. The room was already magical, but when Charles looked into the glass ball just above his nose, he could see the reflection of the entire room—a distorted panorama of blues and greens from the tree and sparkling gifts mingled with the warm ambers emanating from the open door to the kitchen. Charles would lie there until disturbed by a call to the dinner table.

That panoramic reflection of his family's most cherished Christmas event would always be with Charles long after Grandma and Grandpa were gone, long after their little Christmas house on Artic Street had succumbed to urban renewal, with only the huge pine remaining next to the new, two-story apartment buildings as testament to those who had lived there before.

Many years later, after his own children had learned the Secret, if one were to peek into Charles' home late on a Christmas Eve after the dishes were washed and the wrapping paper was picked up and after everyone was abed for a long winter's night, one might find a middle-aged man lying flat on his back on the living room floor with his head stuck under the Christmas tree—feet crossed at the ankles. And his hands—now wrinkled and mottled and bearing the wear and tear of a lifetime of hard work and too much sun—resting on his chest with fingers entwined, at peace with the world.

<Merry Christmas>