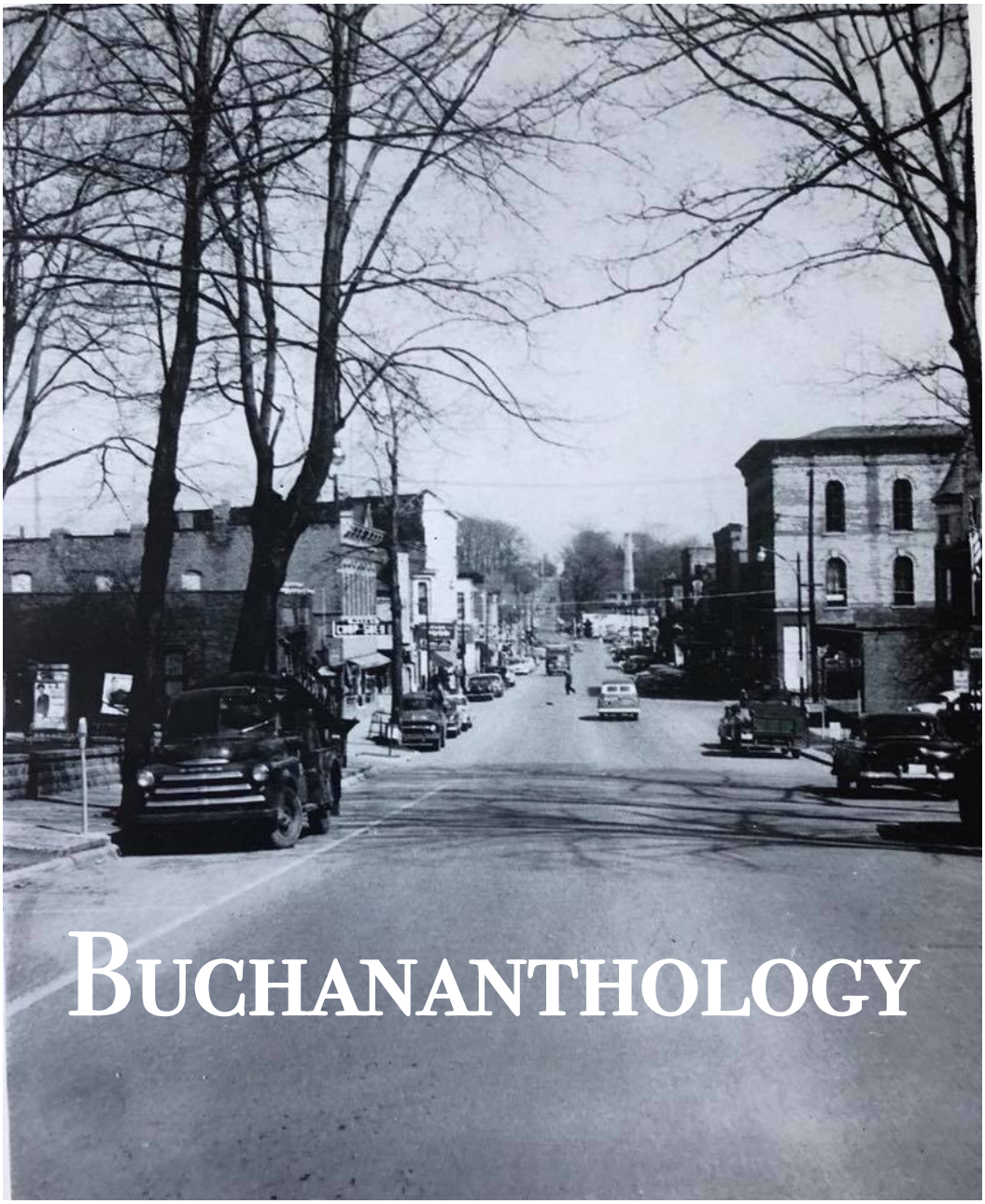

BUCHANANTHOLOGY

MEMOIRS OF AN IDYLLIC CHILDHOOD BY

Skip Birong

BUCHANANTHOLOGY

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Introduction

I wrote this collection of memoirs about eleven years ago. It was my first attempt at writing essays and the exercise was initially intended to be just that—no more than a series of practice pieces. I experimented with some style effects and attempted to brush up on my grammar (heartfelt thanks to my friend and editor, Lynn Gerlach, for taking me back to the schoolroom—she did the best that she could) and generally just wanted to see if I could write something well enough for it to be considered an enjoyable read. Well, the jury is still out on that. In any event, the essays were published sequentially in the Berrien Country record over the eight weeks or so leading up to Christmas in 2007. I subsequently found a home for them on my blog website along with what has turned out be a collection of numerous other works including nearly 120 essays, short stories and original music that I have posted since then. The site is currently titled *Skip's take on things* and can be found at www.skipbirong.com.

In addition to providing some practice, the essays were also written for the benefit of my kids and the younger generations of my extended family. And, admittedly, I have indulged in a certain amount of artistic license since my recollections of some of these events no doubt differ in varying degrees from those of others who were there at the time. In any event, some of the pieces in here are stories I have been telling for decades. Thus, it seemed like a pretty good opportunity to share some of this lore before the time comes to pass the baton.

Fast forward eleven years.

Although I'm not waiting by the phone for my Pulitzer call, I like to think my writing skills have improved at least marginally over the past eleven years. So, upon reading these stories again I felt compelled to see if I could spruce them up a bit. Thus, we have this newly-edited version. Oh, and special thanks to Bonnie Traverse for the cover photo from the Buchanan High School 1956 Pines yearbook.

Skip Birong

Preface

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

Anthology: A random miscellany of stories. Eight tales plucked from myriad recollections of an idyllic childhood in a quintessential small town in Midwest America during the years following the end of World War II (1945 – 1965). Names only half-heartedly changed to protect the innocent.

Growing up in a bucolic environment so charming that my sister and I still go back and drive the old roads from time to time just to reassure ourselves that it actually existed—not just some 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 rubber 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 all the time. No one worried about them unless they were late for dinner. 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 evening. Milk delivered to your door in glass bottles with cardboard caps. Fresh baked goods-delivered to your door by the bread man. Getting in trouble at the Oronoko Methodist 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 and straw in the summer. Getting sunburned on the shores of Lake Michigan at Warren Dunes. Spending the whole day playing in the woods. Picking cherries on twenty-foot ladders—eat as much as you pick. Have seed-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" over the roof of the schoolhouse during recess. Gravel roads. Ice in the winter. Mud in the springtime. Friday night dates to Silver

Beach and 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
Revised 2018

Hands

IN THE YEAR NINETEEN FIFTY-SIX, Charlie was a strapping ten-year old. He and his family lived in a home built by his father on the crest of a hill about five miles from Buchanan, Michigan, and just north of South Bend, Indiana—home of the "Fighting Irish" of the University of Notre Dame.

It was a dazzling Christmas morning and freshly fallen snow, which had blanketed the countryside only a few hours earlier, sparkled under the sun as it rose in a cloudless azure sky. Charlie and his family would soon climb into the family Studebaker for the short drive to his grandparents' country farmhouse where they would join his mother's extended family to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Arriving at about noontime, Charlie's father parked in the circular drive adjacent to several earlier arrivals. Everyone quickly piled out and headed for the front door laden with gaily wrapped gifts and replete with holiday cheer. And soon the old house's rafters were ringing with merriment.

Later in the day a traditional Midwestern holiday dinner was served, buffet-style, consisting of oven-roast turkey, home-baked ham, mashed potatoes and gravy, sweet potatoes, cranberry stars (a family specialty involving lemon gelatin, walnuts and cranberries, among other ingredients—Charlie's favorite), cream peas, homemade biscuits with fresh farm butter (lite "anything" had not yet been invented), ice cold whole milk, pumpkin pie and chocolate cake all prepared from scratch by the noble women of Charlie's extended family. Mouth-watering aromas wafted throughout the house as the oven door was opened and pot lids removed.

When the meal was ready to be served, as was the custom, all the men were called to the kitchen to get their plates filled. The small children were next to be served while seated at folding card tables in the kitchen where space allowed. And then, finally, the women joined their men in the dining room.

After dinner some of the gentlemen settled into college football in the living room on Grandpa's black-and-white console television. Others gravitated to a card table that had been cleared and set up in the dining room for nickel-ante poker,

while the ladies gathered in the kitchen. Meanwhile Charlie's siblings and cousins entertained themselves with their Christmas gifts.

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

Charlie secured the latch behind him and headed in the direction of the deserted chicken coop located just beyond the backyard. The small building served as a garage for his grandfather's farm tractor and stood adjacent to the beginning of a well-trodden footpath. The path, leading south about a quarter-mile across an abandoned grape arbor, was the most direct route between his grandparents' house and his family's home on the hill. But as Charlie approached he could see that the lane had become cloaked under several inches of snow—it would have to be forged anew. With puffs of steamy breath Charlie started up the gentle slope.

Arriving at the crest with a pink nose and fingers tingling from the cold, he entered the house through the back door that opened into the kitchen. He doffed his outerwear, leaving it on a chair and walked down the hall to the bedroom he shared with his younger brother. The furniture in their room included a small study desk that faced a window between their twin beds where Charlie spent the rest of the day quietly working on one of his model airplanes.

#

As evening grew near, the rest of his family suddenly erupted through the door in the hallway leading from the garage, arms filled with opened gifts and covered dishes of leftovers. But Charlie remained at his desk, ignoring the fuss.

Later, while still working on his balsa model, Charlie took notice of his own hands working in front of him. He stopped for a moment and splayed them on the desk—

palms down, digits extended. They were pale and pinkish in the warm 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 his hands over, he could see that the palms were moist and soft. These hands were clearly unlike those he recalled seeing last summer.

Charlie raised his eyes and peered through the window. But he could see no more than his own face and the room behind him reflected in the glare of its shiny, black surface—Christmas Day had quietly slipped into Christmas Night.

He rose from his chair to turn off the overhead light and returned to the window to find a wintry landscape lit by a rising full moon. The air was still and a billion stars shone down on the surface of what just hours earlier had been fresh, virgin snow. Now, at day's end, the previously pristine white cloak bore the scars from sled runners and skis, dogs and the boots of snowman-builders in a crisscross profusion of seemingly Pollock-inspired renderings—all the innocent defilers now curled up in their toasty-warm nests for the night.

Charlie, with elbows on the desk and cheeks cupped in his hands, looked out on the night and recalled visiting his grandparents' home on a scorching hot afternoon the previous summer. He remembered racing down the hill between the two houses over the same path he had followed earlier. But on that afternoon the sun had blazed down from a sky adorned with cotton candy clouds and the path was framed on either side by eight-foot high grasses and weeds that flourished on the uncultivated hillside in the heady month of August.

The air seemed thick with heat as young Charlie, shirtless and drenched in sweat, ran full-tilt down the hill stirring up the weed pollen, which clung to his tousled, curly hair and torso. Swatting sweat bees and panting, he soon reached the old chicken coop where he found his grandfather about to turn over the engine of the old John Deere tractor.

#

Grandma and Grandpa still lived in the same farmhouse in which Charlie's mother and her five siblings had been raised. It was here his mother had spent most of her adolescent and teen years. Where she brought Charlie's father-to-be home to meet her parents, the young man from whom she would sometimes allow a goodnight kiss, but only through the 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. And it was here that his grandfather had dutifully risen from his warm bed each winter morning, hours before the dawn, to replenish the fuel in the coal-burning furnace in the basement so the house would be warm when his family finally began to stir.

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

It was here where Charlie learned from his aunts Elizabeth and Joyce how to make a milk shake in a mixing bowl, 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 in the otherwise deserted chicken coop, about fifty paces from the back door of the old farmhouse, where he watched his grandfather rassle with the hand crank on the old John Deere tractor.

#

Charlie's grandfather, for whom he was named, had always seemed tough as leather to Charlie. 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, a local manufacturer, 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, his sister would have newspapers under him before he could hit a cushion.

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

Grandpa was retired and working odd jobs as a carpenter by the time Charlie 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.

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. One or two good cranks would usually set it off, if the controls were properly calibrated, not that there were all that many controls—they consisted of no more than a gas line and a choke. Nevertheless, someone with an inexperienced ear could crank all day and never find just the right combination.

Charlie watched as his grandfather, clad in a white, tank top 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. Charlie 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 manual labor. Bulging veins traversed his muscular forearms. Even in age, they were strong.

Charlie, sitting in his bedroom, once again looked down at his own hands—he could see they had a long way to go.

Grandpa and Aunt Liz on the old John Deere

The Kiss

CHARLIE'S PATERNAL GRANDFATHER 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 where he smoked and lit and lit and smoked his pipe and read the South Bend Tribune while waiting for Grandma to announce that dinner was on the table.

Grandpa tended to slouch in his later years. By eighty he had lost some of his hearing ("selectively," according to Grandma), 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 he accompanied his son and his family on a driving trip to Canada for a summer holiday. He didn't like it: "Too many foreigners around here," he said.

When Charlie was still a small boy, he and his siblings as well as his cousins, would often 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 whistling of the teakettle 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 down the street and a cup of hot tea.

While standing, Grandpa would pour the steaming water onto the teabag in his teacup, return the pot to the stove, and then take his seat at the head of the yellow

Formica kitchen 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 him.

When it was Charlie's turn he would dutifully march into the kitchen, typically barefoot and clad in his peejays. Standing just below eye-level with his seated grandpa, he would 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 whiskers. Then, back to his tea—and on to bed for Charlie. Every time.

The Half-Way House

THE SMALL COTTAGE in which Charlie's paternal grandparents resided was over one hundred years old when Charlie was a small boy. The two of them would raise four children in that tiny house: three girls and Charlie's father, the second eldest. And it was here that Charlie's grandparents, along with their new daughter-in-law and first grandson, would wait anxiously for their only son to return from the European theater during World War II.

Charlie's father, Howard, who was twenty years of age at the time, was serving his country as a 1st lieutenant and B-17F bomber pilot with the United States 8th Air Force, 457th bomber group, 751st Squadron, operating out of Britain. On May 19, 1944, on mission 46—his 5th—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. 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 was too terrified to jump from the aircraft with no more than an already-opened 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 high regard for German Shepherd dogs and wounds to his spirit that would never quite heal.

In the beginning, that little cottage had only one bedroom and was no bigger than a kitchenette. 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 short wooden ramp from one level to the next to accommodate Aunt Isabelle, Howard's eldest sister, who was confined to a wheelchair.

Grandma had a big, dark green couch that folded out into a bed for the grandchildren when they would spend the night. The fully extended bed nearly filled the tiny living room.

As was the rule, Charlie 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! Brought to you by Gillette Blue Blades!" which Grandpa watched religiously. Some years later, when Charlie 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 a 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 and others of lesser fortune. The patches consisted of heavy, thick cloth, most of which was likely manufactured to serve as furniture coverings, sewn to a maroon cotton backing. They were all shaded in dark patterns of maroons, dark 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 hearty thirteen-year old girl, one day to warm the dreams of her children.

The quilts would eventually become bedraggled and worn over the decades from the wear and tear involved in protecting the family's children from the chill of a cold night. They would eventually be refurbished by Charlie's mother, one stitch at a time, and thus resurrected to last through yet a fourth generation at last count.

Little Caroline has a cold

When Charlie got older, the location of Grandpa and Grandma's house on the north edge of town and between his home and the high school, became especially convenient since he and his siblings did not have ready access to a car. In fact, it was 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 a vehicle. 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 Charlie's parents, who got a little relief from chauffeuring duties.

The half-way house circa 1940s – 50s

Grandma and Smoky's

SHE WAS THE PERFECT EXAMPLE of a doting grandmother. If Charlie or any one 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 Charlie's paternal grandmother waiting on them hand and foot. Meals, gin rummy, 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. Charlie, 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 discovered and compelled by his father to smoke all the remaining cigarettes in the pack in order to teach him a lesson. Charlie's dad figured he would get sick and lose his interest in the habit. Charlie didn't get sick, but, in any event, never smoked a cigarette again until he graduated from high school. Fifteen years after that he quit and never smoked again except for the occasional cigar, which he doesn't inhale (much).

Grandma stood about five-foot-three, popped Tums like candy and wore a girdle when travelling out on the town. Such forays would often include accompanying her friend, Mary, for an afternoon of shopping in Niles, a small town about five miles to the east. These occasional trips would typically begin with lunch in a small café across the street to the east from Montgomery Ward. Grandma was fond of brightly patterned dresses and would wear one on such trips as well her white nurse's shoes, which were kinder to her chronically aching feet than more fashionable styles. When Charlie was a small child 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 summer evenings Grandma would sometimes take her grandchildren for a walk along Red Bud Trail down to the Dairy Queen. As she strolled along 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 in the summer 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 was a special needs daughter and had been confined to a wheelchair since her youth. She couldn't speak normally and what little vocabulary she had been able to garner was pretty much limited to the more popular curse words of the day, which she would string together whenever so moved.

For Isabelle to go with us 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 made George Carlin proud.

Aunt Isabelle, adorned with thick, black, bobbed hair, was of the same stout build as her mother. And the kids all loved her. 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 kitchen and living room. She loved it—swearing like a sailor the whole time.

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.) And 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 saw the opportunity, she would reach out and get one of the kids in a neck hold and practically dislocate vertebrae as she pulled him or her toward her, and then she would plant a big one on whomever she had managed to corner. She died when she was about sixty. They all have fond memories of their aunt Isabelle.

Grandma, Aunt Isabelle, Charlie, 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 in an automobile was a rarity in the Midwest in those days. The Buick was pulled in at an angle to a covered, center walkway facing another row of cars on the other side. The walkway was lighted with long, neon bulbs, yellow in color so as to be of less interest to the moths and other flying insects. Charlie, 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 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 young girls. It was a cool place for teenage girls to work. And the teenage girls attracted the teenage boys. Smoky knew that, of course.

When everyone was finished, the car hop would retrieve the window tray and Grandma would fire up the Buick. But the fun was not yet over.

Since the driveway at Smoky's was one-way, Grandma had to navigate the huge car 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. Charlie, 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 Charlie had given her credit. Which was especially fortunate, since Charlie would later need that car to practice his driving in preparation for the day when he would turn fifteen and be awarded his learner's permit by the Michigan State Department of Motor Vehicles.

In anticipation of this event, Charlie had been given driving lessons by his father and various aunts and uncles over the weeks approaching his fifteenth birthday. So, he was ready to go when the big day finally rolled around on a warm Saturday in March.

The DMV's offices were located in Benton Harbor, so Grandpa had volunteered to drive Charlie down there. And once the documentation was completed, the ink barely dry, Charlie was allowed to drive the big Buick back to Buchanan.

The route took them down Red Bud Trail, which is a winding, two-lane paved road along the St. Joe River. For the entire trip Charlie had an ear-to-ear smile while Grandpa sat in the passenger seat holding a spent match to the bowl of his pipe and stomping on his imaginary brake pedal.

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.

By and by, there we 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. Charlie's favorite popsicle was orange. They tasted a lot like orange Hi-C.

The Gravel Pit

IT WAS A PLACE no male adolescent in possession of a bike could possibly resist. Part of the allure, of course, was the fact that Charlie and Eddie were forbidden to go there. On the other hand, it was a fair distance from their home and largely isolated, at least in the early evenings and weekends—read "hard to get caught." No greater boy magnet could be created (at least not until they got a little older, of course). It was… (drum roll) "The Gravel Pit."

In the day-to-day world of adults, the gravel pit , which was located about a quarter mile west of Red Bud Trail on Little Glendora Road, was a surface mine for rock, stone and gravel—materials used by local construction and road building companies. But for Charlie and Eddie 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 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 Charlie and his brother passed up the chance to hop over some of the cliffs. They lived to tell the story, but only, after an appropriate amount of time had passed.

The Frog Giggers

AS AN EIGHT YEAR-OLD BOY, Charlie had never heard of "frog gigging", which is a southern term he would learn decades later when he decided his fortunes were best sought in the warmer latitudes. Frog gigging refers to the practice of cruising swamps at night in a flat-bottomed boat or canoe powered only by oars or paddles in search of croakers of sufficient size to render fat, plump legs for the dinner table. Charlie did not own a boat. Nevertheless, he had become a frog gigger—if only in a less conventional sense.

But first, this…

In their early elementary years Charlie and Eddie attended classes at Colvin School, a little one-room, red-brick schoolhouse located on the northeast corner of the intersection of Main Street and Garr Road north of town. It was about a two mile walk down graveled country roads for the boys, who joined up along the way with the other kids who lived on Little Glendora, Aalfs and Garr roads.

In the depths of winter, the big county V-plows, after operating all night, would usually have cleared the roads by 7:30 a.m. or so when it was time for Charlie and Eddie to head out for school. And sometimes the boys could hitch a ride on either the milk truck or the bread truck for part of the trip, depending on which day it was. On warmer days when they were lucky enough to do so, Charlie liked to stand on the step just inside the open door of the vans. Holding his lunchbox with one hand and the vertical hand rail with the other, he would watch the dust and gravel of the road flash by just below his feet. No delivery man would dare allow that these days. Not that you could *find* a delivery man these days.

Once they arrived at the schoolhouse they would first pass through the "mud room" just inside the entrance. That was where the kids 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, black rubber boots with metal fasteners up the front, socks and shoes, which always seemed to stay stuck in those

obnoxious boots. (In the picture below, that's Charlie in the second seat from the back in the third row from the left. That's Eddie in the second seat, first row). Anyway, a lot of interesting things can happen to a fourth grader while walking unescorted back and forth to school two miles down a country road…

Here we are in class at Colvin School

The route to and from school passed an artesian wellspring at the corner of Glendora and Garr. The spring was about five feet off the side of the road and formed a small pool about four feet across. Charlie and his classmate David, each of whom passed the pond twice a day, were pretty sure it was bottomless and were cautious not to step in the bubbling "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 afternoon on the way home they noticed the frogs. Big frogs. I mean *lots* of *big* frogs. All over the place. Wow! The fear of certain death quickly set aside, the boys found that if they wanted to *catch* the frogs, they would have to sneak up on them or they would leap into the pond. They soon learned, however, that if one were to sit quietly for a while the frogs would slowly come back to the surface. The two stalkers would wait patiently,

or as patiently as eight-year-old boys can, 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 slip silently by, unnoticed until the cattail shadows became long and the warm spring day would be replaced with the cool, humid air of early evening—dinnertime. And then they knew they were in trouble.

By the time Charlie arrived home, he found that his mother, worried to death, had called most of the neighbors trying to find him. His frog gigging days were over, at least for the time being.

The First Car

CHARLIE 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. For many years it had been the work horse around Bear Cave Campgrounds where Charlie, and later his brother, would work for spending money 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 had been used to haul firewood to the campsites, carry topped-off garbage cans away from the sites, cart brush and tree trimmings and perform myriad other tasks not unlike those more typically assigned to a tractor. Mr. Mallory, the owner of the campgrounds, sold it to Charlie for $35.

Charlie was delighted with his newly acquired vehicle and the freedom he gained by having his own transportation—he was done with bicycles.

After years sitting outdoors in the rain and snow, though, the truck's original shiny, dark green paint job had oxidized to the point where it was almost down to the metal—except 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, Charlie's first order of business was to paint it. He used a plain, six-inch paint brush and royal blue gloss enamel paint. Then, with tongue-in-cheek, he added a six-inch white racing stripe down the middle of the entire cab and hood. 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 Will, who was Aunt Liz's husband, was an expert when it came to automobile engines. In fact, he and some of his friends had competed at various racing venues in the area with a custom-built D-Class dragster. The body and frame, which they built from scratch in his garage, housed a bored-out V-8 Chevy engine with lots of spotless, shiny chrome parts. It was dubbed the Tasmanian Terror. And

Charlie, who had displayed some talent in the graphic arts as a young man, had been given the honor of painting an unauthorized, enamel rendering of the cartoon character on a flat, otherwise unadorned panel on the front of the machine.

One day Uncle Will would be piloting his dragster down the drag strip when the transmission, which was situated between his knees and, fortunately, behind a bowel-shaped, one-half-inch-thick steel firewall, would explode. Uncle Will lost the race. But he managed to keep intact 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 remain on the friendly side of explosions.

With these adjustments, Charlie was pretty much ready to go except for the engine compartment hood. At that point in time, though, he didn't know there was a problem with the hood. He would eventually learn of this problem one day while driving down Red Bud Trail at sixty miles per hour and day-dreaming about his girlfriend at which time the front latch on the hood would give it up.

Okay. Now two things happened there: First of all, that big heavy hood, when lifted by that sixty mile-per-hour headwind, slammed against the windshield, cracking the glass and scaring the living bejeezus out of Charlie. Secondly, Charlie's eyes went from sleepy glazed, and half-opened to the size of saucers as he suddenly found himself barreling down the highway with his vision limited to a six-inch white stripe about a foot from his nose. His instincts kicked in at that point and he managed to stick his head out the window in time to avoid a catastrophe. Charlie sometimes wondered how things might have gone had the window not been rolled down.

# # #

Charlie's life would be forever changed by his discovery of music as a means of self-expression. Having been introduced to the piano at the age of thirteen, he soon expanded his virtuosity to the acoustic guitar.

Although Charlie had yet to become an accomplished guitarist by the age of seventeen, he was a member of 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.

The most notorious member of the Outcasts was Benny, who was their front-man. 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 even at his young age he was already a superb lead guitar player and vocalist. And his interest in music was greatly encouraged by his mother, who bought him a Gibson Firebird electric guitar—the envy of his co-band members.

Charlie, on the other hand, did not own an electric guitar of any description. Thus, he performed with an old Sears Silvertone borrowed from a friend and had to plug in with Benny on his amp. Humble pie.

So, off they went with Charlie playing 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 with which Charlie would play second fiddle.

The Outcasts were well-received in Buchanan and the surrounding communities. And from time to time they would even perform for actual money. The going rate in such case was $50, which they would split evenly at $12.50 apiece. One such paying engagement was at the Moose Lodge in Niles, another small town about five miles from Buchanan. On the evening of the gig, they loaded all their equipment into the bed of Charlie's truck and the four of them, including Eddie, who was filling in as drummer, headed for Niles.

All went well at the Lodge that night. 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 back into Charlie's truck, which was parked in a lighted lot adjacent to the lodge.

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

Over the years the old Chevy had become pretty finicky when it came to being started up, especially in the middle of the night after the dew had settled. Standard procedure was to unwind the nine-gauge wire that held the front of the hood firmly to the grill, an improvisation inspired by Charlie's 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.

Charlie always carried some gasoline with him for this purpose. He found the most convenient vessel to be 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 abandoned squirrel's nest, which he had never bothered to clear out. This was a particularly 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. After administering the gasoline into the carburetor and two or three pumps on the accelerator, the old girl would come to life and everyone would be on their way.

Unless, of course, the truck had been sitting idle for more than about eight hours, in which case it would also be necessary to pump up the left rear tire. Charlie carried a basketball hand pump in the cab for this purpose. Thus, when necessary, he could get the tire sufficiently inflated to make it to the nearest gas station where he could then borrow a motor-driven air pump to bring it up to pressure. Fortunately, that was not necessary on this night.

Charlie managed to get the engine started easily enough only to find that the headlights didn't work. The truck had a tricky lighting system, which sometimes required wiggling and jiggling various wires under the dashboard to get everything sufficiently connected. On top of that, when Charlie first took possession of the

truck he found that the left-front fender area that housed the headlight had pretty much rusted away, leaving the headlight aimed down to the pavement at a 45-degree angle. Charlie cleverly remedied this problem by removing the headlight from its frame altogether and hanging it by two wires from the top of what was left of the fender housing—relying on gravity to keep it level. As a result, when Charlie would hit a bump in the road or come to an abrupt stop, the headlight would swing back and forth from its hanger. It's fortunate that recreational drugs were not available to these kids or they never would have gotten past the first stop light.

But even with these alterations, sometimes the entire lighting system simply refused to work, which was the case on this night. And having no headlights was a particularly vexing problem—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, who had come along to help with roadie duties, had driven to the lodge in his own car. It was quickly agreed that Charlie would closely follow Mick for the five-mile drive back to Buchanan, with Mick's car acting as leading light bearer. So, off they went into the moonless summer night.

Well, about four-and-a-half miles into the trip a vehicle pulled up behind Charlie, riding on the truck's rear bumper with high beams a-blazing. Benny was particularly annoyed by this since it was keeping him awake. His reaction was to exhibit the standard one-finger salute with both hands while bellowing crude remarks at the driver at the top of his lungs. After about five seconds of this the car suddenly displayed an eye-melting, red flashing light on its roof. With his heart in his mouth, Charlie pulled the truck to the side of the road. Meanwhile, Mick, who didn't notice the state trooper behind Charlie, kept right on going, leaving the Outcasts to their own devices.

This was easily the most intimidating state trooper ever to grace the blue highways of Southwestern Michigan. He was driving a spotless, dark blue Chrysler with the words MICHIGAN STATE POLICE and other important information emblazoned all over it in yellow. Charlie slid hesitantly from the driver's seat and turned to find

himself immediately nose-to-badge with the trooper. That is, Charlie's nose was exactly the same height as the badge worn by this formidable Protector-of-the-People of the Great State of Michigan.

The officer also wore one of those silly looking Smoky-the-Bear hats. However, there wasn't one ounce of "silly" anywhere on this guy. He was armed with a blue-black revolver 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 handcuffs and two rows of bullets that to Charlie seemed as big as mortar shells.

As it were, since Mick had kept on driving after Charlie stopped, the officer reasonably assumed that Charlie was simply driving down the road in the pitch-black night with no lights whatsoever. His body language indicated that he was not impressed with Charlie. Meanwhile, in the time it took Charlie to take all this in, Benny had become uncharacteristically quiet, clearly giving Charlie the thumbs-up to take it from here.

"License, please," said the officer. That was it. No idle pleasantries.

Charlie pulled his driver's license from his wallet and waited nervously while the officer studied it in the brilliant beam of a shiny, two-foot long silver flashlight. After satisfying himself that Charlie was properly credentialed, he passed the beam of his flashlight across the cab of the truck while Charlie stood by and 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.

It was about then the officer discovered Charlie's scotch bottle. Gasoline, of course, 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. Charlie noticed the trooper's back stiffen even more, if that was possible.

While also considering what it was going to be like to surrender his driver's license until age twenty-one, Charlie explained to the officer the truck's need for a gasoline booster to get the engine started—and was also quick to point out the obvious utility of using a scotch bottle to store it. The Trooper proceeded to open

the top of the bottle and take a whiff. He handed the bottle back to Charlie. So far so good.

Next, the officer walked around the front of the truck to the passenger side, no doubt admiring Charlie's handiwork on the hood latch on his way. He wanted to have a look in the glove compartment. This took a minute because Will, the bass player, couldn't get the passenger door open. Charlie, 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 Charlie's brother Eddie been sitting next to the passenger door he could easily have opened it for the officer. Eddie became aware of the door's idiosyncrasies earlier that summer when one afternoon Charlie had picked him up at Bear Cave in the truck. No sooner had Eddie settled into the passenger seat, when Charlie, just for the fun of it, hit the gas and did a hard U-turn in the gravel driveway. That was when Eddie discovered that it wasn't such a good idea to lean against the door from the inside. As Charlie completed his 180-degree turnaround in the driveway, centrifugal force had thrown Eddie completely out of the truck, leaving him lying in the gravel about twenty feet away. Charlie found this hilarious: Eddie did not.

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 flashlight when he shined it in there was the tops of Will's shoes—and a little bit of the pavement below, 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, who was now sitting quietly in the truck bed with arms across his chest and a stupid grin on his face. In the meantime, Mick finally noticed that he had lost sight of the crippled truck in his rear-view mirror and had backtracked in time to find the state trooper pulling his citation book from his back pocket.

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 the boys had decided to try to make it home, Charlie 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 Charlie had to go to see the local Justice of the Peace, who served as the traffic court in Buchanan. After hearing Charlie's story, the JP levied a five-dollar fine and sent him home.

A year later, Charlie would graduate from high school and leave for Kalamazoo where he would take his first crack at trying to earn a college education. In his absence, his Dad would sell the old truck for fifty dollars 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

AS WITH OTHER FAMILIES, Charlie and his clan had to split their time during the holidays with both sides of the family. So, Christmas Day was traditionally spent at the old farmhouse of his maternal grandparents and Christmas Eve was enjoyed at the little half-way house on Artic Street in Buchanan. Thus, it seemed as though the most memorable times spent at Charlie's paternal grandparents' house were always on Christmas Eve.

Grandma absolutely loved the holidays. Somehow, she would manage to scrimp and save tiny bits of money all year long, so she would have enough to buy wonderful gifts for every person in the family. Christmas Eve was Grandma's most gloried time of the year and her young grandchildren started counting-down the days immediately after Thanksgiving.

When Christmas Eve finally appeared on the calendar, Charlie and his family and his cousins and their parents on that side of the family arrived at Grandma's and Grandpa's house shortly after dark, which was barely past five o'clock p.m. in the month of December. Cars would be lined up in the gravel drive adjacent to the ancient forty-foot pine that grew in the front lawn. The tree would become veiled in fluffy snow along with the cars as the evening wore on.

> *[As a side note, Grandma and Grandpa's firstborn child was stillborn. Those many years ago, when the world was less complicated than it is these days, they had lovingly buried the child under that tree—well over one hundred years ago now.]*

When Grandpa first heard tires crunching into the drive, he would light a fire in the old-fashioned wood-and-coal-burning kitchen stove. It had been many years since the stove had been used to cook a meal, but it served well as a means to quickly re-warm the room after everyone had entered through the kitchen door. The house was soon filled with the smells and sounds of Christmas.

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, Charlie, who was now ten, was asked to place the family's gifts under the tree shortly after their arrival and before dinner.

As Charlie stepped across the threshold, he found himself bathed in the soft blue lights of a small, four-foot spruce at the far end of the otherwise dark room. As was Grandma's custom, the tree was decorated solely with 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 an inviting, warm glow. And with the mingling scent of pine needles and dinner and the joyous noise of familiar voices behind him, Charlie became lost in the season.

The little tree was surrounded by gifts. Stacked nearly chest high to Charlie, each was wrapped in merry scenes of the season and marked for the recipient by Santa. Grandma always signed the tags "from Santa," and lengthy and varied explanations were shared with the little ones 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!

Charlie gave up the idea of Santa Clause grudgingly. After all, he had been told that if he stopped believing in him, he would stop coming. Charlie was still hanging on to this notion by the age of eight or so, despite some pretty obvious clues, when his parents decided someone needed to just come right out and tell him. Charlie was shocked.

Discovering the true identity of this particular Santa, though, was a rite of passage for the grandchildren. After Charlie learned the Secret he was allowed to help Grandma wrap all the gifts, a task which usually started shortly after the Thanksgiving holiday. He was sworn to secrecy. And Grandma would soon have ornately 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, those bells could be 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-rap-rap at the front door. Charlie's 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 Charlie 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 always have a Hershey bar for each child before taking his leave through the front door. And then, with a great "HO HO HO" and the subsiding ring of sleigh bells, he would be gone into the night.

When Charlie was older he was given the privilege of inspecting those sleigh bells. Grandpa stored them in the dirt-floor cellar of the house, which was accessible through a trap-door hidden under an area rug in the kitchen, 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, which was meant to be draped across the back of a horse, 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, Charlie would salvage the bells from his father's basement and keep them in a safe place with the intent of finding a craftsman somewhere to remount them on new leather. Before doing so, though, he would eventually turn them over to one of his cousins who, by that time, enjoyed a houseful of family on the holidays just as Grandma once did. So, yet another generation of young children get to hear Santa's reindeer on Christmas eve.

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 aahs" and "thank you's" and "you shouldn't have's."

And then it was over. Charlie 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 again while the children slept.

Wading through freshly fallen, blue-white snow sparkling in the moonlight, Charlie's father and his uncles carried the toddlers and kindergartners to the cars. As the interiors warmed during the slow drive home on slippery country roads, the little ones' excitement would be overcome by sleep and dreams of toys and popsicles would dance in their heads.

On this evening Charlie placed the gifts around the tree, as his mom had asked. And then, while everyone was still in the kitchen, he moved a few packages aside and eased himself down to the area rug that covered the worn, hardwood floor. He laid on his back with hands across his chest and with his heels pushed forward until his head was situated just beneath one of the front limbs and immediately below one of the shiny glass orbs. The room was already magical, but when Charlie 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 warm ambers emanating from the open door to the kitchen. Charlie

would lie there, with feet crossed at the ankles, contented and undisturbed, until called to the dinner table.

That panoramic image of one of his family's most cherished Christmas events would always be with Charlie long after Grandma and Grandpa were gone. And long after the little Christmas house on Artic Street would succumb to urban renewal, with only the huge pine next to the new, two-story apartment buildings remaining as testament to those who had once lived such full lives there. (The city would eventually correct the spelling on the street sign to "Arctic".)

# # #

Many years later, after his own children had learned the Secret, if one were to peek into Charlie's home late on a Christmas Eve after the dishes were washed and put away 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