

Chapter Two

"Friends"

Spring in Newton is often a time of cold mornings and warm afternoons. The next day was no exception. It was a little before 8:30 a.m. and the school hadn't opened its doors. Sadie Halstead School was built in the early 1920s. The date stone about the school's entrance said "1923". It was typical of schools of that period, a basement, half above ground level and two stories above that. Steps led up to the main entrance where most of the students were lined up. Some of the kids had rolled up pieces of paper and were blowing their warm breath through them. The exhaust looked like smoke and they were laughing and mimicking TV cigarette advertisement announcers about the wonderful benefits of smoking.

I was in my normal place, leaning against the cross bars on the playground in front of the school. To say I wasn't the most popular kid in the 5th grade would be an understatement. I was 11 years old, with my looks and physique I wasn't exactly a hot item with the girls. I realized this and didn't try to make a fool of myself by trying to fit in with the more popular boys in my grade. I had my dog Boots and a few cousins to hang around with so I wasn't exactly "lonely".

I was cleaning my finger nails with my Roy Rogers pocket knife and watching the parking lot as the last few teachers and one of the school's cooks arrived. A blue, three window '48 Chevy pickup pulled up right before the bell rang, joylessly announcing that it was time for school to start. The boy I saw ride by my dad's feed store on his bike the day before got out and walked toward the front of the school. By now the doors had opened and the kids were walking up the stairs to enter the school. I started to walk toward the stairs and looked up at the open doors. A tall girl turned her head and looked at

the boy coming up the walk to the steps. It was Lucy. She gasped and covered her mouth as she started to laugh. A few other kids turned to see what was so funny. Their expressions betrayed any attempt at civility.

I saw what was happening and walked over to the boy. I said hi and asked if he was new. He told me he was and that he was in the 5th grade. "You're in my class," I said, "come on, I'll show you the way." He thanked me and as we walked told me his name was Jeff Carpenter.

I told him, "my name is Ivar Larsen, but everyone calls me 'Howdy'."

He laughed as we walked up the steps and jokingly said, "Gee, I wonder why?"

I smiled and said, "I'm sorry those kids were laughing at you."

"Don't worry about it, ever since I can remember, people laugh when they see me. I just hope when they get past my looks and get to know me I can make some friends."

"We'll if you don't mind my looks I'll be your friend."

He smiled as we walked into the class room. Most of the kids were just sitting down. Miss Throckmorton looked over at us. I said, "Miss Throckmorton, this is Jeff Carpenter, he's a new student."

She replied, "Thank you, Howdy." She looked at Jeff and said, "You can take the empty desk next to Howdy."

Jeff put his things in the compartment under his desk top and sat down. This desk was the kind with the writing surface and the chair connected. They were designed with a little portion of the desktop extended for your elbow

to help support your arm when writing. This desk was only one of two in the class designed for a left-handed writer. The desk would work for Jeff, I soon found out that he was left handed. I was soon to find out even more about him.

Miss Throckmorton introduced Jeff to the class and asked him to tell the class a little about himself. He stood and looked around at the students, there were giggles and some eye-rolling but Jeff kept his composure and began to speak. "My mom and I just moved here from Spokane, she's the new book-keeper for the lumber mill. I'm her only kid. My dad was in the Navy during the war. He was killed in 1944 when his submarine, the USS Grayback was sunk in the Pacific. I was too young to remember him but I have a picture with him when I was a baby. My mom hasn't remarried, it might be because she looks a lot like me." Most of the kids began to giggle and Miss Throckmorton cleared her throat and gave them all dirty looks.

She said, "Thank you, Jeff, you may be seated."

Jeff sat down and looked over at me and smiled. I smiled back and gave him a wink. Miss Throckmorton spent the morning covering fractions. She took a minute and reminisced about learning fractions in this very school when she was a fifth-grader. She said, "I've never forgot how fascinating I found fractions to be. I remember everything my teacher, Mrs. Mable Smigelski, taught me about fractions. In fact I remember just about everything I was ever taught, I have a memory like an elephant."

I muttered under my breath, "And a figure like one too." Jeff, cover his mouth with his hand to keep from laughing and choked. Miss Throckmorton ask if he was okay just as the recess bell rang. He said he was and we hurried out to the playground together.

It had warmed up considerably. Most of the kids were playing on the galvanized steel,

heavy-duty, indestructible, playground equipment that would still be in use 60 years later. That is if safety concerns hadn't required it to be replaced with environmentally, injury-proof "big toys". Most folks in 1954 felt if you got hurt on the playground equipment it was because you weren't being careful. Some bumps and bruises were good life lessons. If you were severely injured it meant you were probably an idiot and deserved it. It also meant that you'd be banished from that toy for the rest of your time at Sadie Halstead school.

Jeff and I found a spot where the sun was beating down and warming the wall of the eastside of the school. We were leaning against it watching the popular girls talking and looking over at us. I turned to Jeff and asked him why he covered his mouth in class with his eyes nearly bugging out.

"I heard what you said about Miss Throckmorton."

"About her figure?"

"Yes."

"You heard that?" I asked, "I barely heard it myself... did you read my lips?"

"Nope, I heard it. I hear lots of things, more than anybody I've ever known. Do you think these ears are just here to make me look pretty?"

We both laughed at his joke. It felt good to finally have a friend. I think Jeff felt the same. He was barely five feet tall. The two of us looked like Mutt and Jeff, a popular comic strip of the time about a couple of characters of disproportionate size.

"Those girls over there are talking about us." he said.

"Well that's pretty obvious."

"No, I can hear what they're saying. The tall girl from our class said she bets you're glad you're not the funniest looking kid in the school

anymore. The short little blond girl said I look like a hound dog... I've been call that before."

"The tall girl is Lucy O'Clannihan, the short girl is Debbie Swartz. Do you tell people about your hearing ability?"

"Nope, only my friends. It's a good advantage if people don't know. I hope you won't spill the beans."

"I won't tell," I promised. We continued to lean against the warm brick wall. I took my pocket knife out and showed it to Jeff.

He took it and said as he admired it, "This is swell, it's the one I've seen advertised on the back of the comic books. Where'd you get it?"

"I filled out the coupon from the comic book and sent it in with a dollar. I work at my dad's feed store and he pays me two dollars a week. I got a rabbits foot too." I reached into my pocket and showed it to him.

"I've got one like this too, I like the metal thing on the end, you can put in on a chain and wear it for luck. My mom gave it to me, it was my dad's. I wish he would have had it with him in the navy, maybe it would have gave him luck and he'd still be here today."

We talked about his dad for a little while and then I heard my stomach rumble. It was obvious that Jeff heard it too since he was smiling and laughing. I said, "I guess I'm hungry, I wonder what's for hot lunch?"

Jeff lifted his head and sniffed the air. "I think we're having toasted cheese sandwiches," he sniffed again, "and tomato soup... and peaches."

"You can smell what they're cooking downstairs in the cafeteria from here?"

"You think this nose is just for looks too?"

We laughed again. "I'm sure you're right, it's Friday and half this town is Catholic." Until the mid-1960s Catholics didn't eat meat on Fridays. It was to help them remember that Jesus was

crucified on Friday. It was a public school but nobody objected to accommodating simple religious belief, besides if you didn't like cheese sandwiches you could always pack your own lunch. The bell rang and we hurried back to our classroom.

Geography was sandwiched in between recess and lunch. I liked geography and always excelled, never getting any grade less than a "C". We were learning the names and location of all 48 states, as well as their capital cities.

Miss Throckmorton put a map of the United States on the chalk board chalk tray and leaned it against the board. It was showed just an outline of each of the states, with no writing. She pointed to a state in the middle and asked which state it was. A few kids raised their hands, one of them was Jeff. She call on him and he answered, "Missouri".

"That's right, and do you know its capital?"

"Yes, I know the capitals of all the states," he answered, "the capital of Missouri is 'M'."

Most of the kids broke out in laughter. Miss Throckmorton turned red and told Jeff she'd like him to stay after school for a few minutes. She quieted the class down and continued her lesson, but didn't call on Jeff again that day.

Lunch followed geography. Jeff and I sat together. I enjoyed not having to sit alone. Even though we Larsons were Lutheran I still enjoyed the cheese sandwiches. Jeff had brought a sack lunch and was eating a meatloaf sandwich when he perked up his head and paused for a minute. "Lucy O'Clannihan is telling the girls at her table that her mom is taking her to the big Crescent department store in downtown Spokane tomorrow... now she's telling them that she's getting a new bra."

I blushed and told Jeff that maybe we didn't need to know about this trip. He hushed me and relayed more of the conversation, she says she's moving up from a triple 'A' trainer to a bigger size."

A training bra? How do you train boobs? I was glad I wasn't a girl. All I knew about bras was seeing my big sisters' drying on the shower curtain above our bathtub. They were gross, I didn't even like to touch them.

We finished our lunches and headed out to the playground for recess. The rest of the day was uneventful. I waited for a few minutes in front of the school for Jeff to have his special time with Miss Throckmorton. He soon came out and down the stairs with a little laugh. "How'd it go?" I asked.

"Fine, I just played dumb and told her I didn't understand her question. My answer was pretty funny wasn't it?"

I laughed, "It was. I know the capital of Idaho, it's 'I.'" We both laughed as Jeff's mom pulled up in the parking lot. He got into the pickup, rolled down the window, and waved goodbye.

"I might see you tomorrow, Howdy."

"I might see you tomorrow too, Hound dog."

I went over to Uncle George's, got Boots and we walked over to the feed store on Union Street. Dad told me to straighten up the hay shed. "We've got a new load coming in tomorrow morning."

Boots kept me company while I stacked up the few bales left in the shed. I swept up the loose hay and put it the back of our pickup, a red 1951 International Harvester L-120. The sign on

the truck's door said "Larson and Sons, Feed and Tack, 201 Union St., Newton, WA." It was kind of funny since I was the only son. I guess my folks had planned on having more kids. I was the youngest with two older sisters. I never did get my brother and when I asked my mom about it she told me it wasn't going to happen.

I might not of had a brother but I did have Boots. We jumped in the back of the pickup while my dad locked up the store. He got in the cab and we drove off to our place on the edge of town. We had two acres with a few chickens and a couple of Holstein steers. Dad parked in front of the barn and Boots and I feed the chickens, gathered the eggs and threw the hay from the truck to the calves.

It was time to eat and I was hungry. If Hound Dog were here I wouldn't even have to go in the house to see what was for dinner, he'd know before we got there. It was nice to finally have a friend my own age.

I walked in the back door and into the kitchen. Mom gave me a hug and told me to set down at the table. The rest of the family was ready to eat. Dinner was ready, fried chicken with home-made gravy and mashed potatoes. My dad asked my sister Janet to say grace, she did and then we all dug in.

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