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Someday, when I lived in Frost

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Someday, when I lived in Frost

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

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Chapter 1 - Water From the Well

When we went to Grandma's, we went to Frost. Frost and Grandma's were synonymous. And when we went to Grandma's, it meant that we would also visit the farm and all the aunts and uncles and the cousins too. From our home in Rochester, I rode in the back seat of the Ford LTD – or the Pontiac Parisienne or the Mercury Grand Marquis – with my head pressed against the glass, row after row of corn and soy and corn and soy – their green and gold leaves waving like flags – hypnotizing me as we rolled westward across southern Minnesota along on I-90.

Somewhere beyond Albert Lea, somewhere after the implement dealer, my dad would tap on the driver's side window with his knuckle and say, "There's Big Bird." He was pointing out a pair of trees -- a short, round maple and a tall pine standing next to each other at the edge of a small, country cemetery. From a distance, they resembled the big, yellow bird from *Sesame Street*. One branch jutted out westward from the top of the pine like a beak. When we got to Big Bird, we knew we were getting close to Grandma's.

When we got to the "Frost" exit sign, I climbed from the stern to the bow of the Ford, sat on Dad's lap, and slid my fingers into the brown plastic grooves of the steering wheel for the final four miles down a long, straight blacktop between more rows of corn and soy, over the chocolately East Fork of the Blue Earth River, past the steel grain bins and tired farm houses, past the cemetery, past the green sign that said, "FROST - Pop. 298." And if I passed a pick-up or a Buick, I lifted a finger off the wheel, just like Dad.

I turned left at the red brick high school, "HOME OF THE VIKINGS" and a purple, horn-helmeted warrior looked down menacingly from a sign on the north wall of the gym. As

we coasted into town, my Cousin Tommy's house was on the right, just up the gravel alley behind the tennis courts. I always looked for the rear wheels of his go-cart peeking out from behind his garage. I kept driving to the next block with Dad's foot hovering above the brake. Grandma's house was on the corner on the right -- a white, two-story clapboard house with a porch facing west. As we turned into the driveway, I peered over the long, white hood of the car and steered the tires onto the gravel tracks to avoid the green grass between them. I could hear the gravel crunch beneath the tires, and I could see Grandma Clarice -- her soft, wispy white hair piled into croissant-like rolls on her head and a big smile on her face -- waving from between the lace curtains of the small kitchen window.

I hopped off my Dad's lap, out of the car, and onto the grass. In front of the car, just outside the back door, there was an antique well water pump with a long handle. I sprinted to the old pump and grabbed the long handle. I showed my strength by raising that iron handle above my head, then jumping up to bring it down with all my weight again and again until rusty water from a 100-year-old well started to flow in a steady stream onto the grass.

I envisioned my dad pulling down on that same handle when he was a kid. The water was clear in my conjured images of my Grandpa and Grandma Brekke at the pump. They pulled cool water from the ground into buckets, quenching their thirst with a wooden ladle on a hot Minnesota day. Then Grandma hung clothes on the line. Grandpa took a break from hauling grain in his big truck, slaked his big thirst at the pump. I envisioned them in the kitchen, scrubbing potatoes with a brush dipped in that water, warming well water up on the stove and washing themselves with it in a wooden barrel on Saturday nights. I was doing as they had done.

None of that ever happened, according to my dad, when I asked him about the pump years later. By that time, it didn't matter. It was my ritual -- pumping the long handle, watching the rusty water come gushing out in spurts. I pumped faster, harder, and the water came rushing out in a steady flow, and I placed my hands under the spout and felt the cool water on my small hands. Sometimes I would splash it on my face.

The mythologist Joseph Campbell said rituals remind us to live with intention and help us realize that we are "participating in the inevitable energy of life." I didn't know what drew me to that long iron handle when I was a kid, but I knew I had to get out and pump water from the well every time I arrived in Frost.

There are nine streets in the town of Frost, and the branches of my family tree shade every one of them. Grandma and Grandpa Brekke bought their house on the corner of 4th and Stanley for \$900 in 1940 and never left. My mom grew up across the street to the north. My dad's sister, Connie and her husband, Bill, raised four of my cousins in the grand old Maland house across Stanley Street to the west. I'm named after my Great Uncle Joe Kallestad. After a tour of duty as an infantryman in Italy and France during WWII, Uncle Joe returned to Frost, worked as a clerk at Ike's General Store and the Post Office on Main Street, and lived alone in the house he grew up in at the corner of Howard and 3rd Streets until the day he died. Both of my grandfathers worked at the grain elevator at the southern end of Main, along the railroad tracks. My Great Aunt Bea was the bookkeeper for the farmer's elevator, the only woman ever to work there. My Great Grandpa Amund Brekke ran a roller rink and movie

theater on the second floor of the old opera house on Main. The Frost city limits encompass one half square mile, but it seemed to be the center of the universe when I was growing up.

From the water pump in Grandma Clarice's back yard, I ran into her arms at the back porch door. "Well, hello there!" she said, giving me a squeeze with her left arm, holding the door open for my mom, my older sister, Nicci, and my younger brother, Luke, with her right. Inside the back entryway, the smell of musty basement, menthol cigarettes and beef roast coalesced into "the smell of Grandma's House." I would let go of Grandma and run into the kitchen where Dad ate a handful of mixed nuts from the cupboard.

Every time he got to Grandma's, Dad would kiss his mother, snap open the cupboard to the left of the sink and inhale a handful of Planters from a bottomless can. Then he would disappear into the living room to talk to Grandpa Eddie.

I opened the fridge, pull a Mr. Pibb off the plastic six-pack holder and stuff a couple Keebler Fudge Stripe cookies into my mouth. Then, I followed Dad into the living room. Grandpa sat in his wheelchair in the middle of the crowded room. "Hello, Joey," he said, in a growly voice. "Jeez, you're getting big."

Grandpa Eddie was a big man. In all the pictures I have seen of him before his first stroke in 1972, his build reminds me of Dick Butkus, the 1960s-era Hall of Fame linebacker for the Chicago Bears. I had seen pictures of Butkus on football cards in a Mankato card collector's shop, and I was instantly struck by the similarity to my grandpa. They had the same short-cropped crew cut, a half-inch of bristly hair that accentuated the cinder-block shape of the head. They both had a pronounced jaw, thick neck, big arms.

In one of my favorite photos of my Grandpa Eddie, he is holding me in his left arm in the tiny dining room of their home in Frost. It is a small, three-by-three-inch, fading color

photo from 1976. I am two years old. Grandpa's right arm is in a white sling, and the sky-blue straps stand out in contrast against a stone gray work shirt with black buttons. I am looking at the camera over my left shoulder, stone-faced. I was a sober toddler by all accounts. In the photo, Grandpa Eddie is laughing, apparently working hard to get a smile out of me. He is not looking at the camera, but at me, laughing, a broad smile on his face.

I have always wished I had known the Grandpa in that photo, the strong and jolly man I always heard about. I never knew that man. I don't remember him standing without his quad cane or holding onto my father as he slid himself from his wheelchair into the passenger side of the tan Pontiac hatchback Grandma Clarice drove back and forth from Frost to our house in Rochester, from Frost to the Mayo Clinic, from Frost to St. Mary's Hospital. When I think of Grandpa Eddie, I see him sitting in his wheelchair in the middle of that living room in Frost, parked in front of the TV, watching *Hee-Haw*, *Dallas* or *Lawrence Welk*. His hospital bed is to his left, stretching more than halfway across the north wall of the crowded sitting room. Several amber-colored bottles of pills, a copy of *TV Guide* and the remote control are on an orange and brown TV tray to the right of his chair.

I don't remember talking to him much. Whenever we'd go to Frost, I was so geared to drive my Cousin Tommy's go-carts and dirt bikes, I didn't spend much time inside talking with my handicapped Grandpa Eddie. I remember hopping up onto his tall bed each time we left to go back to Rochester after Christmas, after Easter, after a summer visit. I always leaned over the edge of his wheel chair to kiss his bristly cheek and say, "Love you, Grandpa."

I didn't usually take time to do that upon my arrivals. Instead, I would run right past Grandpa Eddie, through the living room, out the front door. I would feel the wooden porch

steps give a little under my feet, and I would sprint through the grass, across the street to my Cousin Tommy's house, spilling and sipping Pibb as I ran. Tommy's house seemed to be the biggest in Frost. It was certainly the tallest. The giant pine trees reached up as high as the tiny windows of their third-story attic. I would run around to the back door and walk into the kitchen where my Aunt Connie was feeding a cat or tending to a pan of Sloppy Joes. Many times, though, Cousin Tommy would be back by the garage, standing beside the big bucket seat and scarred red frame of his go-kart, pouring gasoline from a red metal can into the idling Briggs & Stratton engine. When I hopped behind the wheel and slid my tennis shoe onto the accelerator, I felt the blood pulsing through my body, I saw my future on a racetrack, and I hoped I never had to go home again.

Growing up in Rochester ("The Big City" to my cousins), I ached for a life in Frost, across the street from my grandparents, within walking distance of Uncle Joe's. I wanted to live the small-town experience my relatives all talked about, laughed about, told stories about every time they got together. I wanted to haul feed buckets to the hog barn with Grandpa Morrie just north of town. I wanted to walk "uptown" *by myself* and get the mail for Grandma Clarice at the Post Office every day. I wanted to waltz into T.J.'s Bar with a fistful of quarters like my Cousin Tommy and play *Ms. Pac-Man* in the smoky dark while old farmers and truckers drank beer.

Door to door, Grandma's house was only 96.6 miles from home, but it seemed like another country to me. A better country. In Frost, a kid could do things unimaginable in the city. Tommy and I could walk uptown alone and buy Lik-M-Aid candy at the little grocery store. We could throw the football back and forth in the middle of the street, planting our feet at the curb before falling "out-of-bounds," and sprint door to door, rounding up Frost kids to

play football on the sprawling high school field by Tommy's house. We could knock on my Great Uncle Joe's back door any time of day and be invited inside for a can of Mountain Dew and a full-sized Snickers bar. Even before dinner. In my imagination, that's how Tommy spent every day. He was living the life I dreamed.

Frost looked different than my home in Rochester as well. There were more tractors and grain trucks on the roads than cars. Main Street was one block long -- a grocery store, a hardware store, a bank, and a Post Office. Dogs and cats ran loose around town and everybody knew them by name and temperament. And instead of Rochester's famous Plummer Building and Mayo Clinic rising up into the sky from the middle of town, the colossal grain elevator loomed over south end of Frost, alongside the railroad tracks, the towering grey sheets of steel rusting in streaks from the rain and sun. Tommy drove the go-kart right through the gravel loading area of the elevator where the diesel trucks parked, but I always spun around and gunned it for Tommy's house as soon as the black rubber tires hit that gravel driveway. The elevator always seemed a bit menacing to me, too big for a town so small. I figured I would get used to it in time, learn to drive in between the grain bins, beneath the parked semi-trailers, navigate the gravel alleyways with confidence like Tommy, someday, when I lived in Frost.

My other big boyhood dream was to stay at the farm -- overnight or all summer long. Either one would have been fine with me. My Grandma Mabel and Grandpa Morrie lived there with my Uncles Mike and Terry. The farm was about two miles northeast of Frost. The property was a homestead farm and had been in my Grandpa Morrie's family for over a century. It was beautiful, set back from the gravel road on a gentle rise along Brush Creek.

They raised hogs and sheep, had a horse for a while and white ducks named Laverne and Shirley and Starskey and Hutch.

I wanted to get up early with my uncles Mike and Terry and Grandpa Morrie and “do chores” – feed hogs, sheer sheep, split wood. I wanted to eat eggs and bacon, drink thick milk and black coffee. I had always envisioned myself spending summers on the farm when I was old enough – 12 or 13. I had heard of people doing this. I would grow strong carrying heavy buckets of feed to the hog barns and shoveling manure into piles. My skin would turn bronze in the summer sun walking between rows of soybeans, pulling weeds. Maybe, when the chores were all done, I would help Mike and Terry renovate that old maroon Chevy with the fins in the implement shed, and they would let me drive it on the gravel roads. I would learn to fix cars, tractors, and mowers. Maybe we would repair barbed wire fences or bail hay. I wanted to use my muscles and talk like men about hogs and beans.

When my brother and sister and I would stand at the fences by the barns, reaching out to pet the pigs or sheep, Mike and Terry or Grandpa would call them with a clicking sound followed by, “Kyeer, Pig” or “Kyeer, sheep.” They always came right up, and we could rub our hands across the bristly backs of the hogs, press our knuckles into their wet, curious noses, or sink our fingers into the oily wool of the sheep.

The farmhouse was home to hard-working men and one tough Grandma. The back steps were made of worn concrete with a single rail made of half-inch cast iron piping. To the right of the steps, there was always an old turkey-basting pan full of soup bones, leftover potatoes and dog food, covered with flies. Inside the porch, rubber boots, coveralls, and exasperated gloves were strewn about, sometimes lying over the wood box to dry. In the box to the left there were big round logs the size of tree trunks, split logs and dry kindling. Mike

and Terry would toss wood into that box with a bang. They would pull out those huge logs and feed them into the wood-burning stove in the middle of the house, then jab an iron poker around to stir up the glowing embers. They closed the doors and latched them as if they were in a fencing match, with a quick stab at the door and turn of an iron clasp; the hot doors were locked again. The house always smelled like a campfire. I loved it.

I remember walking into the hog shed once with Grandpa. It was a hot, humid day, and there was a moist manure pile near the back of the shed. My eyes watered. My nose hairs were singed. I pulled my shirt up over my face to try to filter the air. Grandpa turned around to make sure I was still with him, and he must have seen the tears.

“What’s the matter, Joey?”

“I can’t breathe.”

“Oh. I don’t even smell it anymore.”

Grandpa couldn’t smell it. He couldn’t smell anything.

I have four distinct visions of Grandpa Morrie in my mind. In one vision, he is a farm guide. He would often take us on tours of the farm, dressed in his filthy, gray coveralls and rubber boots. Sometimes he would carry the five-gallon buckets of feed, a cigarette pinched between his lips, calling “Kyeer, pig,” as he poured the feed into a trough. Then we could pet the hogs through the fence. In another vision, I see him on a rusty, old orange tractor, resting his right forearm on the steering wheel, removing a dirty seed cap and wiping sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his left. Other times when we arrived, he would be sitting at the kitchen table, in his coveralls, rolling a cigarette. There was always a big can of Velvet Pipe Tobacco on the kitchen table, and I vividly recall watching Grandpa Morrie deftly rolling his own cigarettes in those tiny rolling papers with his big, calloused hands. The other place I see

him in my mind is laid out, sleeping in the big brown Naugahyde recliner in their sitting room, mouth agape, snoring. It seemed like an idyllic place to me.

Chapter 2 - Just Like Cousin Tommy

Despite my desires, I never lived in Frost. The longest I ever stayed in town was for two weeks in 1986 when I was 12. My Grandpa Eddie, my dad's dad, had just passed away.

When people died in Frost, there were scalloped potatoes with cubed ham in the basement of the Lutheran Church. Old ladies in dark floral print dresses with soft, pillowy, chicken-wing arms ladled heaping scoops of creamy, white sliced potatoes onto white plates with big, metal spoons as everyone in town moved through the serving line. Another grandma added a scoop of creamed corn, then some pea salad made with Miracle Whip and small cubes of Velveeta cheese. A scoop of cloudy, green Jell-O salad came next, then a puffy, white dinner roll slathered with butter. More old ladies with floppity forearms like Grandma Mabel's and Grandma Serena's poured black Folger's coffee from gold and black thermal carafes into small, white coffee cups. Nodding in the direction of small, white, dimpled bowls with handles sitting on long tables draped in white linens, the women quietly said, "Cream and sugar's on the table." Older men – farmers, truckers, construction workers – cleanly shaven and wearing the same starched brown suits they wore for weddings and confirmations said "Thank you" or "OK" in equally hushed tones. These men shifted a little in the brown, metal folding chairs lined up around the tables, making loud squeaks and scraping sounds on the poured concrete floor. They raised their pearly cups with calloused hands and dirty nails, leaving the cream and sugar on the table. On the counter near the kitchen, top-heavy squares of yellow cake with chocolate frosting were lined up on small,

white dessert plates, but I had to wait until the adults were done eating before I could have dessert.

“Eddie was a good ol’ guy,” the men said to my dad.

That is what I knew of funerals when I was 12. I wanted that cake, and I wanted to get out of there.

It was decided that I would stay with Grandma Clarice for two weeks after Grandpa’s funeral, be there with her in the house so things weren’t so quiet. I’m not sure I would know how to do that anymore, keep someone company after losing their lifelong companion. Did we talk about Grandpa? Did we talk about death? Heaven? I don’t remember anything like that.

I remember driving go-carts and dirt bikes with Tommy, walking uptown to the store with Grandma Clarice, playing board games at the kitchen table with both of them, games like Sorry! and Yahtzee. We ate tuna noodle casserole with crushed Lays Potato Chips baked to a brown crust on top for dinner and Kemp’s Vanilla Ice Cream with Hershey’s Chocolate Syrup and graham crackers for dessert. We made a fort on Grandma’s front porch one night with old rope, musty quilts, and clothespins, then changed our minds and slept on the floor with our heads beside the polished bronze foot pedals of Grandma’s old upright piano.

Whenever I stayed in Frost, Cousin Tommy was my guide and companion. My parents dropped me off, stayed for lunch and turned me loose. That particular summer, 1986, Tommy had bought a used Suzuki RM 125, a big dirt bike for motocross racing. He was embarking on a new hobby. It seemed like he was always embarking on new hobby when I visited. World War II bomber models. ColecoVision video games. A flying “V” electric guitar. With this new motorcycle, Tommy had bought a bunch of new gear - a chest shield,

knee-high boots, fitted gloves and goggles. His old bike was sitting in the garage, propped up on a 5-gallon bucket. It was a black and yellow Yamaha YZ-80. For years, I'd imagined riding that cycle as I hopped my bicycle over the street curbs in Rochester. I'd never actually been on a real motorcycle. But this was Frost. All things were possible.

Tommy's old motorcycle gloves were too big for me. His old helmet was a little loose. Even as we stood in his garage, inhaling gasoline fumes, the tinted face shield was fogging up. I was sweating. Tommy jumped on the bike and kick-started it for me. A bluish cloud shot out of the exhaust and filled the garage. He revved the engine a couple times. He walked it out into the gravel alley and showed me how to pull the clutch with my left hand, stomp through the gears with my right foot. I straddled the thin black seat. I felt powerful. I felt like a man. I gripped the throttle and heard the engine wind up on my command. I pulled the clutch, dropped it into first gear, and killed it as I tried to take off. Tommy started it up again.

"Let the clutch out easy. Just let it idle. You don't need to give it any gas."

Within minutes I had made it up and down the alley without stopping. First gear. Second gear. No problem.

"Let's go," I said.

Tommy had to mount his giant new bike from the picnic table in his back yard. It roared when he jumped down onto the kick-starter. He rolled past me down the alley, out onto the blacktop of Stanley Street and out onto Highway 254. There weren't any cars in sight. We stayed on the gravel shoulder. We were heading north about a half mile to do some figure eights around some grain bins just outside of town.

Inside the moist leather of the racing gloves, my knuckles were white. Tommy was ahead of me on his new bike. He was fishtailing up ahead, kicking up dust and glancing over his shoulder as I tried to keep up. I was in fourth gear. I could have pulled the clutch, stomped the bike down into fifth, tried to catch him, but I didn't want to. Fourth was fast enough. I wasn't feeling steady. The shoulder was soft. I thought about steering up onto the blacktop, driving on the highway, but that would mean I'd have to look back over my shoulder. Check for cars. That could throw me off the shoulder. All I could hear was the high-pitched whine of the engine. My face shield was getting harder and harder to see through. So I stayed in fourth.

I didn't have motocross boots. I was wearing my Converse high tops and Levis. I was worried the cuff of my jeans would get caught in the chain. What if a rabbit darted out of the ditch, right in front of me? I'd surely wipe out. *Just hold on*, I told myself. *Just hold on. Almost there.* Up ahead, Tommy downshifted and turned onto the grassy drive leading up to the grain bins. He disappeared behind the corrugated metal towers. Soon, I too, reached the grassy lane. I was happy to hook the tip of my shoe under the lever of the gearbox and flick it back up to third, then second gear. The R.P.M.s revved up as I downshifted and slowed up. My cousin was just getting done with his weave through the bins as I got off the highway. We stopped and lifted our visors, our bikes facing opposite directions.

“You see me fishtailin’ back there?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I could hardly see through the dust.”

“Is it runnin’ OK? Seems slow.”

“No, I think it’s fine. I’m just getting a feel for it.”

“Let’s turn around and go out to the gravel pits,” he said.

So we did. I turned around and followed him back into town. Tommy screaming through the gears, popping little wheelies each time he dropped the clutch. Me trailing behind, maintaining a steady speed in fourth gear. At the gravel pits it was more of the same. Tommy caught air, accelerating through the jumps, kicking up dust around the burms. I took it all slowly, spent a lot of time shifting between second and third. By the time we rode back into town, though, up fourth street and onto the gravel alley behind his house, I felt steady. I dropped it into fifth for a little while on the blacktop. I had sweat through my clothes. My hands were numb. But I couldn't wait to go again. I never would have been able to do that back home in Rochester. I wanted to ride cycles all the time. I didn't want to go back home.

When we weren't outside, we played Pole Position and Donkey Kong in Tommy's bedroom. Above the TV, there was a poster of Lonnie Anderson in a baby blue lace negligee. When it was Tommy's turn to play, instead of watching him race against the computer or hurdle barrels thrown by the big gorilla, I would study Lonnie - her airbrushed breasts threatening to bust free from the blue lace, her tan thighs lonely for a young man's hand, her pouty lips waiting to be kissed.

"Your turn," Tommy would say. My fantasy interrupted, I'd grab the controller and try to save the Donkey Kong damsel in distress.

Lonnie had been handed down to Tommy by his older brother Pat, who had inherited her from their oldest brother, Derek. There were other girls on the walls - brunettes stretched out in bikinis on Harleys, buxom blondes washing Camaros and Firebirds in wet, soapy white T-shirts. I was there when Tommy picked up Daisy Duke at the Faribault County Fair.

We were on the midway. Carnie barkers hollered over the sounds of big power generators and loud rock music from rides like “The Zipper” and “The Sizzler.” We walked past a booth where you could throw three dirty, rusty darts at a wall full of posters.

“Pick ‘em, stick ‘em and take ‘em home!” this guy said. “Three darts for two dollars. Everybody wins.”

Daisy Duke was plastered on a corkboard wall covered with posters of Mötley Crüe, Jack Daniels bottles, and other 1980s TV vixens such as Suzanne Somers and Farrah Fawcett.

I never dreamed of plastering porn on my walls. Sex didn’t happen at my house. If people kissed on a TV show while we were all in the same room, my dad would turn the channel and announce, “There’s nothing but garbage on.” Mom would make a sound similar to a cat hacking up a hairball - *AAaacchhh* - and scrunch up her face like she just bit into a lemon.

Tommy and I were at the fair alone, though. His mom, my Aunt Connie, had dropped us off with \$10 each for a couple of hours of cotton candy, corn dogs and competitions of skill and chance. I had already landed a two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew at the ring toss and scored a business card-sized Minnesota Vikings pennant by rescuing a plastic duck from the “Raging River.” I was almost out of cash. As I ogled the slick legs and soft breasts at the “Bulls-Eye!” booth, I tried to imagine how my parents would react if I unrolled that kind of booty back home in Rochester. I could only foresee two possible scenarios: my mother would have a heart attack and instantly die of shame, or my parents would destroy the evidence and never let me stay by myself in Frost again. I wasn’t going to let that happen.

Tommy didn't hesitate. With the accuracy of a spear hunter, he flung each of his darts at Daisy's naked parts. After handing over my last two dollars, I held the three rusty-tipped, dirty green darts in my hand and considered my options. Tommy pointed to Daisy, leaning over the hood of the General Lee in her short blue cut-offs. Suzanne Somers smiled playfully in her soft, yellow workout shorts and tank top. There was a stately, black Jack Daniels label to the left of her. To the right, Prince on a purple motorcycle from the *Purple Rain* album. I hit Suzanne in the belly with the first dart, but "missed" with the other two and went home with Prince. I sold the poster for a quarter at Mom's garage sale a couple weeks later.

Lonnie lived above Tommy's TV for several years. Every time I was in that room, surrounded by those beautiful, nearly naked women, I was always a little in awe and a little uncomfortable. I realize now that's how I felt most of the time around my Cousin Tommy. He was four years older, a bit of a wild man.

Everything seemed to change after that summer. Tommy turned 16 and bought a blue Chevy Camaro with a T-Top. He bragged at Thanksgiving about "laying a patch" on the highway. My mother took me aside in Grandma's kitchen, shook a pointed finger in my face and said through clenched teeth, "Don't you ever, ever get in that car." I never rode with him, nor talked with him for more than a few minutes ever again. After high school, Tommy started working on the highways with his dad, laying concrete, and building roads. He got busted for selling marijuana and spent some time in jail.

About the same time, my mom's side of the family was struggling. My Grandpa Morrie and Grandma Mabel split up. Grandpa Morrie had been struggling with alcoholism for decades, but I never knew it. I later learned that was why I was never allowed to stay overnight at the farm. I was told Grandpa been "getting rough" with my Uncle Terry. I was

never told exactly what that meant, but I envisioned him punching my uncle in the face near the kitchen sink. Grandma moved off the farm and into an apartment eight miles away in Blue Earth. My uncles and cousins were having problems in their own marriages, recovering from their own problems with alcohol or drugs, struggling to make a living on the farms, in Frost or in Blue Earth.

I had a crush on a girl in my junior high English class and was happy to make \$10 shoveling snow for my neighbor in Rochester. I knew there were adult problems going on in Frost and Blue Earth, problems I wasn't privy to. I wasn't asking any questions.

One Christmas, my separation from the clan became obvious to me. We were celebrating the holiday in the party room at my Grandma Mabel's apartment building, the Crescent Apartments, in Blue Earth. My parents, brother and sister and I were all in the kitchen and dining area, setting the tables and buttering dinner rolls to accompany the potatoes and ham. Grandma Mabel had smoked since she was a girl, and by that time her emphysema limited her to little sips of air from her wheel chair. An oxygen tube ran from her nose to a slim green tank attached to her wheel chair. Standing up from her chair left her panting. And yet, my Grandpa Morrie, my uncles and male cousins all took a break from the setting up inside to go have a smoke in the courtyard. They stood in a circle, talking and laughing, tilting their heads back to exhale into the gray sky above. Part of me wanted to be in that circle, smoking with the rest of the men in the family, but my parents had quit smoking long ago. We were different, and I was beginning to understand that there were reasons why my parents didn't want to live in Frost or Blue Earth, didn't want me to grow up in Frost. Despite my fledgling awareness, there was still something in me that wanted to go out and smoke with the men and talk about hogs and trucks and hunting.

Chapter 3 - A Lot of Ground to Cover

On a sunny Sunday afternoon in August 2005, my Grandma Clarice and I decided to go see the empty space in the sky where the Frost grain elevator had been. Two days earlier, volunteer firefighters from throughout southern Minnesota and Northern Iowa had gathered in Frost for a staged training burn. Someone told Grandma it was still smoldering. I wanted to see.

At 88, my Grandma Clarice was still living by herself at the north end of Frost in the small, white clapboard house where my dad grew up. His Cub Scout books, grade school report cards, and combat boots from Vietnam were still in the deep shelves at the end of the hallway at the top of the stairs. Grandpa Eddie had been dead for two decades, but his last bottle of British Sterling cologne still stood beside Grandma's Wind Song on the dresser in the bathroom. She hung onto things.

The elevator was about 1,500 feet from Grandma's house as the crow flies, but we took the car. "I'm not much for walking all over town," Grandma said. A petite woman with snow-white hair, Grandma Clarice has looked exactly the same to me for as long as I can remember.

We were the same height the summer I turned 12, but I got bigger and she stayed the same. I stretched out to 6'2" in high school, four inches taller than my dad -- *your grandpas were both big men*, my parents always say -- and since then Grandma Clarice's downy cheek has pressed into my chest when we hug. She rolls her hair in curlers most mornings, so her soft, white hair is always piled into wispy curls. She wears bifocals with silver frames perched on her broad nose -- *that Brekke nose*, my sister laments. Grandma's quick to laugh, wink, and nod in your direction during conversation, bringing you in on her quips and good-

natured ribbings. When she's smiling, the creases around her eyes and mouth find their grooves.

Grandma Clarice has always worn pants and a short-sleeved shirt, but she may pull on a lightweight Cardigan if she's chilly. Dressing up for a wedding or a funeral means a silky polka-dot blouse and matching slacks -- small polka dots, the size of a pea. Red or black. I have no memory of Grandma Clarice ever wearing a dress.

The day we went to see the elevator she wore khaki slacks with an elastic waist and a white blouse with a floral design embroidered into the collar. As she slipped her tiny feet and white footy socks into her white canvass Keds by the door, I noticed the small holes worn through each shoe directly above her big toe. When she walks, her toes curl up just enough to scrape the canvass. But we were not walking that day.

She didn't need help down the concrete steps, but I walked a few paces ahead of her, past the old water pump, and opened the passenger side door of my sedan in the gravel driveway. She held onto the roof of the car as she lowered herself in, and I was struck by how tiny she looked. I felt like I should buckle her in, strap her into a car seat the way I did my six-month-old daughter, Lucy, at home in Ames, Iowa, but Grandma had it under control. She'd been taking care of herself, living on her own for two decades.

I didn't need to worry about her, but I did. She was the only grandparent I had left, and I had asked her to be my guide. On that day, I had asked Grandma Clarice to take me on a tour of Frost. I'd been up and down every street in town a hundred times, visiting relatives every Thanksgiving, Christmas and Fourth of July for over 30 years. I knew how to get around. I wanted to document how it had been. I had a new digital video camera, and I wanted stories. I wanted her to be my tour guide through the history of Frost as she knew it. I

was coming to terms with the idea that I would never live there, but I was not comfortable thinking that my own kids may never even be able to see the place. Frost was becoming a ghost town. The cremation of the elevator seemed like a milestone worth commemorating.

I made sure Grandma's fingers were out of the way and I closed the door. Her hands were folded in her lap as I sat down and started the car. As we backed out of the driveway, she tapped on her window and said, "They took away my trees. Cut them down so they wouldn't fall on the house. Remember when we hauled all those walnuts out to the dump?"

It was the one time I'd done any physical labor for my Grandma, and she made mention of it each time I visited. My cousins grew up across the street from Grandma Clarice, and they had cut her grass, trimmed her hedges, and scraped paint from her house for years. I scooped walnuts into the back of my Uncle Mike's pick-up, once, and it was a Herculean effort. In Frost, I was often reminded of my ineptitude in performing manual labor. It seemed like every man to ever live there could replace a carburetor and build a deck. But that wasn't Grandma's intent. She wasn't rubbing it in, she was reminiscing, reminding me of my one great feat. "I won't miss raking up those walnuts every year."

We had gone half a block east when she pointed out my window to a yellow house on the corner and said, "There's where your mother grew up." I knew that one. Grandma waved at an older couple raking in the front yard. They squinted to see who was waving from inside the Mazda, and they quickly recognized Grandma, smiled and waved. I nodded. We coasted around the corner, and turned south onto Main Street.

The elevator should have been visible, a gray, steel goliath four blocks away at the southern end of Main, but it was eerily absent. I drove with my foot on the brake, and Grandma kept pointing out the window, looking into the past.

“That’s Doc Hansen’s there,” she said, referring to a small, red brick building no bigger than a single-car garage. Then, pointing to the house next to it, “And that’s Luddy and Mabel’s. And here on the corner is where the livery barn used to be. They keep the snow removal trucks in there now.”

I knew those names. Doc was the legendary town doctor, voted Frost’s “Man of the Century” at the Frost Centennial celebration in 2000. He administered shots in the waiting room, let my mom’s mom clean his office to help pay their bill, made house calls. Luddy Quam was my great uncle, my Grandpa Eddie’s partner in the trucking business.

I remember walking down the alley behind T.J.’s Bar one afternoon with my cousin, Tommy, when we were kids, noticing a smashed up rig, a rusty orange semi-truck cab with “BREKKE AND QUAM TRUCKING” in white lettering on the doors. It was the first time I’d seen my name on anything in public. I stopped and looked at it, wondered what had happened to the driver, wondered if there were more like that somewhere, trucks with my name on the door. I always wanted to be a trucker like Grandpa Brekke.

Between the ages of seven and nine, I often wore a purple T-shirt with an iron-on cartoon drawing of a brawny, hairy truck driver gritting his teeth, gripping a big steering wheel with his left hand and an oversized gear stick with his right. The phrase “GEAR JAMMER!” was spelled out in bold, bubble letters above the man and his rig. My dad chose this as a nickname for me, and he calls me “Jammer” to this day. When I’m behind the wheel of my Honda Odyssey mini-van, pushing 72 miles-per-hour, and my family of four passes a Peterbilt on the freeway, I sometimes get the itch to grind through 15 gears and get on down the road, see the country from the high seat of an 18-wheeler. My cousin, Derek, and my uncle, Mike, are both over-the-road truckers. I used to wish they would ask me to ride along

on some cross-country adventure, see the country, load and unload. I'd seen *Smokey and the Bandit*. When Tommy and I saw that mangled semi behind the bar, he wasn't impressed. He had seen it before. He pulled me away, and I forgot about it for years.

When Grandma and I crossed Third Street en route to the elevator ashes, we came upon an empty lot overgrown with weeds on the corner to our right. It had been an empty lot as long as I could remember. Grandma told me what used to be there -- "the Folken Restaurant and a beauty shop, I think. What was her name, the gal who did hair there?" She reminisced a little about each empty building we passed, each vacant property.

"That building there is where Eddie's dad ran the roller rink -- upstairs," she added. "I have some of those old skates up in the closet still. They skated on the wooden floor."

Looking out my window as we passed an abandoned service station with no pumps, no lifts, no sign of life besides the weeds reaching up out of the concrete slabs, Grandma said, "There was a guy working on trucks out of this building, but I don't know, doesn't seem to be anything happening there now."

The impulse to chronicle my family history in Frost impelled me in a little surfing village called Cayucos on California's Central Coast. I was working as a features writer for *The Tribune*, a newspaper 20 miles south in San Luis Obispo, and I had heard about a guy making wooden, hollow-body surfboards, the kind Duke Kahanamoku used to surf on Waikiki Beach in the early part of the 20th Century. A guy named Dirk Langer was handcrafting hollow long boards according to the original plans drawn by surf legend Tom Blake when surfing was gaining popularity along the California coast.

Once a whaling village, Cayucos had, for the past few decades, attracted a select breed of supremely laid-back surfers who eschewed the endless rush of humanity in Southern California. I was not a surfer, but I imagined myself becoming one that day as I drove my orange 1982 VW Vanagon up the Pacific Coast Highway to interview Langer.

He had grown up surfing in the Pacific. He went to Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, got a degree in design and made a bunch of money as a graphic designer in Southern California. Once he retired, he decided to spend the rest of his life living his dream, “shaping” these giant wooden surfboards modeled after the 10-15 foot-long boards The Duke made famous.

I was about an hour into my interview with Langer when I started thinking about my dad. Langer had shown me his workshop. We had a beer in his living room, and he showed me some old photos of him and his friends with their boards at beaches all over the world. Standing there, looking at this guy’s “hang-loose” lifestyle in the photos, it struck me that he was about my dad’s age.

My dad is a phenomenal craftsman. He’d earned some extra time in the Frost High School wood shop one afternoon when his high school shop teacher, Mr. Dahl, caught him and a buddy, Daryl Amundson, smoking Lucky Strikes behind the bushes at a gas station across the street from Frost High School in 1963. They were supposed to be in study hall. Dad liked Dahl’s class. He enjoyed woodworking. When Mr. Dahl came upon the truant students, he didn’t take them to the principal’s office. He blackmailed them.

“OK, guys,” Dahl said. “You’re going to stay after school and help me every day in the shop until we finish these cabinets I’m working on for my fiancé.”

“I can’t, Mr. Dahl,” Amundson said, “I’ve got to do chores on the farm after school.”

“OK, Brekke,” the teacher said, “You’re coming with me.”

Every day after school for four months, Dad went to Dahl's wood shop and helped his shop teacher finish his wedding presents. They built benches and three-legged stools. The apprenticeship, and my dad's compulsive attention to detail, turned him into an excellent carpenter. Over the years he framed and refinished all four rooms in our basement in Rochester, built a two-story playhouse and storage shed in our backyard, and he spent months crafting Shaker-style writing desks of oak as wedding presents for all three of his kids. I'd love to have a whole house of Dad's furniture.

My dad was selling real estate and hating it when I interviewed the surfer-carpenter. I started losing track of Langer's story and began wondering if my dad could start making wooden surfboards. Maybe my mom could retire and they could move to California near my wife and me. Dad had lived on the coast before. In 1964, when he was 17, he had taken the advice of Mr. Dahl and joined the service "to see the world." As a young Marine in boot camp, Dad was stationed at Camp Pendleton for several months before he took a boat to Okinawa, Japan, en route to Vietnam. I couldn't help but wonder about the trajectory my dad's life may have taken if he had stayed in California when he finished his duty. Maybe he would have met Dirk Langer and scouted the coast for tasty waves, built wooden surfboards in the summer of love. Not likely.

But I couldn't think about surfing any more. I wanted to know why my dad joined the Marines. I had never asked him. I wanted to know why he didn't stay in California. Why did he drive back to Minnesota as soon as he was discharged in 1968? When I decided to chase my Luther College sweetheart out to the sunshine state in 1997, Dad helped me buy a car and drove out with me. I was so preoccupied with my own grand plan; I don't remember asking about his.

Standing in Dirk's surf house, listening-but-not-really-listening, I had a revelation. I had never really asked my family about anything. Here I was, thousands of miles from home, interviewing strangers every day, and in an hour or so, I would learn more about their lives than I had ever known about members of my own family.

I mean, I knew my family. I knew my parents in the context of my own self-centered existence. I knew them as my parents, as providers -- my mom, the elementary school teacher who loved her job, my dad the maitre d'-turned-real-estate-agent who hated his. I knew my uncles and cousins -- the mechanics, the truck drivers, the construction workers. I knew my aunts -- the homemakers, the nurses. But I didn't really know anything about them, about their inner lives, about their reasons for staying so close to Frost, living in Faribault County all their lives. Didn't they want to live in California? Didn't everyone?

I saw them all every year. We had our rituals. We gathered; we brought crock pots of beans and buttered rolls and Special-K bars to each other's houses and we ate, we talked about the football game, the cars being rebuilt in the shop, the construction projects underway. I would be asked about school (*How's school? Fine.*), asked about sports (*Is your team good this year? We're alright.*), teased about girls (*What's her name? Shut up.*). But I had never asked why everybody stayed around Frost. I had never dug into why Mom and Dad were the only ones to leave. By "leaving," I mean trying out life in surrounding towns an hour away, two counties away. Why did they move *all the way* to Rochester, when everyone else in their families had stayed in Faribault County?

I suppose everyone experiences this moment. The time comes, often accompanied by thinning or graying hair, when we want to know how we came to be the way we came to be, how our family's American Experience began, how it got derailed, how it was fulfilled. I was

28. My wife, Jen and I were living in a one-bedroom apartment on Morro Street in San Luis Obispo, and thinking about staying, planting roots in that paradise, starting a family 2,000 miles from home. I hadn't been around the world, but I'd seen pictures, and few places measured up to San Luis Obispo.

I had inklings about the family story -- Grandpa Eddie was a trucker, Grandma Clarice played piano. Mom's dad died in a car wreck when she was 16. Grandma Mabel remarried when Mom was in college. Grandpa Morrie had always been a farmer and Great Uncle Joe had always been a bachelor. I knew I could get birthdates and death dates, fill in names on the family tree, but I wanted stories. I wanted THE STORY, and I wanted to figure out how I fit, what I still had in common with these people, because the longer I lived away from home, away from southern Minnesota, the less I felt like going back.

I called my dad right after that meeting with Langer and asked about doing some interviews, writing about his life.

"No thanks," he said. "I don't like that kind of stuff. Talk your mother. She'll do that."

I have a couple vivid memories of Frost's Main Street when a few of the weather-beaten buildings were still serving customers. I was born in 1974, so most of my childhood memories of Frost were formed during the Midwest Farm Crisis of the 1980s. In one of these sketches in my mind, Grandma Clarice and I drove "uptown" (three blocks away) and bought some groceries -- Wonderbread, Cheeze-Whiz, ground beef. I remember she smiled and announced to the cashier, "My Grandson, Joey, is with me today." Grandma smiled and winked. The dark-haired woman in the green apron standing at the register said, "Oh, you're

Gary's son." I smiled. "You look just like your dad," she added. Grandma pulled a crisp \$20 out of her red wallet to pay. I helped carry a brown paper bag to the car.

That same old grocery store building was empty, dilapidated, and looked like it was on the verge of disintegrating in a gentle breeze the day Grandma and I drove by en route to the elevator. A block further south, the black top of Main Street gave way to gravel just before the railroad tracks. We crossed over the tracks and parked where the grain trucks used to drive, where my Grandpa Eddie used to load and unload corn and soybeans and sugar beets for most of his working life. In front of the car, silvery smoke rose up from the ash pile that was the elevator into the blue sky.

"Well, there it is, there it was," Grandma said, correcting herself. We were silent for few moments. I put the car in neutral, my foot on the brake. I pointed a hand-held video camera at the smoke for a few seconds, then panned east and west, looking up and down the empty railroad tracks.

"Now the trains won't have any reason to stop here whatsoever," Grandma said. "Our little town is really dying."

We sat there in the car, watching the embers for a few more minutes. Grandma pointed to the north and showed me where the sugar beet dump had been.

"Frost used to be the Sugar Beet Capital of the World," she said. "Eddie's Dad ran the dump. Your dad almost died here when he was a kid."

When my Dad was a little boy, four or five, she explained, he went wandering around the elevator on a Sunday with Grandpa Eddie, and he fell into one of the separator chutes and nearly died.

“Eddie came back home white-faced, all shook up,” she said. “He told me, ‘Clare, if that thing had been turned on, we would have lost him.’ He didn’t take your dad down there for a long time after that.”

We sat a while longer. The sun was casting an orange and gold glow into the car and Grandma shaded her eyes.

“Well,” she said, “we better get going. We’ve got a lot of ground left to cover.”

Chapter 4 - Required Reading

When I was 13, my big sister, Nicci, kept her journal in the upper right hand drawer of the desk in her basement bedroom. It was a five-subject, spiral-bound account of her “extra-curricular” activities as a 16- to 18-year-old at Mayo High School. Every couple days I would sneak downstairs and into her bedroom shortly after she left the house. I always waited until Mom began reading the newspaper, so I knew she’d be occupied for a while. I told my mom I was going downstairs to watch T.V. or play Nintendo, and I descended.

I turned on the T.V. as a ruse and quietly opened Nicci’s bedroom door. I left the door open for a quick exit and proceeded to the desk beside the bed. I gently jiggled out the upper right hand drawer of the desk. A few *Vogue* or *Rolling Stone* magazines used to “hide” the green, spiral Mead notebook. I removed them as a unit, so I could replace them without suspicion.

The desk drawer always stuck a little. Our dad had transformed the cinder block walls and poured concrete floor of our old toy room into Nicci’s basement hideaway. He framed and sheet-rocked the walls, carved out a walk-in closet and tucked her bed into a cozy nook beneath the stairs. The desk was built into the wall with a large slab of finished pine on top. The drawers didn’t have any rollers on them, so they always stuck. I would quietly wiggle the drawer out of the desk while my mom was upstairs reading the Post-Bulletin or making hot dish.

My sister wrote with the same loopy script as our mother. In blue or black ink, she chronicled her exploits around Rochester - in the underground subways of the Mayo Clinic, in the department store dressing rooms at the mall, and in the homes of the doctors’ sons on the south side of town. It was riveting.

My invasion of her privacy was completely justifiable. Nicci was never home, and she was always wearing black clothes and heavy, black eyeliner. Black nails sometimes. Her auburn mane could eclipse Madonna's. She fought with our parents. She brought home a guy with tattoos, a skateboard, and black Chuck Taylors. I thought she was going to kill herself. That was my rationale: I was protecting her. I read so I would know, and if she ever mentioned "suicide," I would confess to my parents and be a hero. I was reading her journal to save her life.

In the spring of 1988, the girls in her clique carried themselves like they were all auditioning for the Ally Sheedy role in a John Hughes film. They carried big black shoulder bags with "ESPIRIT" or "BENNETON" silk-screened in white block letters on the side. Inside were black sweatshirts, red lipstick, pink cans of Aqua-Net, and, at least once, a pilfered bottle of vodka.

One afternoon, Nicci and two of her friends took their big black bags into a dressing room at Dayton's, the premier clothier in Apache Mall. Behind the closed door, they tried on prom dresses and passed the bottle. Each sashay down the runway toward the triple-mirrors became increasingly difficult and hilarious. I remember seeing a picture Nicci had of her redheaded friend, Leah, collapsed in the corner of a dressing room overcome with laughter, her pale skin nearly glowing in contrast to a bright purple prom gown. Mall security arrived soon after the photo was taken.

Other entries remain as fragments of memory. Her friends became characters moving through vaguely familiar settings in a serial novel. The hockey player, Charlie Kahn, had a huge house near Mayowood, south of town, tennis courts in his back yard. His parents had a bar. They drank, smoked pot, and hit tennis balls into the woods. At another party on Elton

Hills Drive, her friend, Ann, confided, “Joel MacDonald put his boner on my thigh.” Great dialogue. I’d never read anything with as much interest. Her journal made me a reader. And although I rarely spoke to her throughout her high school years, I felt like I knew her better than ever before. I even found myself developing empathy for her.

We fought often as kids. She used to tell my mom I should be “locked up in an institution” because I was such a “hyper-spaz.” She teased me. I retaliated. I don’t remember most of the stupid stuff we fought about. I do remember that she tore up one of my football cards, so I emptied a bottle of Elmer’s glue in an intricate, webbed pattern over all her bed, her dresser, and the carpet in her bedroom.

She would bite her lower lip and dig her fingernails into the undersides of my forearms until I bled. I once chased her around the house with a paring knife and threw it at her after she slammed the basement door. It stuck in the wood. She got a lot of mileage out of that story. She would pull my hair until it came out. I heaved Tonka trucks down the stairs at her. She would sit in the rocking chair as if she were riding a recumbent bicycle and kick me over and over again. Full of rage and blind fury over some junior high injustice, I would run at her, swinging, catching heels to the head and gut until I couldn’t get up off the floor.

About the time I turned 13, I had a growth spurt. When I was 14 and she was 16, I was bigger and stronger than her, but I began fighting smarter, not harder. Along with the privacy my sister’s basement bedroom afforded her, it also instilled a little fear. Every night before she went to bed, Nicci would make a ritual sweep through every room of the basement with all the lights on. She looked in every corner, every closet of every room and behind the furnace in Dad’s wood shop to ensure there were no masked murderers in the house before she turned off the lights. I knew her routine.

One evening, following another fight I don't remember, as she washed her face and brushed her teeth in the upstairs bathroom of our rambler, I made my way to the basement in a black sweat suit with my black ski mask and a shiny cleaver from the kitchen. I hid in the utility closet Dad had made in her bedroom to enclose the water meter. There was just enough space for me to stand and look downward through the slotted doors. I had to hold the doors closed with the fingertips of my left hand as I held the cleaver in my right.

She always started her routine at the far end of the basement, looking through Dad's shop and the basement bathroom, then the laundry room and T.V. room before closing the door to her private hideaway and opening the utility closet. I saw her approaching in her pajamas and I slowly raised the cleaver. As she opened the doors, I roared and lunged at her. She screamed with more terror than I've ever heard, before or since. I could feel my parents' footsteps pounding on the floor above me, running to her rescue. I knew I'd crossed some kind of line. She was gasping for breath and moving in convulsions toward her bed. I immediately pulled off my mask and tried to reassure her, "It's just me, Nicci. I was just getting you back. I'm sorry."

Dad thundered down the steps and looked at me incredulously. He went to the bed and put his arms around my sister. I went upstairs and put the cleaver back in the knife drawer. We didn't fight anymore. We just avoided each other. I didn't see her much during her three years at Mayo High School. I just read her journal every couple of days.

Not long after she left home for Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, in the fall of 1990, Nicci invited me down to visit her for a weekend. I don't know if it was her idea or our parents'. I didn't care. I had just acquired my driver's license, and I was thrilled by the opportunity to pilot the Buick Regal for an hour and 15-minutes along Highway 52 as it

snaked through the rolling hills and over the trout streams of Southeastern Minnesota and Northeast Iowa.

As I crossed the border near Prosper, Minnesota, a few minutes from the Luther campus, I became increasingly uneasy about spending the weekend with my sister. I began to think about how uncomfortable our recent conversations had been. We had acted like unfriendly acquaintances for much of the past three years.

I had helped move her to campus a month before, so I remembered where she lived. I parked along a street just south of Brandt Hall, grabbed my blue soccer duffel out of the back seat and walked to her room. She greeted me with a Keystone Light in hand. She and her two roommates had already started. She threw her arm around me and handed me a beer.

“This is my little brother, Joey,” she said, introducing me to her roommates.

We ordered pizza and kept drinking. A few more Keystone Lights into the evening, she confided in me that she couldn’t wait to get out of the house. I probably didn’t realize it, she said, but she had had a pretty wild and difficult time in high school. I nodded. I had another beer. Then I spilled the beans.

“Nicci,” I said. “I actually know all of this. I read your journal.”

“When? What do you mean? Which part?”

“From the summer before 10th grade until the week you left for Luther.”

We were both drunk when I told her. She cried. We hugged. We talked for the rest of the night about growing up in Rochester, about our parents, about college life at Luther. And we became very close friends.

When I began talking to Grandma Clarice, searching for stories about our family, about Frost, about that part of Southern Minnesota that has always seemed like the birthplace

of Brekke to me, the center of our world, I wanted to read a book with all the answers. I wanted a family journal, like my sister's, a book that would tell me why most of my extended family never left Faribault County, why my parents chose "The Big City," and why I never seemed to fit in Frost. I wanted to be able to read this book, then show up on the doorsteps of my cousins and aunts and uncles with a six-pack and reconnect. It didn't happen. That book doesn't exist.

On one of my visits to Grandma's house, after I'd announced that I wanted to become the family historian, she did hand me an heirloom book of genealogy. In 1959, the Reverend R.J. Meland self-published a hardcover edition of his family history titled *The John J. Malad and Mari Brekke Genealogy: Ancestral Lines and Descendants*. In the foreword, Meland writes, "I have not been concerned, particularly, in producing a book of literary excellence but rather one of the nature of a 'Family Who's Who', with brief statements of facts and information." He did more than that, visiting and interviewing relatives in Norway and America, writing letters and acquiring family photos over the course of a decade before he published the book. It includes details about the original Brekke family farm in Norway and the circumstances surrounding the Brekke emigration from Norway to Minnesota in the late 1850s.

The copy given to me is inscribed, "Property of Bea Marsh" in blue ink on the inside of the front cover. Bea was my great aunt, my Grandpa Eddie's sister. I remember eating cake doughnuts from a wooden bowl at her house in Rochester when I was a kid, running through green grass in her deep back yard to a little footbridge that crossed a creek. She had a big, white polar bear skin rug at her house, and there are pictures of Nicci and I as babies,

crawling around on it, inspecting the pearly canines in its open maw. The book smells like musty paper and cigarettes. Every time I crack it open I inhale and remember Aunt Bea.

According to Meland, Knute Anderson Brekke was born on the Brekke farm in Oppstryn, on January 2, 1834. He would be the first Brekke, the first Norwegian from Nordfjord region, in Faribault County Minnesota, arriving in 1860. He was the third of four children born to Anders Magneson Brekke and Oline Tunold. Oppstryn is located near Lake Strynavatnet, tucked deep inside the 68-mile deep Nordfjord in northwestern Norway. The entire Stryn Valley is a world famous tourist destination today, beckoning visitors from around the globe with picturesque mountains for hiking and skiing, and access to the Jostedalsbreen Glacier, the largest on mainland Europe. In travel brochures, there are glossy color photos of young, blonde, fit, Norwegian women and their dark-haired, fit, tan male companions sunning themselves beside a tranquil lake under blue skies. Steep, snow-capped mountains are reflected in the still water. I want to live there.

In Norwegian, a “brekke” is a “steep hill,” and the old family farm on the south side of Lake Strynavatnet got its name because it was backed up against the steep mountains. The farm had been occupied since the Viking Age, but the earliest written records show that Rasmus AA Brekke paid taxes on the farm in 1563. It wasn’t the best farming land, according to Meland. Avalanches often wiped out the crop. Farm records dating back to 1626 note a “bad crop” that year, a “small income” most others. As many Norwegian families discovered during the 1800s, the little strip of land between the mountain and the lake could not sustain the growing Brekke family.

The land was divided into two farms in 1602, and again into three farms around 1620. Possession of the property changed hands in 1702 and 1718 as family members squabbled

over various claims. A population boom occurred in Norway in the first half of the 1800s as a result of lowering infant mortality rates. This population bubble coupled with a struggling economy inspired many Norwegians to seek work off the farms, in cities such as Bergen and Oslo.

When Knute was five-years-old, his father, Anders, was elected to the Storting -- the Norwegian Parliament -- appointed to the Interior and Food Department. Shortly after his arrival in the capital, however, Anders suddenly died. He was only 37. Meland's history doesn't give any other details about the cause of death. Knute's mother, Oline, had five kids to support.

Oline Brekke soon re-married, a man named Rasmus Berge from elsewhere in the fjord. It was common at that time in Norway for people to be known by their given name and the name of their place of residence, so when Berge moved off the Brekke farm he became known as Rasmus Brekke. Oline and Rasmus Brekke had four more children on the Brekke farm -- Anders I, Anders II, Barbara and Anna.

In 1850, eleven years after his father's death, Knute left the family farm to find work in Bergen. Norway was in the second year of a major economic depression. Jobs were scarce. Knute probably realized that he didn't have a future on the family farm. So he went to the city and got a job making guns. Around that time he met up with the Haugeans, and changed the course of Brekke family history.

Assembling rifles in an arms manufacturing plant in Bergen, Norway, Knute Anderson Brekke could envision the fruit of his labor -- dead men and boys. The guns could be used for war, and the 18-year-old farm boy was learning toward pacifism. When he got involved with a group known as the Haugeans, Knute decided he had to make a change.

Hans Nielsen Hauge was a Norwegian religious reformer, a lay preacher who was gaining popularity throughout Norway in the mid 1800s, especially in coastal towns, for challenging the church establishment. According to Ingrid Semmingson, in her history of the Norwegian migration, *Norway to America*, Hauge “asserted the right of the individual to obey his or her conscience” (35). Knute’s conscience told him it was time to quit making guns and start making plans for America.

According to Semmingson, such a progression of ideas was not uncommon. “Haugeanism was significant as a powerful new influence from without,” she explains. “It prepared the ground psychologically, helped to detach ordinary people from the old society, and enabled them to receive new signals and make radical decisions such as leaving for America” (35).

As a single, able-bodied young man opposed to violence, Knute feared he would be drafted into the armed forces if he applied for a passport in Norway, according to the Meland account, so he went to Germany for a passport and set sail for a America.

Crossing the Atlantic was getting easier by 1850, but it still took two months to get to New York or Quebec, the most common entry points. Once immigrants such as Knute arrived on the east coast, they still had over 1,000 miles to go if they planned on settling on the western frontier. They took steam ships, canal boats, rudimentary rail cars, and horse-drawn wagons through the Ohio Valley into Illinois and Wisconsin. According to Meland, it would have taken Knute several months to reach his final destination -- a farm north of Madison, Wisconsin, near the village of Lodi.

Like many of the Norwegian immigrants, before he left, Knute had done some digging and found out about a guy from down the fjord named Hans Tenden who had gone to

America a few years earlier. From mutual friends or acquaintances, Knute got Tenden's address, and started making plans. Meland estimates it was 1856 when Knute arrived at the Tenden farm in Lodi, Wisconsin, four miles north of Madison. As a laborer, Knute lived and worked on the farm in the summers. He took English classes in the winter, and over the course of his four years there he courted a young Norwegian girl named Brita Quam. They married in Madison, then headed west in an ox-drawn wagon on their honeymoon, heading for a new life together in the Minnesota Territory.

An introductory pamphlet to the state published in 1878 by the Minnesota State Board of Immigration gives a sense of the rhetoric used to entice immigrants and to the bounty of Minnesota at the time the Brekke family established themselves in Faribault County. The 1878 pamphlet was addressed in all caps,

“TO LABORING MEN, WHO EARN A LIVELIHOOD BY HONEST TOIL;
 TO LANDLESS MEN, WHO ASPIRE TO THAT DIGNITY AND
 INDEPENDENCE WHICH COMES FROM POSSESSION IN GOD'S FREE
 EARTH; TO ALL MEN, Of Moderate Means, and Men of Wealth, Who Will
 Accept Homes in a Beautiful and Prosperous Country... THE BENEFITS OF
 IMMIGRATION ARE RECIPROCAL. If it is Well to Exchange the
 Tyrannies and Thankless Toil of the Old World, for the Freedom and
 Independence of the New, and to Give the Overcrowded Avocations of the
 East a Chance to Vent Themselves Upon the Limitless and Fertile Prairies of
 the New North West, it is also Well for the Hand of Labor to Bring Forth the
 Rich Treasures Hid in the Bosom of the NEW EARTH. The Wealth of
 Minnesota Consists Not in Her Fertile Prairies and Mighty Forests, Her Broad

Rivers and Thousand Lakes, But in Those Products Which Fill the Barns With Plenty, and Quicken the Energies of Trade and Commerce. (Minnesota State Board of Commerce)

That type of official promotion hadn't begun when Knute Anderson Brekke was working as a laborer on the Tenden farm near Madison. More often there were newspaper accounts and personal letters such as one sent in 1864 by Spencer Armstrong to Abraham Shanklin, a friend and former neighbor of Armstrong's living near Owensburg, in Jackson Township, Greene County, Indiana.

Armstrong had emigrated from Indiana and settled in northern Faribault County about the same time as Brekke. Armstrong wrote to his friend,

Tell all who are such, there are plenty of room in this state. Be sure and come to Faribault County, I have travelled through Fil[*I*]more, Olmstead, Steel [*e*], Dodge, Rice, La Leusure [*Le Sueur*], Blue Earth, Martain [*Martin*], Freeborn, Goodhue and Faribault counties, in all I have traveled about 700 miles in Minn, and Faribault county beats all for me including Waseca county.

(Armstrong)

After listing all the places Faribault County beat, Armstrong moved on to a specific opportunity to buy a specific farm for sale.

Now about a Farm; there is all chances any man want, there is 160 acres of good land with (I am informed) 30 acres of timber on it and a small creek (called a river here) running through it, the water lasts all the year, for sale at 1200 dollars, there is considerable improvements on. Farm is 3 miles from me. You can surely suit yourself here now before land comes up which it will

year or two. But if you wish to Homeste[ad] one hundred and sixty acres you will have to go out too far west to suit you to get timber closer than 2 or 3 miles, that is my judgement now, you might do better if you were here to look around a little. You can get plenty of water any where (almoste) on the Prairies by digging 6 feet for stock and 10 to 25 for family use Abraham I could tell you a great deal about Minn. But it is useless, you or any other man can do well in this country. (Armstrong)

When the Brekkes made the final leg of their journey from the Tenden farm in Wisconsin to Faribault County, Minnesota in 1860, they rode in an ox-drawn wagon that rattled along unpaved roads at about three miles-an-hour. It had to have been a long and bumpy ride. It would have taken more than three weeks.

There were well-defined roads from the east into the Minnesota Territory, with ferry crossings of the Mississippi at French Island, near La Crosse, and another at Winona. Most travelers of the era going through southern Minnesota made it to Rochester, where they would find a wagon or caravan heading further west, toward the edge of the prairie frontier. They probably followed a well-defined road to Owatonna, then they would have had to follow a rough trail heading southwest, skirting the southern reaches of the Big Woods into present day Faribault County.

The Big Woods were an immense hardwood forest of elm, basswood and sugar maple trees that extended in a diagonal strip 40 miles wide and 100 miles long in a northwestern direction. French explorers in the 1700s designated it the "bois fort" or "bois grand," which English-speaking inhabitants later translated as "big woods." The forest stretched from south-central Minnesota, near Mankato, up north to Monticello. Pioneers used the hardwood forests

to build their homes, barns and businesses. They tapped the maples for syrup. They chopped and burned the wood all winter for fuel. And after they cleared 40-acre stands of old-growth hardwood forest, the pioneers used the rich soil for growing wheat, alfalfa and potatoes. Of the estimated 3,000 square miles of forest the native Dakota tribes used for hunting beaver, deer, and elk, less than 2% remains.

I first heard about the Big Woods as a 10-year-old, sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor of my third-grade classroom at Jefferson Elementary School in Rochester. Mrs. Payne sat on a wooden stool and read Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie* to us. Published in 1932, the book introduced the Minnesota pioneer experience to a wider audience. Years after my Grandpa Eddie's death, my Grandma Clarice told me that he loved reading the *Little House* books once he was confined to his wheelchair. Knowing that softened him in my memory. I would have loved to hear him chuckle about Laura pulling one over on that mean old Nellie Olsen.

The Brekke's caravan would have made their way south from the Big Woods in 1860, through oak savannah and virgin tallgrass prairie, still within a day's drive of that seemingly endless source of timber. Although many of the prairie "sodbusters" built homes from the turf, Brekke and other settlers in Faribault County had plenty of timber along the feeder creeks and banks of the Blue Earth River to construct log homes and outbuildings for livestock.

According to the Public Land Survey, 1847-1907, the Faribault County landscape was a combination of upland prairie, prairie wetlands, maple-basswood, and floodplain forest. Native prairie grasses grew six-feet high in the mesic prairies between the stands of hardwood trees. West of Albert Lea Lake, the big bluestem, Indian grass and prairie dropseed

were thick, opening up the horizon for miles. Elk were common and buffalo roamed in massive herds.

The native prairies developed over thousands of years. The elk and buffalo dug their hooves into the turf, aerating the soil. Lightning strikes ignited occasional wildfires, adding nutrients to the soil and allowing the plants to regenerate, driving new roots deep into the earth, adding even more nutrient-rich organic matter.

According to John Testor, author of *Minnesota's Natural Heritage*, the native prairies of southern and western Minnesota produced soils belonging to the order Mollisols. "The rich, black layer of the prairie soil may be from 6-40 inches thick," Testor explains. "High nutrient levels and the excellent loose, soft texture of the prairie soil make it ideally suited for agriculture." Although the rich soil of southern Minnesota would prove to be the beacon that led my ancestors to Faribault County, the first Europeans to explore the area sought a different kind of wealth in the earth -- copper.

Chapter 6 - Blue Earth and Le Sueur

Pierre Charles Le Sueur and a group of 24 other French explorers sustained themselves on the abundant buffalo they hunted in the prairies surrounding the Minnesota River Valley in 1700. Le Sueur was the first European explorer of the Blue Earth and Minnesota Rivers watershed. There's a town named for him on the east bank of the Minnesota River, 25 miles north of Mankato.

The name "Minnesota" comes from the Lakota language --"mini" meaning "water" and "sota" which is alternately translated "smoky-white" or "like the cloudy sky." The Minnesota Territory, and later the state, was named for the river.

The Minnesota River Valley was carved into the landscape by the massive glacial River Warren between 11,700 and 9,400 years ago at the end of the last ice age in North America. The gently rolling hills of the southern Minnesota landscape are the result of moraines created during the last ice age, known as the Wisconsin Glaciation, which covered the vast majority of Minnesota. Giant fingers of ice would stretch out and retreat as the glacial ice expanded and retreated, carving the earth as it moved.

Le Sueur first came to Minnesota as a young Lieutenant serving under the tutelage of the experienced French trader Nicholas Perrot from 1683 to the mid-1690s. Le Sueur would have assisted Perrot with the pomp and circumstance designed to claim the Minnesota Territory for the French crown at Fort St. Antoine on May 8, 1689. According to William Lass' *Minnesota - A History*, Perrot was instructed by French officials to claim the Upper Mississippi Valley for the French. It was the third time the claim had been made for the benefit of the native Dakota and Fox Indians. Lass explains:

There, to the sound of muskets, Latin chants, and shouts of ‘long live the king,’ Perrot claimed the lands adjoining the Fox, Wisconsin, and upper Mississippi as well as the country of the Sioux and the rivers St. Croix and St. Pierre; and lest some undiscovered area of value should escape the French grasp, Perrot also laid claim to “other places more remote”. (Lass 37)

During his time with Perrot, Le Sueur sought his own opportunities for wealth in the frontier. At some point during his tenure with Perrot, Le Sueur met Dakota Indians who smeared their faces and bodies with a greenish-blue clay they extracted from the banks of a stream that entered the St. Pierre’s River from the south. This tributary, now known as the Blue Earth River, was named for the bluish-green earth that was used by the Sisseton Dakota as a pigment, found in a shaley layer of the rock bluff of the stream about three miles from its mouth.

Around 1683, Le Sueur and a party went to the site, extracted hunks of the clay and sent it back to France to be analyzed. Tests by the French King’s chemist named L’Huillier showed copper was present in the clay. Le Sueur was determined to return to the site and make a fortune as a copper prospector.

It would be four years before Le Sueur returned to the Minnesota River Valley with 24 men in October of 1700 and established Fort L’Huillier just south of the mouth of the Blue Earth River, a few miles south of present day Mankato (from *mah kato*: “blue earth” in the Sioux language). A signpost marks the supposed area of the fort along U.S. Route 169. The original garrison held about 20 men. Le Sueur’s crew scraped the bluish-green clay out of the riverbanks with knives and loaded it into canoes. An estimated two tons of clay were hauled away.

In the early 1700s, however, the easy money in Minnesota was in fur, and Le Sueur knew this. In addition to extracting the copper-laden clay, Le Sueur traded with the local Dakota, collecting nearly 4,000 beaver pelts in the winter of 1700-01, which he planned to sell upon his return to France.

Le Sueur left the fort in 1701, floating two tons of clay down the Mississippi to New Orleans for further analysis. While he was gone, the fort was attacked and abandoned. By 1702, no more was heard of the remaining men. The blue clay was found to be worthless as a source of copper ore, and Le Sueur did not return.

(I plan to go to the site of Le Sueur's mine and add a few paragraphs about what that "blue earth" along the banks looks like today.)

There wasn't much European traffic in southern Minnesota once the French lost control of the American frontier to the British. During the Revolutionary War, both the Americans and the British were focused on the battles in the east. British and French fur traders continued exchanging goods with the native tribes throughout the 1700s and into the early 1800s.

During the mid-1800s, however, word of the rich Minnesota soil, along with the American government's desire to expand their territory westward, encouraged a growing number of European pioneers into the Minnesota Territory, including the area that would later become Faribault County. Like most stories of American diplomacy with the Native Americans of the era, the United States' diplomatic efforts with the Dakota was a legacy of broken treaties. Clashes between settlers and the Native American tribes that had been living in the area for centuries ended abruptly in 1862, when Abraham Lincoln ordered the largest mass execution in United States history, and 38 Dakota Indians were hung in a public square

before a riotous crowd of 3,000 pioneers in Mankato. Somehow, I missed that detail in my high school history classes.

Growing up in Rochester, I became a Spartan -- a Mayo High School Spartan. The school motto: TO BE A SPARTAN IS TO BE THE BEST THAT ONE CAN BE. In my mind it is cast in bold, green letters on a high, yellow wall of McNish Gymnasium. It may or may not have looked like that, but that's how I see it. I spent a lot of time in that gym, playing basketball. I took a Renaissance approach to my Spartan education, valuing the development of my social skills as much as my academic and athletic pursuits.

Several of my friends took Advanced Placement classes to bolster their transcripts for applications to Northwestern, Carleton, and Colgate. I registered for photography in order to stand close to Janelle Stanhope in the darkroom. My friends with med school plans took Latin. In my four years of German classes with "Doc" Most, I learned to introduce myself to other students in my classroom (*Ich heisse Dieter, un du?*), but I also learned to sing, "In München steht ein Hofbräuhaus, eins, zwei, g'suffa!" That's been handy. I did well enough in high school, earned a B+ GPA, and decided by the end of my senior year that I, in fact, wanted to become scholarly as a college student. I'm exaggerating my slacker status in an effort to understand explain my ignorance of Minnesota history. My high school history classes were probably rigorous and relevant and illuminated the causes and casualties of the Dakota War of 1862 that took place a few hours from where my ancestors settled in Southern Minnesota, but I remained ignorant and apathetic until I started digging a little, ruminating on Knute Brekke's pioneer experience.

I spent a week or so in Mankato every summer when I was kid. I wasn't interested in Native American history at the time; I was chasing the Vikings. The Minnesota Vikings football team held their summer training camp at the University of Minnesota, Mankato every year. From ages 9-12, I spent at least a week each summer with my best friend, Mike Banwart and his family. Mike and I had been friends in utero.

Our moms met when they worked as cabin girls at the historic Burntside Lodge Resort in Ely, Minnesota. Recently dubbed the most photographed resort in Minnesota, Burntside advertised for summer help all over Minnesota. My mom's summers there helped pay her way through Mankato State.

Mike and I played football, traded football cards, watched the Vikings football practices and begged them to sign our cards. Eventually, we got enough Greg Coleman, Teddy Brown and Matt Blair autographs to fill our binders and we needed a new challenge. We moved on to sweaty clothing. Wristbands were easy to come by. I coveted a bloodstained white one thrown to me by Mike Mullarky, a tight end. Mike got a sock from running back Teddy Brown.

We spent entire days on the Mankato State campus, throwing a football, watching our heroes, dreaming of our own careers in purple and gold. It was hot every day we were there, and since we rode bikes all over town, we'd get thirsty. From our begging stations just outside the locker room door, we could see two fountains of Gatorade at the end of the hall, about 10 yards from the door. We dared each other to sprint in and return with a paper cup full. Mike did it. A kick returner named Buster Rhymes chased him out of the locker room and threw a white cleat at him. Mike snatched it and yelled, "Thanks!" as we ran to the gymnasium for cover. We were ecstatic. We'd been messing around with wristbands for

days. Cleats were our new quest. While all the other kids were wasting time asking for signatures, Mike and I were asking, “Can I have your shoe?”

We did continue collecting cards. The father of one of Mike’s Mankato friends owned a sports card shop in the mall downtown. We’d ride our bikes to the center of town and leaf through boxes of old trading cards, searching for Hall-of-Famers, preferably Purple People Eaters like Alan Page and Jim Marshall, for under a buck.

It wasn’t far from that mall that 3,000 people gathered on December 26, 1862 to watch the ceremonial hanging of the Dakota. Despite all of this personal history in Mankato, I was unaware of Mankato’s infamous distinction until I was a grown man, deliberately digging for history. I’m a high school English teacher now, and I know my students do not hang on my every word, do not read every page I assign, so I do not blame my teachers for my ignorance. It was probably “covered,” and I was probably tested on dates and deaths and causes. I probably blocked it out, didn’t want to know about it, didn’t want to find a connection between my family and the Native American genocide.

I remember studying slavery in both high school and college, swelling with pride and self-righteousness, secure in the knowledge that my family came from Norwegian pioneer stock and were, thus, innocent of America’s original sin. Learning about the indigenous people of the Minnesota Territory has been a more sobering experience.

The first Brekke in Faribault County was occupying land that had been Dakota hunting lands before the broken treaty of Traverse de Sioux. When the Dakota War of 1862 broke out, the Native Americans were starving to death, fighting for their lives because payments and provisions promised were never delivered. Knute Anderson Brekke was

pioneering a new American Dream for the land-starved Norwegians from Nordfjord just south of the Minnesota River Valley where the battles took place.

Occasionally, as I have made discoveries in my search for family history, I have called my parents, my brother and sister, my grandma, and shared my findings. When I first read about the Dakota War, I called my parents. They were playing Boggle at the kitchen table, killing time before they went to a friend's house for dinner.

"I've been reading about the Dakota War," I told my mom over the phone. "I can't believe I never knew this stuff. It was the largest mass execution in U.S. History."

My dad must have heard me through the phone from across the table.

"A lot of white people were killed," he barked.

Wow. I wasn't quite sure what to make of that knee-jerk, defensive retort. It was almost as if our family had been right there and Dad wanted to defend himself, defend our family.

"Please re-assure Dad I'm not writing a Native American history of the Brekke Family," I said to Mom.

"Oh, he knows that," she said. I could imagine the scolding look she was giving him. "Every time I teach that part of the Minnesota History unit I always tell the kids how Dr. Mayo, the father, not the brothers, was one of the doctors called onto the scene. He was a pioneer doctor."

My mom has taught third grade at Jefferson Elementary School, one block east of our house in Rochester, for 24 years. Living in Rochester, any tidbit illuminating Mayo Family History is essential learning.

“So Mrs. Mayo, she would tuck her hair up under her husband’s hat, wear his coat, and carry his gun every time she went out to the well just to get water,” Mom continued. “All the men in the area were off fighting, but she wanted them to think she wasn’t there all alone.”

My dad was right to get defensive. I had just read about how the old man, Charles Mayo, the pioneer doctor, father of the famous brothers, had dug up the mass grave of the Dakota who had been hung and used the bodies as cadavers for anatomy studies. Yikes. I wasn’t seeing the war through my ancestor’s eyes, nor those of poor Mrs. Mayo.

I was getting a better glimpse into the complexity of our history. The pioneer life has always seemed heroic to me. Growing up watching and listening to *Little House on the Prairie* created an image of an idyllic existence where men proved their worth by the strength of their backs and the kindness of their hearts. I first read O.E. Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* while I was a Paideia student at Luther College. The epic tale of Per Hansa’s quest to make a life from the stark prairie of western Minnesota did nothing to dissuade me from that belief.

The Malad book reports that Knute Anderson Brekke was a pacifist, that he paid his way to avoid fighting in the Civil War. I had read a little bit about the economic crisis that sent so many Scandinavians seeking work, seeking a livelihood in the new land. According to Jon Gjerde and Carleton Qualey’s *Norwegians in Minnesota*, “The early Norwegian exodus had begun in part as an attempt to escape urbanizing Norway. So many Norwegian immigrants flocked to the fertile farmlands of the Midwest that by 1910 they were the most agriculturally inclined ethnic group in the nation. Many were able to live a rural life that would have been denied them had they remained in Norway” (23).

Things had to be bad for so many young men and women to leave their families, leave their homes, to embark on such an arduous journey into the unknown. But it became increasingly unsettling to envision my pioneer ancestors tearing up the virgin prairie, slaughtering buffalo, pushing the Dakota further away from their homeland as the Norwegians carved a place for the Brekkes in Faribault County.

Chapter 6 - Pioneering Tensions in Southern Minnesota

While Knute was earning some money and dreaming of a place of his own, the U.S. government was busy negotiating claims to the land with the Native tribes of the Minnesota Territory. The Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, which would open up southern Minnesota to white settlement, was signed on July 23, 1851. Conducted by Alexander Ramsey, the first governor of Minnesota Territory, and Luke Lea, Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., the negotiations included a lot of booze, food and revelry. In *Minnesota: A History*, William Lass describes the week as having “a carnival atmosphere” (Lass 86). The Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of the Upper Sioux ceded all of their claims south of the Mississippi except for a narrow tract of land along the upper Minnesota River, about 20 miles long that would become the Upper and Lower Sioux Reservations.

Manifest Destiny was still in the minds of many Americans, and Minnesotans seeking statehood were eager to entice more settlers into the region. The economic promise of the rich agricultural land in southern Minnesota fueled settlement south of the Big Woods. In exchange for the land, the United States promised payment of \$1,665,000 in cash and annuities. Between the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux and the similar Treaty of Mendota, nearly 24 million acres of land opened for white settlement, purchased for pennies an acre.

The Indians were given two reservations, each about 20 miles wide and 70 miles long, along the Minnesota River. The Upper Sioux Agency was established near Granite Falls, while the Lower Sioux Agency was established about thirty miles downstream near Redwood Falls. Although some of the Upper Sioux were reportedly satisfied with their reservation, because it contained several villages established prior to white settlement, the Lower Sioux were not content. In addition to being forced from their home territory, the

Sioux were being “encouraged” to transform their culture from nomadic hunting to the stationary cultivation of European crops. As was the case with most treaties between the U.S. government and the Native American tribes, the promises made to the Native Americans at Traverse de Sioux and Mendota weren’t kept. The payments were slow in coming and less than expected. Food became scarce. Tensions between the settlers and the tribes grew, finally erupting in the Dakota War of 1862.

Growing up in Minnesota, I always believed that the Cowboys and Indians games and toys had their genesis in the Wild West - Wyoming, Nevada, California. I somehow never envisioned wars in Minnesota.

Chapter 7 - Pioneers in Faribault County (summary)

This chapter will focus on the pioneer experiences of the Brekke Family in Faribault County as told through the Malad history and other research. I plan to place details of our family history in the context of other Minnesota pioneer histories.

Chapter 8 - Frost on the Prairie (summary)

It wasn't until 1899 that Frost became a town. The Chicago & Northwestern Railroad was expanding. In Iowa in 1881, the Mason City & Fort Dodge line was laid down to tap into coal deposits. Two decades later, the Chicago & Northwestern pushed out into the prairie, heading northeast out of Mason City. The barley, corn and wheat of Faribault County, Minnesota, could then be loaded up and carried to Chicago, where it could reach markets all over the world.

The hulking steam engines that pulled the heavy cars through the plains needed water to produce their steam. At that time, the giant boilers needed to be refilled every eight miles. A train station was, therefore, built alongside the tracks every eight miles. A hobo who hopped a freight headed northwest out of Mason City in those days would have stopped in similar, small Iowa and Minnesota farming communities such as Hanlontown, Joice, Bricelyn, and Keister before arriving in Frost. And at every stop there would be a small depot where a station agent kept track of all the freight that passed through. Many of these small, quaint depots were designed by a Chicago architect named Charles S. Frost.

In all my years of going to Frost, I never once learned that tidbit of history. There are no plaques honoring him, no Charles Frost Days celebrations. At Easter last year, I trotted out my new Frost historical nugget and no one in my family knew where the name had come from.

Frost and his business partner, Henry Ives Cobb, had designed The Palmer Mansion, an enormous stone home on Lake Shore Drive. Inspired by a German castle, it was the largest private home in Chicago when it was finished in 1885. Frost later partnered with Alfred Hoyt Granger, designing numerous railroad terminals in the early 1900s including the

Renaissance Revival style Milwaukee Road Depot in downtown Minneapolis and the Old Chicago and Northwestern Terminal in downtown Chicago. Compared to those imposing brick buildings, the tiny depot he designed for Faribault County looked like a Monopoly house. Frost went on to design other grand structures, such as the Navy Pier Auditorium on Lake Michigan, and the residents of Frost went on to build their town. I have no idea if Charles Frost ever visited his namesake town.

The train tracks linked the isolated homesteaders to the larger world, and little towns grew up around each station. Engineers running trains on that same line today don't stop in Hanlontown or Joice or Frost at all anymore. When the steam engines gave way to diesel in the 1940s and water was no longer needed to keep the trains moving, the grain elevators were the reason trains stopped in the small towns.

Chapter 9 - Growing Up in Frost (summary)

This chapter will rely heavily on personal interviews with former residents, members of my family, and excerpts from Neil Kittleson's *Growing Up in Frost*. In the Introduction to his memoir, Kittleson states his book is "a collection of memories of what it was like growing up in a small town during the 1930s and 1940s, the years of the Great Depression and World War II." My parents were both born in 1946, so their memories will help chronicle the 1950s and 60s in Frost. My cousins and uncles went to Frost High School in the 1970s, my cousin Derek Wrase, literally, being the last person to walk across the Viking stage and graduate from Frost High. Two of my cousins still lived in Frost in the 1980s, though they attended Blue Earth High School. Those years are the basis for most of my memories.

Chapter 10 - Dad in Da Nang

When I played war, I dressed up in Dad's old Marine Corps fatigues from Vietnam. I slid them off the steel hangers in my closet and thrust my skinny, 12-year-old-boy limbs inside the soft, green sleeves and legs. The fabric hung on my lanky body like rags on the clothesline. I rolled up the sleeves, cuffed the pants. It was the middle of July. The Heinz brothers were out in my green backyard, sweating in their dad's Army clothes. Mike Hayden had an uncle's Navy shirt. We all had guns. We had uniforms. The war was on.

My dad had built a two-story playhouse and shed in the southwest corner of our lot a few years before. It was taller than our rambler, and from the wooden balcony of the playhouse you could see the tops of the maples and the roofs of the houses down 7th Avenue. You could also see the enemy hiding in the bushes. This was our base.

We had an assortment of weapons. Wooden replicas of Lee-Enfield bolt-action No. 4s -- you could open the breech and see a live round -- a wooden shell painted bronze. The Heinz boys had plastic Tommy Guns. Pulling the trigger sprayed imaginary bullets everywhere *rat-a-tat-a-tat! rat-a-tat-a-tat!* Tennis balls were grenades.

I remember sprinting from the corner of the house to the brick smoker, believing I could outrun the Heinz brothers' defensive strikes. I remember being hit by imaginary bullets -- in the left thigh, in the right shoulder blade -- strikes that sent me careening to the ground, rolling and crawling for cover under the nearest picnic table or hedge. Sweating. Panting. Calling out:

"I've been hit! I'm hit!"

Waiting for reinforcements.

"Come on! Come on, Hayden! Get me out of here!"

Tennis balls bouncing all around me, landing in the bushes.

“You’re dead! You’re dead, Joey!”

“No, it was a dud! I’m still alive!”

A miraculous recovery. Sprinting again to the front yard, regrouping. Planning another run at the base.

“Hayden, create a distraction. I’ll sneak in from Pharis’s yard, climb the ladder, and throw a grenade onto the deck.”

The Marine Corps fatigues became mine. They smelled of my sweat. The grass stains were from me “hitting the deck” under heavy fire. Mom washed them, dried them on the line, and hung them back up in my closet. And we always got back up too, the boys. We went to our houses, left the darkening sky for dinner and a bath.

“See you tomorrow.”

And we always did. We saw each other the next day and played again - sometimes football in the vacant lot, sometimes Atari in the basement, sometimes war all over the neighborhood.

One of my favorite photos of my dad was taken at the Minneapolis airport. It was the day he left for boot camp. In the photo, he leans against the right rear fin of the family’s black ‘57 Chevy, the image of easy-cool. He is wearing loose gray slacks, a white button-up shirt and a light, black cardigan sweater. His black hair, long and curly on top, like James Dean’s, is blowing in a warm Minnesota breeze. He holds a small, sky-blue handbag with both hands, and has a toothy smile on his face. This was a big day for the small-town boy. He had never flown in a plane. He had never seen the ocean. He had never been further than an

afternoon's drive away from his southern Minnesota home. Now he was going to California, going to see the ocean, going to explore the world. If you cropped the photo to reveal only his big smile and excited eyes, you might think he was skipping.

“Boot camp was my favorite part of the service,” he told me. “It was just what I wanted. It was disciplined. There was order. And you were learning all these new things so quickly - first aid, hygiene, how to march, how to clean and assemble your rifle. It was unbelievable the things they teach you in such a short period of time.”

This newfound love of learning was a big change for Dad. Discipline, order, and intense study sessions hadn't been a priority for him at Frost High School. He hated math. He skipped study hall. Across from the high school on county road 254 there was a gas and service station. Tall weeds are growing up through big cracks in the concrete now. Shelves are empty inside. Rusty cars and trucks are parked at different angles all over the property, and they are bumper to bumper in the short gravel driveway behind the hedges in back of the building. That's where my dad and his buddies used to go and smoke Lucky Strikes when they were supposed to be in study hall. The shop teacher, Mr. Dahl, the one who made Dad a fine carpenter, also encouraged him to join the service.

College had never appealed to him. His dad finished eighth grade in a country school and had driven grain trucks ever since. Dad didn't want to do that. A gravel truck, maybe. Maybe he would drive a gravel truck. Or be a pilot. He thought it would be cool to be a corporate pilot, fly executives around the country in private jets.

“I didn't really have any plans,” he told me once.

College? No way.

“You know, Gary, if you’re not going to college somewhere, you may as well join the service,” Mr. Dahl told him. An Army veteran, Dahl explained all the advantages - the travel, the training, the excitement. “It would be a hell of a lot better than staying around here.”

There were two grocery stores and three hardware stores on Main Street then. Farmers delivering a load of corn or sugar beets to the Frost Elevator could grab a sandwich and a cup of coffee at Shorty Forthun’s Café or shop for a new hay rake or harvester at Jensvold’s Implements. The biggest building in town was the grain elevator. In the summers there were brass band concerts, and on Saturday nights, in the empty lot between Doc Hansen’s old office and Maland’s Supply, the Frost businessmen’s association showed free movies for everyone in town.

When Dad and his buddies outgrew the ice cream socials and popcorn nights on Main Street, they occasionally drove around on the gravel roads, passing a bottle of Old Crow between them. One night, as they crossed the train tracks south of town, they discovered they could hop the car right onto the tracks. The tires of Tommy Johnson’s Ford hugged the rails, so nobody had to drive. They put the car in gear and let it idle down the line. And they drank. It was perfect. Nobody had to drive. A few miles north of Frost, however, as the Ford chugged along a lonely stretch of track between the cornfields, somebody thought they heard something.

“Is that a light up there?”

“No. Can’t be.”

“I think it is. Is it?”

“You’re drunk.”

They were drunk. And it was a light. Johnson tried to turn off the tracks, into the field, but the rails were too high. Johnson dropped the clutch, jabbed the stick into second, third, fourth. They were going to collide head-on. They were racing the train to the crossing. They were seniors in high school. They made it back to the road. Dad was ready to get out of town.

“I just wanted to get out of there, get out in the world,” he told me. “That’s the reason I joined the service. I just wanted the adventure of it. We’d never been away from Minnesota or Iowa. I don’t really know if I’d ever been to Wisconsin. I just wanted to get out of there and see things.”

Soon, visits to the Marine recruiter a few miles north in Wells became a new excuse to get out of study hall. Two weeks after graduation, on June 12th, 1964, Dad was getting that picture taken by his mother at the Minneapolis airport, en route to Marine Corps Boot Camp in San Diego, California. It was a thrilling day. He felt like anything could happen.

My grandma remembers that day differently.

“Your grandpa had to pull over on the Mendota Bridge,” she told me. “I was just sobbing. I couldn’t stop. I’d never cried so hard in my life.” Less than a mile from the airport, traffic snaked around them where they parked, suspended above the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers. The two of them spent the night in a hotel not far from the airport.

A few hours later, Dad walked off the plane in San Diego. He could feel the warm air. He could hear planes coming and going. In the distance, he could just make out the silhouettes of houses nestled in the hills above the city.

“I remember looking up and wondering who was living up in those houses,” he said. “They looked so cool up there.”

A few minutes later, a Marine Corps officer found Dad and a guy on his flight from North Dakota wandering toward the recruit depot.

“You guys looking for the Marines?” he asked. They nodded. “Get in the back of the truck. If any of you are chewing gum, spit it out.”

That night, Dad packed the black cardigan sweater and gray slacks into the powder blue handbag and mailed them home. He stood in a long line at the barber shop.

“Any of you have birthmarks on your scalp,” the base barber announced, “tell us before we shave your head.”

He went to bed in a barracks, wearing Government Issue underwear. He woke up the next morning at 6 a.m. to the sound of a scratchy recording of a bugler playing reveille over the P.A. system. During the course of the next three months, every minute of his day was scheduled for him. And he loved it.

“In the Marines, for the first three months, you don’t get to go anywhere by yourself,” he told me. “If you wanted to go to the bathroom, you had to ask permission. They would tell you when you could smoke, when to eat, when to wash your clothes, when to shine your shoes.”

They trained in the hot San Diego sun. They ran between three and ten miles each day. They did sit-ups, pull-ups, push-ups by the hundreds. They practiced marksmanship in the bright sun and in the black of night. They learned how to bivouac, how to wear a gas mask, how to administer first aid in a combat zone, how to fire a bazooka, a flame-thrower, and a grenade. When dignitaries visited the base, they marched in parades and stood at

attention for hours on “The Grinder,” an open expanse of black top asphalt that radiated heat and made tired Marines fall asleep standing up.

“You never, NEVER, dropped your rifle,” Dad said. “That was a basic rule. But we were training so hard, and you’re standing out in that sun, guys would fall asleep standing there, and you’d hear this ‘crash’ - a rifle falling to the ground. You paid for that by doing exercise.”

After hours of drills in the sun, the new recruits would also be expected to study the *Marine Corps Handbook*. Dad loved learning about the history of the Corps, the different types of duty, the unique terms and symbols of the Marines. But the lecture hall was crowded. It was hot. The guys got drowsy after hours and hours of workouts. Sitting with 150 other soldiers in a dim lecture hall, the Marines fought sleep like heroes, but a few nodded off. They were woken up with a clipboard to the back of the head.

“You’d hear a ‘THWACK!’” Dad recalled, “and you’d sit up a little straighter in your chair.”

Dad never fell asleep. He took notes. He paid attention. He had a plan now.

“I wanted to be a communicator when I got out of boot camp,” he said. “You had to score high on this battery of tests and I got it.”

But when they finished boot camp the commanding officers announced, “We’re short of mortar men, and we’ve got too many communicators.” So they ordered many of the would-be communicators on to infantry training, despite their high scores and ambitions. Dad was one of them.

Although Dad seemed to thrive in such an intense environment, some guys couldn’t take it. Couldn’t take boot camp. Couldn’t take the physical or mental demands. Dad

remembers one recruit, “a sick-looking kid, scrawny, with yellow, rotten teeth,” couldn’t keep up. He wanted out. On one march in front of the barracks, just as Dad’s platoon got moving, the drill instructor yelled, “Halt!” The sickly soldier had peed on the street. He was still scrubbing the same spot on the concrete when the rest of the platoon returned several hours later. A few days later, in a sterilized Navy sick bay where several platoons were lined up “asshole to belly button” for immunizations, Dad heard the drill instructor screaming. The same kid was peeing on the spotless floor.

“We never saw him again,” Dad said. “You just felt kind of bad for him. Everyone else looked pretty healthy. You knew he wasn’t going to make it.”

Other soldiers couldn’t handle the mental strain. One night while he was guarding a barracks -- “You are always guarding something in the service” -- Dad and another private got a call on the radio.

“Corporal of the guard to post three! Corporal of the guard to post three!” When they arrived, the soldier guarding the latrine explained that one of the recruits had gone into the latrine three times in the last few minutes. Strange. Finally, this last time, the soldier on guard noticed a bayonet sticking out of this same soldier’s pocket. The soldier with the bayonette was detained. He was crying. The guards woke up the drill sergeant. The drill sergeant assessed the soldier’s condition.

“What the hell’s the matter with you?” he said to the blubbing soldier.

“I’m not gonna make it, sir.”

The drill sergeant took the kid’s bayonet and pressed the tip of it into the recruit’s throat. He pressed harder, nearly punctured the skin.

“You’ve already made it,” he said. “There’s only two weeks left, you idiot. Now if you’re still going to kill yourself, don’t do it in the head because some other poor son-of-a-bitch private is going to have to clean up all your blood. If you kill yourself on the beach we can just kick the sand over it. Don’t make me get out of bed again.”

That kid made it. So did Dad.

“You knew in your head ‘this is all just a game,’” he said. “They’re not Russians trying to kill you. They’re just training you, trying to make you stronger.”

I have a second favorite picture of my dad. This one was taken three months after the airport photo, at my grandparent’s house in Frost. Dad was on leave for a month after finishing boot camp in October of that same year. Again, the big black Chevy is in the background, parked in the gravel driveway behind Grandma and Grandpa’s white clapboard house. In this photo he is standing ramrod straight, at attention, chin up in his olive green Marine Corps service uniform. The fingertips of his right hand touch the visor on his peaked cap, which is pulled down low over his eyes. He does not lean on the car, but stands rigid beside the left front fender. He is not smiling. He looks like a soldier.

They say they can do that to you, the Marines. They can transform you. In the TV ads I saw growing up, the narrator always asked, “Do you have what it takes to join the few, the proud, the Marines?” Every time I saw those promos growing up, I wondered a little. Just a little. For the first 12 years of my life I had planned to be quarterback of the Minnesota Vikings. Then, throughout middle school I lived for basketball and Nicole Schuler, but had no dreams of the NBA or marriage. By the time I signed my registration card for selective service at the Post Office on Broadway in Rochester, I had decided to become a filmmaker, a white Spike Lee. Watching those Marine Corps commercials though, I thought about my dad,

and I wondered if he harbored any secret desire for me to join. Every boy wonders how he'll become a man in the eyes of his father.

Dad rarely talked about his service. I never asked, but I always listened. Bits and pieces, opinions and impressions would come out at random times - during a commercial for a movie, driving past a Fort Ripley convoy near Brainerd, shoveling snow off the driveway. I remember him telling me that he was a mortar soldier, launched big 81mm rounds like grenades. Then he got a job in the mail room. I remember a story about an outdoor shower, him feeling something scrape across his feet, looking down to see the long, pink tail of a rat. I remember him talking about the Vietnam movies. *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now* were "garbage."

"That's just not how it was," he told me.

No drugs. No psychotic killing sprees. No reel-to-reel players blasting "Flight of the Bumblebees" or "Gimme Shelter" during raids. That was fiction. I was glad to know it. It was easier to know that. I didn't have a clear picture of *how it was*, but I must not have really wanted one. I never asked.

I never asked Dad about much. And he never sat me down to impart any *Guidelines for Manhood*. There were no man-to-man talks in a fishing boat. No hunting trips. No camping. No "birds and bees."

I was a senior at Mayo High School in the spring of 1993, when the local Marine Corps recruiter called me. Then he called again. Then again. And again. During the first phone call, I was sitting on my dad's bed, watching *Monday Night Football*. The recruiter asked if I had ever known any Marines. I told him my dad had fought with the Corps in

Vietnam. That was his green light. The recruiter didn't stop calling until I agreed to meet with him at school.

Later that month, a sinewy Marine in dress blues unpacked a small bag of wooden blocks onto a table in the Mayo High cafeteria. In bold caps on the rectangular blocks were words such as *HONOR, INTEGRITY, KNOWLEDGE*.

"Joseph, I want you to pick out the words here that are important to you," he said.

One-by-one I grabbed each of the blocks from the recruiter. *TEAMWORK. STRENGTH. HONOR*. He stacked them into a neat pyramid between us. Using his index finger as a pointer, he gestured to each of the blocks in turn and delivered a well-rehearsed explanation of how the Marines could train a kid like me to do anything I wanted, and turn me into a confident, intelligent man. Filmmaker? No problem.

"Joseph, do you have any plans right now for after high school?" he asked.

"My sister goes to Luther College," I said, "I think I might go there."

"Joseph, do you really believe you will be able obtain these important attributes that you have identified at Luther College?" he said, not really wanting an answer.

"Well, yes, I think I probably can."

"But you don't know for sure, do you?" he said. "You haven't been there. I know for sure, however, and your father knows for sure, that the Marines can provide an education for you and much, much more. In fact, as a Marine, you can even earn money for tuition at Luther College after your service in the Marine Corps, if you think you still want to go to college."

My mom was a freshman at Mankato State University when she got a letter from my dad in late February 1965. They were not married yet - she was still Connie Thompson - but

Dad was hoping. He wrote to her from Okinawa. He was going to Vietnam, but he didn't want his mom to find out. Could she go back to Frost and tell his sister? Someone should know he was there, just not his mom. So, Connie Thompson drove down to Frost from Mankato and met Dad's sister, Connie Brekke, and showed her the letter. Later that day, his sister told their dad. By the time Grandpa Eddie told Grandma Clarice about it all, Dad was already in a boat in Da Nang Bay.

It was tight inside the transport ship. Dad was standing below deck in an aisle between Navy cots stacked five high on either wall. Marines in full combat gear stood in front of him and behind, shifting their weight from one boot to the other. They were cutting through deep swells in the South China Sea toward Da Nang Bay. Dad readjusted his grip on his M14. He was sweating under his field helmet. They all were.

"This is gonna be nothing," they told each other.

It was nearing 9:00 a.m. on March 8, 1965. Operation Red Beach Two was to begin at 0900.

Dad was going to Vietnam. He was a mortar soldier in the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade. He was among the first U.S. ground troops committed to the growing conflict.

"I didn't go into the Marines because I was a big patriot or anything," he told me once. "I just wanted to see the world, get out of Frost."

He was being sent to help defend the Da Nang air base, launch pad for Operation Rolling Thunder, a daily bombing campaign meant to cripple the supply lines and the will of the North Vietnamese Army.

"This is gonna be nothing," they kept saying to each other inside the boat. They weren't even carrying live rounds.

Then a voice came over the loudspeaker:

“Intelligence has reported a battalion of VC in the hills above Da Nang Bay,” the voice said. “We’re going to issue live ammunition.”

Nobody said anything below deck. A few moments later, soldiers began passing hot clips over each other’s shoulders. Two clips each.

“All men on deck.”

With a bulky life vest slung around his neck, an M14 over his shoulder, and two clips strapped in his belt, Dad climbed up onto the deck of the transport ship. The sea was rough that morning, waves crashing against the hull as the 7th fleet dropped anchor. Looking east, toward shore, Dad could just make out some palm trees and a stretch of sand along Nam O Beach. Then he was climbing down the sides of the transport ship on a cargo net. He jumped down into a small, amphibious landing craft. He couldn’t see over the tall, iron sides. The sky was gray overhead. Nobody spoke. He could hear the engine churning through the swells. It was a three-minute ride. The bay doors would open in the surf. The Vietcong would be firing from the hills. Dad would run out into the sand.

“Sure, you get scared,” Dad told me, “but you don’t think about that. You can’t think about that. We all came running off the boat, charging.”

But there were no bullets raining down from the hills. There was no need for the live ammunition. There were no traces of the Viet Cong.

“There were these Vietnamese women there in silk robes selling Coke,” he said. “We got on the beach and we just stood and looked at each other.”

Back in the States, readers of the *New York Times* on March 9, 1965, learned that a group of Vietnamese students “wrapped garlands around the necks of the first Marines to trot ashore,” and local dignitaries officially welcomed the soldiers to Vietnam.

“Then they loaded us in trucks and they took us through Da Nang,” Dad told me. “We were waving at people on the streets and they were waving and smiling and cheering back at us. It was the weirdest thing.”

Readers of the *Times* on March 8, 1965, woke that Monday to three articles about the Marines landing in Da Nang. The stories ran just beneath the A1 photo of white Alabama state troopers bludgeoning a black man in Salem. As Dad was marching onto the beaches of Da Nang to protect U.S. citizens from the spread of Communism, protestors were marching from Salem to Montgomery demanding democracy.

When I was being recruited by the Marines, Dad made sure I was prepared for the hard sell. He and I talked in the kitchen the night before I met with the guy. I was eating a bowl of Corn Flakes at the table. Dad sat down next to me.

“When he tries to tell you how great it’s going to be, don’t listen,” he said. “When he tells you about all the places you’ll go and the things you’ll learn, tell him you’re going to college. You’re too smart for the Marines. You’re going to college.”

Chapter 11 - The Entertainer

When I sang in church as a kid I sang quietly. My voice was a dull vibration in my throat and inner ears. I held open the big green Lutheran Book of Worship with the embossed gold cross and I stared at the notes on the pages. Even though I didn't know what all the words meant -- doth, transcend, magnanimous -- I could still sound them out. I followed the notes the best I could, trying to sing a little higher when the notes climbed the staff, but not too high, like the old lady in the pew behind me, I just tried to stay in the middle of everybody. I tried to sing low when the men sang low, because I figured I'd need to do that when I got older. I always made sure I was silent a couple of beats before everyone else.

I don't remember the exact Sunday or the season or even the song, but I vividly recall singing with a hymnal in my hands, standing with my family in one of the long pews in the sanctuary of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church on 16th Street in Rochester, doing my best to stay in tune with the men, and being slugged, hard, in the arm by my sister, Nicci. With wide, raging eyes she hissed through her clenched teeth, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! You're embarrassing!"

I must have been in junior high. I was singing a lot then, in my bedroom, cranking my plastic gray and black Sanyo record player as high as it would go. That particular Sunday I recall going home after church and sliding album one of Led Zeppelin's *Physical Graffiti* out of the sleeve, setting the needle down on track three of side one, "Kashmir," and assuming a particularly haughty pose on my bed with a handheld tape recorder in my hand. John Bonham's smashing cymbals and crashing gong transformed me into the band's front man Robert Plant, and I pranced around my room, reaching for the sky and pulling it down in a clenched fist, working myself into a sweat as I mimicked Plant, who was doing his best to

mimic traditional Pakistani Qawwali singers over the soaring, symphonic, middle eastern melody and Jimmy Page's guitar.

“Oh let the sun beat down upon my face,” I hollered, “And stars fill my dreams/I'm a traveler of both time and space/To be where I have been.”

I stumbled upon the tape during a move years later, and lost the tape again without remorse. My sister was right to be embarrassed, and she probably fulfilled the secret desires of many gray-haired Lutherans at Gloria Dei that morning she silenced me in the sanctuary, but she wouldn't muzzle me forever.

In my late 20s, my Grandma Clarice became my musical hero. Pressed to name my seven favorite musicians of the moment in reverse order, the list looks like this: No. 7 - Elvis, No. 6 - Lucinda Williams, No. 5 - Gram Parsons, No. 4 - Greg Brown, No. 3 - Bruce Springsteen, No. 2 - Bob Dylan, No. 1 - Grandma Clarice.

As long as I can remember, Grandma's dark brown upright piano has always been pressed up against the south wall of her living room in Frost, alongside the stairs. Whenever I slept on Grandma's living room floor as a kid, I would scoot myself closer to the piano, resting my head beneath the fingerboard near the brass pedals, reaching out for the cold metal and pressing them to the carpet with my little hands as I lain awake in the dark.

I've always loved listening to her play, and I ask for a few songs every time I visit. She never used to hesitate. She would pull out the rickety wooden bench and sift through piles of sheet music on the little bookshelf to the left of the piano. She would lick her dry fingers and open the pages of a yellowing, worn piece of music and say, “Let's try this one.”

One of the hallmarks of a singular artist is the creation of a distinctive sound. One note on Lucille is all a blues fan needs to recognize B.B. King. Dylan's delivery has

transformed through the decades, but the nasally, indignant tone of “Like a Rolling Stone” or “It’s alright, Ma” is unmistakable. In the same way I know Bob and B.B., I would recognize Grandma’s sound anywhere. Tucked into the corner of an arena with a hundred other pianists playing Scott Joplin’s “The Entertainer” on a hundred different pianos, I could find her by ear. Blindfolded. That’s her song.

She hums the melody unconsciously as she plays. Her breath beats the stroke of the hammers by a fraction of a second, and you can hear the foot pedals thud up and down as she slides her little feet on and off to dampen and sustain.

When she’s playing songs from sheet music, she tilts her head back a little to read the notes through the bottom window of her bifocals. She turns the pages without a break in the rhythm. Songs from the late 1930s and ‘40s are her favorites. “My Happiness” by Bonney Bergantine. “Please Think of Me” by Benny Davis. There are a few post-War themes in heavy rotation such as “Somewhere My Love,” from the 1965 film *Dr. Zhivago*.

She plays without looking at her hands. Her fingers hover gently on the keys and glide to each chord, each note of the melody. A few years ago, arthritis made it painful for her to reach for the next octave in a song. The ends of her fingers dry out and split every winter. They bleed. For years, every night during the winter months, she has slathered Vaseline on the ends of her fingers and wrapped them in Band-Aids and athletic tape.

“I’ll play and suffer,” she told me once, smiling. “I have to play.”

“The happiest day” of my Grandma Clarice’s childhood was the sunny summer Saturday in 1929 when her piano arrived. She was 12. She was sweeping the hardwood floors and dusting the furniture with her mother in their farmhouse just south of Buffalo Center, Iowa. Her younger sister, Evelyn, was across the gravel road helping their

grandmother do the same. Saturday was cleaning day on the Jensen farms. As she swept, Clarice saw something drive by out on the road. “A delivery truck?” she wondered. She ran to the living room window and saw a flatbed from Henry Schutter’s furniture store, pulling up the lane to her house.

“I knew what that truck delivered,” she once told me, “furniture and pianos. I couldn’t believe it.”

On the back of the truck, covered and tied down with ropes, was a new piano. She ran outside and watched as the moving men untied the knots and peeled back the dust cover to reveal a brand new upright Morris piano. It was stained dark brown, almost black. The movers slid the piano off the back of the truck, rolled it on a cart up to the steps, and then heaved it into her family’s living room. Clarice led the way.

For several months leading up to that big day, she had been asking, “begging,” for a piano. Her father played the fiddle. Her grandmother across the road played the pump organ. Clarice’s older brother, Marion, could play any stringed instrument he picked up. He was keeping pace with their dad on the bass viol, playing old-time bluegrass tunes such as “Turkey in the Straw” and “Irish Washer Woman.” Clarice felt it was her turn to have an instrument and she’d been letting her parents know about it.

That spring and summer, before the piano arrived, she had taken to fantasy. She would sit down at the windows of the living room, looking out onto the fields of corn and oats, and she would tap out tunes on the windowsills. Her fingers found scales in the wooden ledge. Her parents got the message.

She began taking piano lessons later that summer from Mrs. Joe Peterson. For one hour, once each week, Grandma Clarice would play songs from a practice book. Her mother

never learned to drive, so her dad or her brother drove her into town for lessons. They would do some shopping or visit her other grandma who lived in town while Clarice played for her teacher. Near the end of each lesson, Mrs. Peterson would give her a few more notes to work on, a few more songs to learn for the following week. She practiced. My grandma was a good piano student. I was not.

I don't remember anything about the day my family's piano arrived in our living room in Rochester. My parents tell me I was in elementary school. It was in the fall of 1983. I hadn't been asking for a piano. A new football? Yes. A purple and gold, No. 59 Matt Blair Minnesota Vikings football jersey? Yes, I'd been asking, begging, for those. But I had no interest in a piano.

My older sister, Nicci, did. She had been fooling around on Grandma's piano and asked mom and dad if we could get one. My parents talked to Grandma about a loan. She gave them the money, \$1,400 for a brand new Wurlitzer from Wellhaven Music on Broadway. No need to pay her back. Neither my dad nor his older sister, Connie, had stuck with the piano. Grandma Clarice was all for encouraging the next generation. When Nicci and I came home from school one day, the piano was in the living room. My dad tells me we didn't seem too impressed.

"I'd hoped for a little more of a reaction," he later confessed. Sorry Grandma.

My sister and I began taking lessons from Mrs. Frederickson. She was a frumpy older woman, a music teacher in the Rochester schools who lived a few blocks away from us on 9th Avenue. In my mind, she is always wearing a silky green and blue blouse with a big bow hanging from the pillowy folds of her neck. Her gray, polyester slacks made a swishing noise

when she adjusted herself on the bench beside my scrawny, nine-year-old frame. She smelled like my Great Aunt Bea -- dime-store perfume. Lots of it.

She was nice enough. She never caned my knuckles with a baton or anything when I missed a note, and she had ample opportunities. She never beat me, but she never inspired me either. I've occasionally wondered what I could have become if I'd had an attractive, young, sweet-smelling college girl with an affinity for James Booker, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Doctor John. To be fair, I probably was Mrs. Frederickson's dream-student either. I usually practiced for a few anxious minutes before each lesson. I don't remember if I walked the two blocks to her house alone with my piano book or if my parents took me. When it was time for me to play the song of the week, she'd unleash the metronome, and I'd come unglued. The small, wooden timer on top of her piano always screwed me up. I'd focus on the "click-click-click" of the pendulum and forget where I was in my song, forget all eight notes in my repertoire, and fumble over the keys as if I had pickles for fingers.

I do remember "All Cows Eat Grass" and "Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge" - the notes of the bass and treble clefs. I can still play one song by memory, "The Calliope." That page of my piano book had a small, black and white drawing of a little steam organ, perched on a cartoonish circus trailer, playing by itself. Puffs of steam rose from the pipes. It's a happy little song. With my thumbs stationed on middle "C," my left hand hit each bass note down the scale. My right hand tapped out a punchy reply to each bass stroke with two staccato notes from the treble clef - *exactly* like a calliope. I can still sing the song as I play: "Come and dance with me / Sings the wheezy calliope / Come and dance with me / Do the two-penny waltz." Learning that song was the apex of my piano career. Grandma Clarice

graduated on to bigger things, paid performances at weddings and funerals, and a 30-year career as pianist and organist for Emerald Lutheran Church.

“When I started,” she said, “I didn’t think it was going to be so valuable, just entertainment for myself.”

When Grandma Clarice started playing in 1929, the Grand Ole Opry was only four years old. Radio was gaining popularity, but fans had to tune in to their favorite shows at specific times. There weren’t any recording stars in those days, so people entertained themselves, and every county seemed to have a family band. In Winnebago County, Iowa, where Grandma Clarice grew up, her family was the family band.

Grandma Clarice’s dad, Jens, played the fiddle. In the early 1900s, before the kids were born, he formed a band with a guitar-picking family friend named Matheson. The two of them hooked up with another local musician, Peat Mundahl, who played clarinet. The trio played waltzes and two-steps at square dances and farmer’s co-op meetings in Buffalo Center and other venues around Winnebago County. Once his kids were old enough to pick up a fiddle or pick out notes on the piano, Jens encouraged them to play music and supported their training.

From 1915-1935, Jens was secretary of the local farmer’s elevator co-op. In addition to keeping the books for county farmers, he would get his kids to help provide entertainment for the monthly Farm Bureau meetings. Throughout her grade school years in the late 1920s, Grandma Clarice would perform with her dad, her little sister, Evelyn, and her big brother Marion. They played old time fiddle tunes such as “Turkey in the Straw” and “Old Irish Washer Woman.” Grandma Clarice and Evelyn always sang, “When I was a Little Girl.” Clarice didn’t really want to sing, though. She wanted to play piano.

The stock market crashed a few months after the Jensens bought the piano. But that didn't affect her study. In Dorothy Schwieder's *Iowa: The Middle Land*, she explains that the Wall Street collapse didn't have an immediate impact on Iowa's farm families. "Iowans did not feel the full brunt of the Great Depression until two years later," Schwieder explains. That's when Clarice's piano lessons ended, 1931. By then, however, she had learned how to read music. She taught herself after that, buying sheet music at the local hardware store -- three sheets for a dollar.

Most Sundays, after dinner, the Jensen family would get together in the living room and play. Jens and Marion would rosin up the bows. Clarice would take her spot at the piano. Both her mom, Lottie, and her little sister, Evelyn, could chord the guitar. Together, they would play music and sing loud enough that the neighbors could hear them a half-mile away at the next farm.

"I hear the Jensen's are in concert," the neighbors would say.

Her brother, Marion, went on to form bands of his own and played for dances and parties throughout the region. He asked Grandma Clarice to join him a couple of times, but she turned him down.

"I just wasn't comfortable, I guess," she later told me, "but I sometimes wish I had gone and done that. They had a good time, I think. It would have been fun."

The first wedding she played was for a woman named Aleta Pink in Buffalo Center. The first funeral she played was for a friend of her father-in-law, Johnny Njoes, of Frost. She played for hundreds of others over the years.

"Weddings were so nerve-wracking," she told me once. "You didn't want to mess up someone's big day."

For about 40 years, her compensation stayed the same. Families either gave her a check for about \$25 or a gift -- “vases or a pretty plate.”

In 1954, her big break came. She was asked to play weekly performances as the organist and pianist for Emerald Lutheran Church in Frost.

“I didn’t have to try out,” she said. “They just asked me. They ran out of organists.”

Every Monday, the preacher and church elders would pick out the hymns for the coming Sunday and call Clarice with the titles. She would practice at home. “Amazing Grace” and “It Is No Secret (What God Can Do)” came to be her favorites. On Sunday mornings, she would start cooking a beef roast with potatoes, carrots and gravy for dinner. Grandpa Eddie, not a churchgoer, would stay at home, wash the dishes, and tend to the roast while she played for the parishioners a few blocks away.

Her son, my dad, was a regular at church for about a year during his confirmation classes. He didn’t hear all of his mom’s songs though. He was 15. All the boys in the confirmation class were supposed to take turns lighting the candles before announcements, helping with collection before the sermon, and snuffing out the candles after the service. After each of the 10 boys had taken their turns, Dad and Tommy Johnson volunteered to help with the service for the rest of the year. All the boys were expected to be in church. Most of them sat in the pews and listened to the service. Not Tommy Johnson and the organist’s son.

“We’d go in and light the candles while mom was playing,” Dad explained, “and then, during the sermon, we’d go down to the basement, hop out the back door, drive around town and have a cigarette.”

After a Lucky Strike, they'd park the '57 Chevy behind the church, along 3rd Street, hop up the back steps, sneak in through the back door behind the altar, and put the candles out after the last hymn.

"Had her timed down to the T," Dad boasted.

Dad and Grandpa made it to church every now and then to hear her play - Christmas, Easter, and my Dad's first weekend home after boot camp. He wore his uniform. Grandma Clarice played almost every Sunday for 30 years. She retired in 1984 after Grandpa suffered his second stroke. She wasn't comfortable leaving him home alone anymore, but she didn't stop playing piano.

Even after Grandpa Eddie died, Grandma Clarice would spend hours playing through stacks of sheet music.

"I'd lose track of time," she said. "I'd look up and two hours would have passed, just playing songs for myself."

I knew that feeling.

When I bought my first guitar in the summer of 1991, I wasn't aiming to join a family band. I was 17 and I had visions of grandeur. Rock star. Big stage. In addition to wailing along with Robert Plant, I'd been grunting out John Cougar Mellencamp tunes in my bedroom for years -- "Hurts So Good," "Small Town," "Jack and Diane." Listening back to my micro-cassette recordings of me and Michael Hutchence of INXS, I learned how to drop the "r" syllable on "Never Tear Us Apart." It was more of an "ah" sound most of the time. You could sustain a note like that -- "NEV-ahhhhhh" -- and say it with conviction. I read

somewhere that Bono believed conviction was the most important quality in a lead singer, so that's what I was cultivating.

I had a harmonica - a Marine Band, key of "C". I first learned to toot along with the Beatles' intro to "Love, Love Me Do." Then I began playing along with Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* -- "Before You Accuse Me," "San Francisco Bay Blues," "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" -- classic blues tunes that turned me on to Muddy Waters, Little Walter, and Sonny Boy Williamson.

In order to start my own band, however, I needed to learn how to play guitar. All the guys who sang in bands at Mayo High School played guitar, and I needed to buy one. I'd been saving money from my job as a bus boy at Michael's Restaurant. I took a consultant, my sister's ex-boyfriend, Steve Rings, to the music store. He was two years older than me, an established guitarist at Mayo with the rock trio "Vertical Hair Factor" (VHF). Steve and the other guys in the band, Dean Skuldt and Eric Mellom, all had long, straight hair that hung down to the middle of their backs. When they performed, they grunged up in blue jeans and flannel shirts, and then they would load their hair full of Aqua Net and comb it straight up. Everybody knew Steve was the best guitarist in town. In addition to winning the Mayo High School talent show with VHF, he performed works by Mozart, Bach and Segovia on classical guitar for adults. Everybody knew he was going to make it big. So I tapped him to be my wingman when I went to buy my first guitar. He liked my sister, even composed a song inspired by her. She was two years older than him. I was the little brother of the older girl. He *had* to take me.

It was early in August. I'd just come into a little extra cash from my birthday, so I cleaned out my bank account and had about \$350 to spend. I remember picking Steve up in

our blue Buick Regal. We drove to Welhaven Music on Broadway and surveyed the goods. My budget led us to a small selection of acoustic guitars hanging from hooks, high on the southern wall of the store. Steve told me I wanted a “solid spruce top.” The salesman showed us a couple of models. Steve played them and said they sounded all right. I don’t remember why I chose the Fender *San Marino*, but I was excited to learn that the price tag -- which cleaned me out -- included a hard shell case. That would be nice when I tossed the guitar into a trailer or the back of a van, traveling from town to town on tour.

I started taking guitar lessons that summer, in the basement of the music store. My teacher, Chris Ricks, was a heavy-set guy with a stringy black beard and thick glasses that made his eyes look huge. He was always sweating. He wore button-up collared shirts, open at the top (more hair), and overalls. I told him I wanted to learn how to play blues and rock like Jimmy Page.

Chris showed me how to press my fingers on the fret board to make the “E,” “A,” and “B7” shapes. He’d strum the chords on his black and white Stratocaster, and I’d try to repeat the sound. He would then try to play some lead licks over my chording. My fingers were a mushy mess on the fret board, muting all the other strings. I couldn’t seem to make my fingers operate as individual digits. It hurt my hand.

It took me a quarter of an hour to try to tune the guitar with my pitch pipe, and it still sounded off. I was never going to get it. Plus, I had soccer practice. Then basketball practice. I gave up on the guitar.

My grandma taught piano lessons for a few years at her house in Frost. Most of her students were like me.

“I really didn’t enjoy giving lessons,” she said. “The kids weren’t too into it. They didn’t care if they learned or not. Their parents wanted them to learn. They’d say to me, ‘I haven’t practiced since I was here last time.’ So, I figured I was wasting my time. They say if you’re forced to play you might as well give it up. You have to want to do it.”

For a year I left my guitar in the case, propped up in the corner of my room. I’d go to parties on Saturday nights at Eastwood Park where a group of guys from our high school played Grateful Dead covers while we drank Busch Light Draft and made out with girls in the nearby woods. I’d lean against a post in the park shelter where they played and imagine myself behind the microphone, a guitar slung over my shoulder. It seemed inevitable to me. I convinced myself to give it another try.

The next summer, I started lessons with Chris again. Same routine. E-A-B7. I kept at it. I got to where I could slowly make it through a sloppy 12-bar blues. Chris would play some lead riffs over my slow, halting rhythm to make it sound more authentic, but he earned his money with me every week. Later that summer, soccer practice started. Then basketball. The guitar sat in the corner.

The next summer, in 1993, I was preparing to leave home for Luther College. As I packed my suitcases and took down my Springsteen “Born in the USA” poster from the back of my door, I thought about my guitar in the corner. Springsteen played a Fender too. I knew I didn’t actually “play” a Fender, but I had one. After a few minutes of soul searching, I came to terms with the realization that I would probably, most likely, never entertain a stadium full of screaming fans the way Bruce did. I had come to a major crossroads in my life and I knew it. I had to make a decision. I could sell the guitar for \$300 and have a little extra beer for

college, or I could keep the guitar, keep trying to change chords without stopping to look at my hand, and learn to play a song or two for my grandkids one day.

I decided to take it with me. And I vowed that if I learned how to play Mellencamp's "Jack and Diane" before I died, I would consider myself successful. By the spring of my freshman year, I could belt out "Jack and Diane" and get a roomful of drunk college students singing along. I played blues harmonica and sang in a little folk group with my high school buddy, Paul Odenbach, and our campus pastor, Mike Blair. One of the Luther librarians, John Gooden, joined us on mandolin. We earned a standing ovation at the Decorah Folk Festival with our interpretation of Dylan's "When the Ship Comes In." I sang and played harmonica. When I left Luther, I kept plugging away on the guitar.

In Turlock, California, I took lessons from a guy named Robert Allen (not to be confused with Robert Allen Zimmerman). I learned to play rhythm and sing well enough for him to play with me at a few house parties. I was hosting open mic poetry events at a Barnes and Noble store at the time and writing for the Turlock Journal when a woman from the local arts council invited me to read some poetry and sing some songs for the Tuesday Women's Reading Club. They gave me a check for \$100. That was my first paid performance. I wanted to frame it for posterity, but I was bouncing checks all over town on my \$8 per hour wages at the newspaper, so I deposited it right away.

When I got a job as an editor and features writer in San Luis Obispo, California, I started playing in the back of the *Tribune* parking lot with one of the photographers, Dave Middlecamp, at lunch on Fridays. Pretty soon one of the graphic designers, Jeff Cannon, joined us. An intern from Cal Poly named Whitney Phaneuf had a yard sale the next summer

and wrote “Live Music” into her classified ad. Then she asked us if we’d play for her customers at eight in the morning. We did it. We called ourselves “Yard Sale” after that.

The apartment building my wife and I moved into that year had been built in the 1940s. The original owner had converted a portion of the parking garage into a private tavern, complete with a mirrored bar and wells for the bottles. Friday nights at “The Tavern” were usually headlined by “Yard Sale.” We played a variety of folk-rock classics such as Dylan’s “Tangled up in Blue” and John Prine’s “Angel from Montgomery.” I blew a nasty harp on “Pink Cadillac.” Jeff played lead guitar. Dave was learning slide and picking up the mandolin. We all sang. Dave got us to harmonize on “Can’t You See” by the Marshall Tucker Band. Pretty soon we landed a few paid gigs - a Saturday afternoon at a retirement community center, a Friday night at a local deli. Our big break came on a Saturday night “pass-the-hat” show at the “Last Stage West” supper club in the hills just east of Morro Bay.

The Tavern was our regular gig. We played there at least once a month. The room was the size of a one-car garage. The building managers strung white lights through the exposed beams of the roof. We could pack 20 people in the room. Our wives and colleagues came and went. The neighbors came in for a drink. People danced and sang along. They requested the songs we knew. Most of us didn’t have kids at the time, so we stayed up and played until the neighbors called the police or my fingers were became too sore to play. Those nights in The Tavern were among the most blissful moments of my life. I didn’t need to be a rock star. I was making music with my friends, and hours seemed to pass with every verse.

Before I left Luther, I wrote a song inspired by my grandma’s stories about making music on those Sunday afternoons with her family. I pulled together bits and pieces of what

she had told me and penned a few verses to the melody of Bob Dylan's "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere." I called my song "Family Jamboree." I didn't know the names of my ancestors at the time so I just threw in some names I'd heard kicked around like "Oscar" and "Louie." For the chorus, I wrote, "oooo-weeeee, c'mon Clarie / bang on that piano, tickle them keys / oh-whoa, c'mon let's go / let's have a family jamboree." Our friends in The Tavern started to request the song and sing along on the chorus. Before I played it, if there were new revelers in the room, I'd tell the story of how my grandma got her piano, how she played on the windowsills until it arrived, and how she played with her family every Sunday growing up.

A couple of years ago, not long after we moved back to Iowa, some friends of my in-laws were planning a move to Texas. They offered my wife and me their old upright piano, a black Clarendon. They didn't want to move it. They said we could have it if we took it out of their house. I got a few friends to lug it out of their house, into a moving truck, and down the steps into our basement. Whenever we go downstairs to do puzzles or play with the trains, I lift the cover off the keys and play the scales, planting the seed. And I'm on the lookout for young piano teachers with an appreciation for Bob Dylan, Professor Longhair, and Alison Krauss.

Chapter 12 - The Strong Man

If piano was Grandma Clarice's first true love, my Grandpa "Eddie" Brekke was her second. They met at a drinking fountain at the corner of 2nd Avenue and 2nd Street in Buffalo Center in 1937. She was 19. He was 21. It must have been a Saturday. There were movies showing and band concerts in the park on Saturdays. When the chores were done, people poured into town for some entertainment. Grandma Clarice was a country school teacher at the time. She was in town with some girlfriends. Eddie lived a few miles north on Highway 9 in Frost. He was there with some friends from Frost and Rake -- Art Olson, Wilbur Nesheim, and Burton Njoes.

"He asked me to roll up his sleeves," Grandma Clarice recalled. "I thought he was really sharp looking, but I didn't think he noticed me."

I'm pretty sure Grandpa Eddie noticed her, and he wanted her to notice the guns. Not long after he finished 8th grade at the Frost School in 1930, Grandpa Eddie started working as a blacksmith's apprentice at the shop on the corner of 3rd Street and Main. He was the striker. In a typical blacksmith shop, the striker's job was to swing a big sledgehammer under the blacksmith's direction. The blacksmith would hold the hot iron in tongs against the anvil and tap the desired contact point with a smaller hammer to show the striker where to land the sledge. It required great strength and precision. In one less-precise moment in the shop, a hot piece of iron slid onto Grandpa Eddie's right forearm and burned through to the bone. The blacksmith slapped a handful of bear grease onto the wound, and it eventually healed, but the scar was there forever.

After Grandpa Eddie had been working for the blacksmith a few months, a traveling carnival rolled into town on the railroad. My dad told me this story, and I imagine it all in

sepia tones. Grandpa was down on the Midway one night when a barker called out, “Test your strength! Swing the hammer!” I imagine Grandpa Eddie knowingly picking up the hammer, gauging its heft, then swinging the handle over his head and nailing the target to the cheers of a small crowd. According to the legend, the carnival manager asked him to join the crew that night and be the Strong Man for the rest of the tour. He declined the offer, but he always looked like the Strong Man to me, and I’m sure Grandma Clarice was impressed.

She cannot remember if there was a reason why this 22-year-old truck driver couldn’t roll up his own sleeves, but his strong arms and kind eyes left an impression. They began dating shortly after, going to movies and dances in the nearby town of Lakota with another couple for a while. Eventually, they started going out on their own. For the next two years they had standing dates on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday nights.

Grandpa Eddie was a city kid, raised in Frost. Grandma was a country girl through and through. Clarice Josephine Jensen was born on the family farm on March 17, 1918. She was the third of four children born to Jens and Caroline Jensen in the home located three miles south and one mile east of Buffalo Center, Iowa. Her father had the home built across the road from his parents’ farm, and the half-mile of dirt road between the two was well worn with foot traffic from the kids going back and forth.

Like most family farms in the first half of the 20th century, the Jensen farm was a self-sufficient operation that enabled the growing family to be well fed even when times were hard economically. Jens tended the fields, the horses, the hogs and dairy cows, while Caroline kept up the garden, fed the chickens and gathered eggs. The kids helped with everything.

They had a big garden full of green beans, carrots, cucumbers and tomatoes. There were grape vines and fruit trees full of apples, cherries, plums and pears. The birds got most of the cherries, but the Jensens ate the rest of fruit in season, and there were always enough vegetables for canning and pickling.

Everybody spoke Norwegian at the Jensen home until Grandma Clarice's oldest brother, Marion, started school in 1919 at age five. Then everybody spoke English, and the adults only used their native tongue to talk about things they didn't want the kids to understand.

"My Grandma Peterson used to say 'lange ouren'", Grandma Clarice later explained. "That meant 'long ears.' She'd say the children had 'lange ouren' and then they'd talk in Norwegian."

When she was a little girl, my grandma didn't want to go to school. Her first day was full of tears. Once she got started, however, her dad used to say that you couldn't keep her home. She and her two brothers, Marion and Alvin, and her sister, Evelyn, all attended Grant Township School #2, located about a mile south of their farm. There were nine one-room schoolhouses in Grant Township, each two miles apart. Students attended grades one through eight, working their way through textbook lessons with the help of the teacher. Classes began at the end of August and ended in May, so the boys could get out to the farms for spring planting.

Grandma was only 17 when she graduated from Buffalo Center High School in 1935. She wanted to be a teacher, but state law required all teachers to be at least 18. Her father was one of the Grant Township School Board members. Grandma Clarice made a commitment to the board to teach at her old country school – Grant Township School #2 –

after a year. To keep herself busy, she took another year of elective classes in shorthand and typing at the high school. She loved it. Her shorthand and typing instructor told her she should go on to college, get a degree and use her new skills. When she turned 18, however, she felt obligated to honor her commitment to the country school.

After years of dreaming what it would be like to teach in the one room schoolhouse where she had made so many fond memories, Grandma was soon disappointed to discover that planning the lessons, stoking the coal-burning furnace each morning, and washing the floors and desks wasn't as enjoyable as she'd imagined. She stuck it out for four years. For the first two years, when she was 18 and 19-years-old, she taught at her old school – Grant Township School #2. Her third year, she transferred to Grant T.S. #5. Her fourth and final year, she taught at a similar school near Rake, Iowa. That's where she was teaching when she met Grandpa Eddie.

Eddie didn't like to dance, so they didn't spend much time in the dance halls. On Wednesdays and Saturdays they “went to shows,” taking in movies from Hollywood's Golden Era such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone with the Wind* and *Wuthering Heights*. On Sunday afternoons the young couple almost always went to Interlaken Park.

Located on a 36-acre strip of land between Hall and Amber Lakes near Fairmont, Minnesota, Interlaken Park was a popular resort and recreation area drawing thousands of people from throughout the Midwest on summer weekends. There was a sandy swimming beach on Hall Lake with tall slides casting swimmers into the water. A zoo featuring bears, a lion, seals and an ostrich entertained day-trippers. In the early 1920s, the dance hall featured live bands on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday nights.

Going to Interlaken with her family on the 4th of July was one of Grandma Clarice's fondest childhood memories. They'd pack a picnic and pile into a car with her mom's brother Chris and his family. She'd watch other kids fly off the slides into the water, but Clarice never got in the lake. She never learned to swim. Riding the rollercoaster, eating ice cream and watching the fireworks were thrilling enough.

Many people stayed for a weekend in the lakeside cabins or the Interlaken Inn. It was only a half hour drive for Eddie and Clarice though. They skipped most of the big attractions and simply parked Eddie's grey Chevy alongside the channel between the lakes.

"We'd eat summer sausage and crackers and drink Cokes and watch people," Grandma Clarice once told me. "We just enjoyed being there together."

When he would drop her off on Sunday nights after a date, Grandpa Eddie would always say, "Write me a letter," and she did, every Monday, for two-and-half years. He'd get the letter on Tuesday and tell her his favorite parts when they met again on Wednesdays.

One Wednesday night when they were dating, Grandma Clarice was at home, waiting to hear Grandpa Eddie's car coming down the lane. His old Chevy was so loud the whole family could hear him stop for the tracks a mile north of the house. One Wednesday night after teaching, she came home and got dressed, planning to go to the movies like they did every Wednesday. She waited. Dinner came and went. She waited by the window. The sun went down. No Eddie. No call.

The next day, a Thursday, she heard the Chevy coming down the road. He was fine. There hadn't been an accident. He had driven to Mankato, hauling a bull for a local farmer, and when they opened the trailer, the bull escaped. A small group of farmers and truckers chased it all around Mankato -- through neighborhood streets, into people's front yards, onto

their porches. They chased the bull all night, trying to get him back into the truck. Photos of their pursuit appeared in the Mankato newspaper about the time Grandpa Eddie made it home. He called on Clarice the next day and explained. The two got along famously.

“He was always good to me,” Grandma Clarice said. “He was always considerate and seemed to like all the things I liked. And I always liked his looks.”

In the spring of 1940, they decided to get married. Grandma’s sister, Evelyn, and one of Eddie’s friends from Frost, Siggie Thompson, went with the young couple to a parsonage in Thompson, Iowa. They eloped.

“We just went and got hooked and stayed together 46 years,” Clarice said. “We never had a church wedding. We never had a honeymoon. My parents didn’t know anything for a couple weeks. I think my brother Marion broke the ice. I think it hurt Dad more than Mother. But my folks always liked Eddie.”

Not long after, Clarice left home for the first time.

“I was always a homebody. I never wanted to stay overnight anywhere,” she said. “My mother used to tease me and say, ‘What are you going to do when you get married?’”

In the spring of 1940, she moved to Frost with Eddie. He was driving trucks for his brother-in-law, Ludwig “Luddy” Erickson, but he didn’t have enough money to buy a house. With a baby on the way, Eddie and Clarice got a loan from Luddy and paid \$900 for the small house on the corner of 4th and Stanley. Grandma Clarice has lived there ever since.

To help with the payments, Eddie and Clarice rented out the top floor of the tiny house for \$10 a month to a couple named Marion and Olive Johnson. The Johnsons had a baby boy of their own named Michael.

“We never put it up for rent,” Grandma told me one day. “I think they just asked us. It wasn’t a big deal. We weren’t using it.”

Johnson was working at Bill Jensvold’s Hardware Store on Main Street at the time. Jensvold was a good friend of Eddie’s, and that could be how the connection was made. The arrangement didn’t last long however, as the Brekke’s baby was on the way.

In early September of 1940, Grandma Clarice began feeling intense stomach pain. The baby wasn’t due for another month, but she had appendicitis. After an emergency surgery, Grandma went back to Buffalo Center and stayed with her parents to recuperate. Two weeks later, on September 20, 1940, my aunt, Constance Elaine Brekke, was born on the Jensen farm. She arrived two weeks early, and weighed just over five pounds. Grandpa Eddie was driving a truck in New Ulm at the time, making a delivery of his own.

Chapter 15 - New Age Pioneers

For most of my life, I have crisscrossed the farmland of southern Minnesota and northern Iowa, driving to visit family. From above, the path forms a cross with the crux at the intersection of I-90 and I-35 near Albert Lea. Whether I was in the backseat of my parents' car with my head pressed against the window on our way to Frost for Thanksgiving, or behind the wheel of my own Honda Odyssey -- my own kids in tow -- en route to my sister's home in The Cities or my brother's place in La Crosse for Easter, I have spent years of my life looking out of car windows onto the black soil of the Suland, the symmetrical rows of corn and soybeans, the green and gold leaves waving like flags in the breeze.

Staring out at those fields, I always conjure images of my pioneer ancestors breaking sod behind teams of oxen. I have always admired their trailblazing spirit, their vision of a better life for their descendents, and their fortitude in the face of adversity. And as I think about their efforts, their sacrifices, their ambitions, I have wondered if my life has fulfilled their hopes for the future. Did they hope some future Brekke son would make a living apart from the land, with his head and not his hands? Did they hope one of their clan would attend Luther College and study the liberal arts? Did they hope for a guitar player, a family band?

In some ways I know I've let them down. I do not own an animal, and I struggle to grow tomatoes in my back yard. I could not change the brakes on my car if I had to, and repairs to my plumbing, heating and cooling systems have been done by hired hands from the yellow pages. I don't speak Norwegian, and I traded my Lutheran faith for Unitarian Universalism. I am not a hunter, and when I have killed rodents in and around my house, it is accompanied by much consternation.

I have come to believe, however, that we are all pioneers. And even though we do not break virgin prairie sod and stake claims on homestead farms, we're all breaking new ground in a metaphorical sense, leaving the lives we knew and forging our own.

As soon as my wife and I had our first child, and we realized she was going to survive our ineptitude, selfish desires began creeping into my consciousness. I hoped she would like to read, to write, to canoe in the Boundary Waters. It would be great if she became a fan of old-time string music. Maybe she would idolize Gillian Welch, Allison Kraus and Emmylou Harris? If she played the mandolin or the fiddle? Bonus. I wouldn't force her. Piano would be fine too.

One afternoon when my Lucy was two, we were playing in the basement, and she finally seemed interested in the harmonica. I cranked up Van Morrison's "Days Like This" and she marched around the room, blowing notes out of a Marine Band in the key of "C." She was laughing and smiling, and I danced around the room with her. Then I got the video camera and started rolling tape, thinking it could end up becoming important archival footage for a documentary about her musical career. I was giddy.

Every parent has hopes for their kids. I hope mine live healthy lifestyles and take care of their bodies, their minds, and their spirit. I hope they find good friends and stay connected with them. I hope they develop an appreciation for nature and spend time among the trees. I hope they work to create a sense of peace inside themselves, and to cultivate an appreciation for the mystery and wonder that surround us every day. More than that, however, I hope they live long and share their lives with their mom and me for many years.

I know they will move away. I know they will reject some of my values and views on how to get along in this life. That is part of the deal, part of being a parent. It has to happen --

they've got to cut the cord and disengage from mom and dad. I get that. I just hope they can find the handle and pump some water from the well every now and then.