

Howdy and Hound Dog

by Rick Reil

Chapter One

"A New Boy In Town"

Being the tallest boy in the fifth grade doesn't mean you're going to be tallest student. That distinction most likely will go to a girl. In my fifth grade class the tallest girl was Lucy O'Clannihan. Not only was she the tallest, she also had the biggest mouth. Lucy was a know-it-all and wasn't shy about making sure everyone other student knew just how smart she was. The fact that she wore cateye glasses with little sparkly things in the corners, only helped to reinforce her academic self-importance.

Every "A" she received on a test, report, or any other assignment, was promptly held up and gleefully displayed to the rest of the class. What made this especially hard on me was our teacher's habit of having us grade each other's tests. We were required to hand our completed tests to the person in front of us, in my case it was Lucy. Miss Throckmorton, our teacher would then read off the answers while we would check off any wrong ones.

I wasn't a dumb kid. If I applied myself I could easily get "Bs" and an occasional "A." However the determining factor here was "apply", that could be a challenge. My mind often wandered to lands and adventures beyond our little logging and ranching community. I would gaze out the windows at the hills above our town and see the towering pine trees blowing in the spring

breeze. I was sure, to be free of this stifling, confining environment would bring me the greatest happiness imaginable.

With all correct answers given, Miss Throckmorton would ask us to pass the tests forward. Lucy would turn and tell me in a hushed voice, just loud enough for the rest of the fifteen students in our class to hear, "Howdy, you only got half of the answers right, that's another 'F'." This was followed by laughter with Lucy being mildly reprimanded for her indiscretion.

If I turned red with embarrassment it probably wasn't noticed. My flaming red hair, freckles, and gapped teeth were a great camouflage from blushing. Add that to my height of five-foot eight and my weight topping the scales at 103 pounds and it was easy to understand the nickname of "Howdy".

It was 1954 and television's most popular children's show was "Howdy Doody". I guess it was understandable as I could have been the show's star since we looked pretty much like twins. The big difference were the strings attached to the real Howdy, a marionette, much loved by just about every kid in America. I really didn't mind the nickname since my real name was Ivar.

I was named after my mother's grandfather, Ivar Rasmussen, a Norwegian immi-

grant from whom I inherited my colorful locks. Mom said we were the proud descendants of Viking warriors. In fact, she said, "our ancestors conquered Ireland, that is the reason there are so many red-headed Irish." I wasn't quite sure of the connection, but something told me not to ask for details. Still Ivar wasn't a very popular name for a fifth-grader in 1954, Viking or not.

Our ancestors conquered Ireland? I thought about that and wondered if that great feat might have any bearing on defeating Lucy O'Clannihan. Lucy was Irish. She always bragged about it and made sure to pinch anyone not wearing green on St. Patrick's day. Oh yes, St. Patrick's day, most important day of the year for the O'Clannihan clan, Irish Catholics with eight children, six girls and twin boys. Lucy was the oldest and most often wore a little gold necklace with a cross.

Well, I think you get the picture here. Small farming town of Newton, population 1,410. Sadie Halstead School was a kindergarten to 8th grade academic institution producing some of the finest scholars in eastern Washington State, or so we were told. We had about 140 students most years and only one class per grade. Miss Throckmorton, was a portly, grouchy old maid who came to the area with her family as a child. She looked to be about 90 but in reality was only in her late 50s and planned on retiring in a few years. I was sure her sole reason for existence was to make my life as miserable as possible. Fortunately for her, she had the assistance of a fine apprentice in Lucy.

After the commonplace embarrassment of everyone knowing my test results, I was saved by the bell. It's loud ringing announced to the whole school that our day of

experiencing the joys of learning was over. I was reinvigorated as I stacked my books, cinched up my book strap, threw them over my shoulder, and ran out of the school. The fresh, pine scented spring air fill my lungs as I threw off the weight of the stifling atmosphere of Sadie Halstead School.

Across the street from the school was my Uncle George and Aunt Anna's house. As usual my dog, Boots was waiting for me in their front yard. Boots was a mongrel. Who knows what kind of mix she was? She was the product of 50 years of unselective breeding by the neighborhood canines in our little town.

She was about 3 years old and the size of a Labrador retriever. She had a short tan coat with white "boots" on her front feet, hence her name. I was sure there was no smarter dog in Newton, or for that matter in the whole world. She took her place beside me and we hurried over to my "after school job".

My dad, Harold Larson, owned the town feed store. It was my job to clean up the place and help customers load their vehicles with bags of feed, blocks of salt, bales of hay, and whatever else they might purchase. Hay was a bit of a challenge. The bales were alfalfa and weighed about the same as me. Being wiry and strong helped me to wrestle them up and in to the beds of pickups. I was in the process of doing just that for old Mrs. Johnson, who had a place along the river south of town when I looked up and saw a boy about my age riding a bike on the street in front of our store.

I couldn't help but stare. This kid, who looked to be about my age, had the biggest nose and ears I'd ever seen. I suppose somebody has to have the biggest nose and ears,

but who'd ever thought that I'd ever get to see him. I guess he must have had similar thoughts when he turned his head and looked at me as he peddled by. He'd probably never seen a kid as tall and skinny as me, with my flaming red hair, freckles, and gapped teeth. He just smiled, waved, and peddled off, looking back at me with a great big grin.

I waved back and watched him ride down the street and wondered who he was. I thought knew every kid in town, in fact I was sure I knew everybody in town and he wasn't one of them.

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