

Dreams of Life

Ron A. Miles

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ISBN-10: 1479120685

ISBN-13: 978-1479120680

DEDICATION

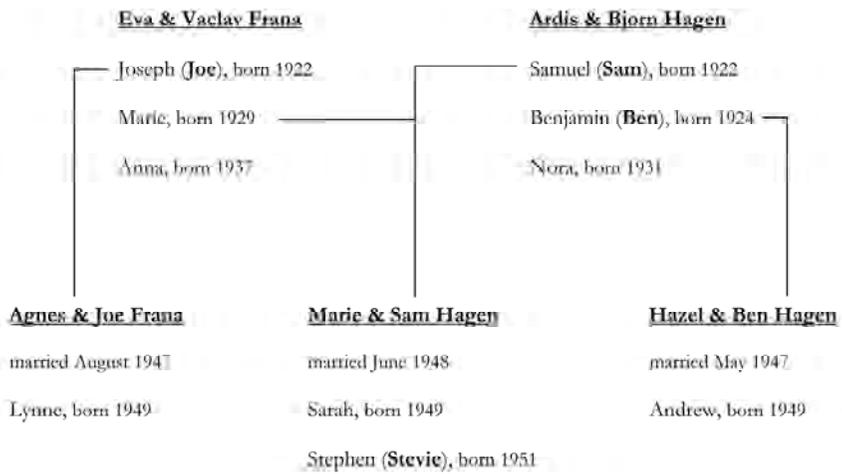
To my mother, Delores, who taught by example to live life with grace and gratitude, not regret, and whose memories brought Iowa during the 1950s alive for me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people played a part in creating *Dreams of Life*. Foremost, I want to thank: my brothers—Randy and Roger—Donna, Edie, Susan, Sophia, Jay, Bill, Stan, and Jim.

Frana-Hagen Family Tree

1953



1 SAM HAGAN

After Sam Hagen married Marie Frana in June 1948, his ambitions grew and he rented the old Toresdahl brothers' farm. The Toresdahls had agreed, with a handshake better than any signed contract, to wait until Sam owned his machinery and livestock free and clear before he started paying down on their land. Sam figured by the time he owned the place his father, Bjorn Hagen, would be ready to retire, and he would then buy Bjorn's farm.

The Toresdahl farm, that is to say Sam's farm, was nestled in a shallow vale below the Knob, the highest point and only forest in that part of Iowa. When Bjorn Hagen and his best friend, Jimmy Solberg, were boys, they hunted deer and squirrels in those woods, and prairie chickens and rabbits around the Knob's grassy base.

In 1931 the Toresdahls gave the Knob to the State—the depression had set in, and it did not make sense to pay taxes on acreage they could not till. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps paved a road through the Knob and constructed a fieldstone and cement viewing tower atop it, which made the hill appear from a distance like the rounded breast of a woman lying on her back, the tower her erect nipple.

Early Scandinavian settlers were attracted to this area of oaks and moraines, both unusual on the chest-high grassland that had spread like an ocean to all horizons. Now, farmsteads broke the rolling prairie. From the Knob's tower, those farms appeared much the same: pens for livestock next to red barns and sheds, domed silos, white houses, and trees on the west and north sides of the farmsteads to cut the wind that blew most days. Up close they mostly differed by the people who lived and died there.

* * * * *

Tuesday, March 3, 1953

Three days of balmy weather the week before ended on Sunday with heavy rain that pooled on the still-frozen ground. The rain had stopped as winter returned with Arctic fury. Patches of dirt-crusting snow, the only remnants of the season's blizzards, dappled a land of brown pastures and black fields studded with faded gold stalks of harvested corn.

The lane to Sam Hagen's farm bordered a long narrow pasture spotted with oaks that reached disfigured fingers toward the iron-colored sky. Jim Solberg carefully turned the black Chevrolet with SHERIFF FOX COUNTY printed in bold, white letters across its doors onto that iced road. The sheriff assessed the property with a critical eye and noted filled-in potholes and a mended fence. Sam had recently cleared a stand of timber, leaving stumps, burn piles, and split firewood stacked in precise cords. The house and buildings were well kept. Farm machines were neatly parked in the equipment shed. Cattle and hogs lined full feed troughs; their freezing breath rolled in white mist over bent necks and lolling heads. A bright green and yellow John Deere tractor sat in front of the barn.

The back of the Chevy slid to the right as it entered the farmyard, tires spun until rough ice gave traction. Three men stood by closed barn doors and watched the thin sheriff in olive-drab uniform get out of his car. Bjorn Hagen, the tallest, stood slightly apart. Brimmed caps with earflaps down made their heads appear out of proportion to bodies ballooned by layered clothing under worn denim jackets and overalls.

Solberg walked stiff-legged over the ice and grasped Bjorn's arms. Grief marred Bjorn's wind-burned face; his lower eyelids drooped, showing blood-colored flesh and eyes crisscrossed with red lines. Tears rolled down his bristled cheeks.

"Oh God, Jimmy," Bjorn groaned. "My boy, why..." His voice broke, shoulders heaved.

Twenty-seven years of law enforcement had hardened Solberg to all manner of harm that men could inflict on each other or themselves. In a situation like the one he now faced he had learned to get directly to business. That was best for everyone. But this was different. He had known Bjorn for as long as he could remember, and Sam was like a son to him. He wanted to say some comforting words but none came to his aching throat. Releasing Bjorn, he turned to the large, big-jawed young man in the middle.

Voice hoarse, Solberg said, "Merle, you called my office?"

Merle Ohlson, Sam's cousin, cleared his throat. "That's right, Sheriff."

"Come with me then," Solberg said.

The third man's rounded back and stocky body made him seem even shorter standing next to the three tall Norwegians. The sheriff glanced at him and curtly said, "Vaclav."

"Charreff," Vaclav Frana replied with a heavy, immigrant's accent.

Solberg entered the barn through a split door by the building's corner.

The dark interior felt warm after the cold outside. Pungent-sweet smells of cow manure mingled with the fragrance of hay stored in the loft above. His eyes swept from a very pregnant Guernsey to his left, over a line of stalls, and then fixed on the remains of Samuel Hagen lying on a blanket, head cocked to one side. Sam's clothes were like the other men's. His bare head exposed dark brown hair hand-combed into place. A cap lay a few feet away. Solberg bent on one knee beside the body and smelled a faint odor of released bowels, but he still searched Sam's neck for a pulse.

Dear Lord... Then the sheriff thought, *thank God he didn't use a gun.*

Unlike Bjorn and Merle, Sam had shaved that morning. His handsome face looked much like Solberg remembered Bjorn's when he was thirty. The sheriff reached for the nearby noose and easily slid the half-inch, twisted manila rope through a well-tied slipknot. He inspected the rope's frayed end. Its mate lay next to the stall where Sam had looped the rope's tail diagonally around the juncture of rail and post.

"You cut him down?" the sheriff asked as he stood.

Merle nodded. "I hoped he might still be alive. After I was sure he wasn't, I took Marie into the house and then came back and put Sam on the blanket. It didn't seem right to leave him on the dirt."

"You did right," Solberg said as he absently coiled the killing end of the rope. "Tell me what happened."

"I was trying out my new Deere in the field across the road. I heard a noise. I idled the engine, but I couldn't make out what it was. It took me a moment before I could tell the sound came from over here."

"You could tell it came from the barn?" Solberg asked.

"No, only that it came from this way. I didn't know what it was. I thought something was wrong, so I drove over. As I got closer, I could tell it was a woman... I found Marie in here."

Merle looked at Sam's body. He knew that he would never forget hearing Marie's screams change to a wail like that of a dying animal as he cut the rope and Sam's body collapsed to the earth. He tried to stop the fall, but the rope slipped through his gloved hands. Nor would he ever forget how Marie spoke her husband's name as she kissed him, running her fingers through his hair, begging him to be alive.

Throat dry, Merle swallowed. "I could tell before I cut Sam down he was gone, but I checked his pulse just like you did. It was hard to do because Marie was on top of him." Now his words came in gasps. "Marie didn't want to leave him. I said her children needed her. We went to the house. I called your office first, then Bjorn's place, and Vaclav's. I told them there'd been a horrible accident. I couldn't tell them what happened over the phone."

Merle wept.

"You did right, Merle," Solberg said softly. He looked at Bjorn. His friend's blank eyes tore at the sheriff's heart. "Let's sit in my car."

They heard a siren and Solberg said, “Vaclav, open the barn doors so the ambulance can get through. Merle, get your tractor out of the way.”

Inside the sheriff’s car, Solberg set his campaign hat on the seat and ran hands through sparse ash gray hair before resting them on the steering wheel. Bjorn sat beside him, staring at the barn. The old friends said nothing for a few minutes, drawing some small comfort from each other’s presence. Solberg broke their silence.

“Bjorn, I am more sorry for your loss than I can say. Sam had his problems before the War, but since then he’s been a son to make any father proud.”

Bjorn’s head moved slightly.

“When did you last talk to Sam?” Solberg asked.

“Yesterday. He helped me with silage.”

“Could you tell he was feeling low?”

“Not like... He worried about livestock prices like any farmer, but he wasn’t hurting, not like when he was a boy.”

The Oak Forest ambulance drove into the barn.

“Why don’t you go into the house now. Marie needs you,” Solberg said. “I’ll take care of things out here.” Inside the barn, he found Doctor Schmidt alongside the body.

Oak Forest was the county seat, a “big” town of nearly two thousand people. Before the War, it had two doctors. Thanks to Schmidt, there were now four and a small hospital.

Schmidt took off his fur cap, exposing large ears and naked scalp fringed with hair the shade of the steel stethoscope dangling on his chest. He gently opened Sam’s coat, unhooked the straps to the overalls, and then unbuttoned Sam’s plaid shirt. He slid the stethoscope beneath Sam’s undershirt, listened for a moment before putting the instrument back in his pocket.

Solberg watched as the doctor then straightened the dead man’s clothing. “Can you tell how long, Doc?” Solberg asked.

Schmidt moved Sam’s jaw to check for stiffness. “Not long, Jimmy. An autopsy won’t give me the exact time of death, not that it matters much.” Iowa law required an autopsy for murder victims and suicide was, by law, murder. “You can put him in the ambulance now.”

After the body was inside the vehicle, Solberg took Schmidt’s arm and guided him away from the others. “Doc, was Sam seeing you, taking any medication?”

Schmidt nodded. “After Christmas, Sam said his headaches had returned and that he felt depressed. I prescribed amphetamine. Medicine has come a long way since the War for treating Sam’s problem, but...” The doctor rubbed his eyes. “I guess not far enough.”

“Could you tell it was this bad?”

“You think I’d just stand by and do nothing if I did,” Schmidt snapped.

“Damn it Doc, I’m just doing my job.”

Schmidt looked at the ambulance and then at Solberg. “When he was a boy, I worried about him a lot. But not since he came back from Cherokee.”

The State Mental Hospital was in Cherokee, Iowa.

In 1941 after the crops were in, Sam and three friends had been drinking to let off steam when their car went off the road. Sam was hurled from the car and knocked unconscious against a large rock. No one else was injured. His recurring headaches started that day.

Sam’s tall thin frame, like his father’s, disguised a body that God and hard work had made powerful. After the accident, Sam got into fights when he drank, which was several nights a week. He always won. Witnesses attested the other men threw the first blow, so at first Solberg did nothing. When people started complaining about Sam, however, he went to Bjorn and Sam and told them if there was another fight it would either be jail or treatment for alcoholism. Two nights later Sam got drunk and attacked his mother. It took Bjorn and his other son, Ben, to subdue Sam. The next day Sam voluntarily went to Cherokee.

He returned six months later. There were no more fights. He still drank occasionally but always stopped at two beers. That he rarely smiled after Cherokee was not unusual. In the years Jim Solberg watched Sam become a man, he had never seen the boy laugh, not until Sam met Marie Frana.

“Let me know if there was anything in his blood, Doc,” Solberg said.

Schmidt sighed. “Sam didn’t like drugs of any kind, for any reason. He said my prescription kept him from sleeping. I suspect he stopped taking it. Now, if you don’t need me anymore, I’m going to see what I can do for Marie.”

Solberg’s gaze remained on the house long after Schmidt entered it.

“What you think happen here, Charreff?”

Solberg hadn’t noticed Vaclav. It took him a moment to decipher the Czech’s accent. “You know what happened.”

Vaclav moved in front of the sheriff, forcing eye contact. “You think he kill himself?” Vaclav’s tone implied he did not.

Solberg saw faint purple-blue veins on the man’s nose. He had been a deputy the first of many times he arrested Vaclav for intoxication. That such a man could sire a daughter like Marie was a mystery, one solved when Solberg met Vaclav’s wife in 1950 after the couple moved from a farm in neighboring Tabor County to Oak Forest.

“What do you think?” Solberg said brusquely.

Vaclav jabbed a finger against the ambulance window. “Look at hands!”

Without doing so, Solberg said, “And what the hell am I supposed to see?”

“The gloves. He has on gloves. If he hang himself, he must take off gloves. Why does he put them on again?”

“I don’t know, Vaclav. Do you?”

“I see Sam in town this morning. He was happy. He tell me he bring Marie and babies to visit tonight. Why would he tell me that? Why he take off gloves to make hanging then put them on again? You tell me that, Mr. Charreff.”

Solberg’s temper erupted, as much at Sam as Vaclav. “I don’t know why anyone would kill themselves, but people do. You know Sam had problems before. I see no evidence of murder if that’s what you’re getting at.”

The men glared at each other, neither disguising his contempt.

Vaclav broke the silence. “Will you talk with Marie? Ask her about Sam?”

“I don’t see any reason to cause her more grief. I have all the facts I need.”

Vaclav snorted and walked toward the house. He met Schmidt outside the front door. “How is my Marie, Doctor?”

“Not good, Vaclav, not good at all,” Schmidt said. “I wrote a prescription to help her sleep tonight. I gave it to your wife. Make sure Marie takes two pills.”

When the doctor returned to the barn, Solberg asked, “Doc, do you think it’s strange that Sam had his gloves on? You know that farmers wear several pairs in weather this cold. Sam wouldn’t have been able to noose the rope without taking his off. Why would he put them on again?”

Schmidt’s eyebrows rose. He looked at Sam’s hands. “Force of habit, I suppose. You do something in this weather that requires you to take your gloves off, then you put them back on without thinking. You question whether this was suicide?”

“No. Just wanted to make sure I’m plowing the whole field.”

Schmidt got in the ambulance and Solberg watched it drive away. It was a good fifty yards from the barn to Merle’s field. Marie’s screams had carried that far, from *inside* the closed barn and cut through the racket of a tractor’s engine. He shook his head and went to his car.

Inside the house Vaclav found Marie sitting on the davenport, black hair crushed against her mother’s neck, her pretty oval face puffy, staring blankly at the floor. Her mother’s large arms engulfed Marie in a protective embrace. His wife had cried until they got to Marie’s house. Then her tears stopped and she forced her attention on caring for her daughter.

Sam’s mother sat in the rocking chair next to the couch with four-year old Sarah on her lap, stroking her granddaughter’s blonde hair.

No one looked up. The wood floor creaked as Vaclav went to the kitchen.

Stevie, three months shy of two years old, perched on Bjorn’s thigh at the kitchen table. The child’s bright blue eyes matched Bjorn’s and were fixed on his grandfather’s huge hands. He grasped Bjorn’s thumb with one tiny hand while the other clutched his constant companion, a stuffed

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animal his grandmother had sewn from a worn brown pair of Vaclav's corduroys.

Vaclav tousled Stevie's oat-blond hair, and the boy smiled at him. Vaclav said to Bjorn, "Our grandchildren will now live in my home." After a moment Bjorn nodded.

Vaclav repeated this to his wife and told her to get as many of Marie and the children's things as she could.

"I take dem home, Vaclav, so you can do chores," Sam's mother said in her thick Norwegian accent. Vaclav's wife did not know how to drive.

Thankful for something to do, the older women worked with military diligence to collect clothes, toys, and children's books. Marie moved among them listlessly, holding Stevie while Sarah clutched her skirt. After loading everything into the trunk, Vaclav and Bjorn stood on the icy lawn next to the old blue Pontiac, watching silently as the women and children got in the car.

Frightened because everyone acted so strangely, Stevie cuddled against his Czech grandmother's lilac-scented bosom. He looked at his grandfathers and pressed a palm to the window. The car drove slowly away. Neither man waved back.

* * * * *

Vaclav told the Bjorn and Merle to tend to their own farms; he would do the evening chores here and come back for morning milking. He was Sam's number one hired man and knew the farm well. After completing the last task, Vaclav checked the pregnant cow Sam had named Margaret. It was her first calf. He would be there when she birthed it, just as Sam would have, even if that meant sleeping in the barn.

He gathered both sections of the rope that killed Sam. After a time, he cleared loose straw from an area on the floor and placed them on the bare earth. He was about to pour kerosene on the pile and burn it when he noticed its tawny color, yet hanging on the wall he saw a coil of rope gray with age. Sam was too frugal to buy something new when old would work as well.

Untying the noose, he then measured the rope by extending it arm's length from his chest; each sweep of his hand exactly three feet. One end of the forty-foot rope was factory-tied, which meant it was either the beginning or end of a roll. He knew Sam kept records of his purchases. The only thing that would convince him that Sam wasn't murdered would be a suicide note or proof he bought the rope.

He looked at where his son-in-law's body had lain. Sam had been closer to him than Vaclav's own son but the anguish he felt was for Marie. Nicotine-stained fingers trembled as he lit a hand-rolled cigarette.

Thirty-four years later... July 1987 Lake Michigan, Midnight

The storm would soon be upon him, and Steve welcomed the danger. Sails that had luffed in light wind at dusk were taut now. Lightning forked through black clouds astern, its purple color something he had never seen before. Thunder followed three seconds later. Then it was dark again; neither horizon nor stars could be seen beyond the sloop's running lights.

Steve swung his feet into the cockpit of the thirty-six foot Columbia that he and Tom Sobolewski had purchased three years before. He peeled off his sleeping bag as he stood. Though he wore jeans and a T-shirt under a yellow V-neck sweater, the air felt cold, not unusual on Lake Michigan even in summer. Fine, light brown hair blew off his forehead as he turned toward the wind.

Close to fifteen knots and building, he thought. *Autopilot won't hold much longer. Better reduce sail while it still works.*

* * * * *

"Thunderstorms are forecast," Tom said earlier that day in Steve's office.

"I've sailed by myself in bad weather," Steve said.

"No. You had Pam with you and these are supposed to be severe."

"She wasn't much of a sailor."

Tom liked Pam, liked that Steve drank less after she moved in with him and seemed genuinely happy. He had asked Steve why they were splitting up after two years together.

Steve answered, "No particular reason, just time for both of us to move on."

When Tom asked Pam the same question, tears flooded her eyes. "I love Steve, but he won't touch me anymore." Tom thought it odd that with her degree in counseling psychology she couldn't mend her own

relationship. Then he realized that Steve must keep his true feelings hidden from her as well.

Tom hoped he was Steve's best friend. Steve had helped him through a difficult divorce and during that time, Tom confided his anguish and insecurities. Steve never reciprocated. Their new boss, "The Bastard" as Tom always referred to him, had made work difficult for Tom and hell for Steve, yet Steve never complained. He was like an island shrouded in fog; Tom could depend on his friend to be there for him, but could not see through Steve's façade of optimism.

"She could radio for help if something happened to you," Tom said.

Steve grinned. "If something does, you'll have the boat to yourself." The distant look in his eyes did not change. "If something worse happens, our insurance will buy you another boat."

Tom didn't smile. Steve had joked about dying before; it hadn't been funny then, either. "Wear a harness," Tom said.

Steve laughed at the advice in his peculiar way: he smiled broadly but little sound came from his mouth. "So someone can recover my body if I go over?"

Tom's frown caused his cheeks to jowl. He was thirty-six, Steve's age, but the weight he had gained over the last two years made him appear much older than his youthful-looking friend.

"Even with a harness," Steve said. "If I go in, my clothes will soak up that cold water like a sponge. The extra weight, plus the sloop's forward motion, will be tough to overcome. If I can't get aboard fast, it's hypothermia and then I'm dead. I don't plan to fall in."

Tom ran a hand through his dense, reddish brown hair. It was pointless to argue. Steve could be as stubborn as a wet-tied knot dried in the sun. "Why aren't you taking a date?"

Because, Steve thought, since Pam, my dick isn't good for much more than pissing. Aloud he said, "There's no one I want to spend a whole weekend with."

The compass under the helm stanchion's plastic dome showed the boat had remained on a due-east course while Steve slept. He put his watch next to its dim light and estimated the distance traveled since his late departure.

If I averaged three knots and maintain it, I should clear the shipping lanes in two hours.

Steve was crossing Lake Michigan at its widest point, about eighty nautical miles across or ninety miles as distances are measured on land. In such open water collisions were easy to avoid—unless there was fog or storm or starless night. For this reason the Lake was divided into north-south lanes for freighters to follow. Steve was crossing those now.

Stronger winds meant faster speed, but too much sail up in high winds risked ripping the expensive sails or even capsizing the boat. He pulled in the mainsheet until the aluminum boom was overhead. The deck heeled to

starboard. He adjusted his course and crawled to the mast. As the boat turned into the wind, the mainsail snapped with increasing intensity until it deafened wind and thunder. On his knees with a forearm hooked round the mast, Steve freed the halyard, grasped the sail, and yanked it down. He pulled himself erect and caught his breath.

His six-foot two-inch height was a disadvantage in the boat's cramped cabin where he could not stand upright. Topside, however, his long arms made folding the sail into itself easier. His long legs, braced wide, gave him stability on the pitching deck as he tied the sail to the length of the boom. When this task was done, he returned the autopilot to its original course and went below to don foul weather gear. As he climbed back to the deck, his arm brushed against safety harnesses hanging by the cabin opening. He did not take one. He secured the doorway and hatch above it to seal the sloop's interior.

Steve and Tom had learned the basics of sailing from the previous owner who tutored them on their maiden voyage north from Green Bay to the canal that made Door peninsula an island, and then south to the boat's new berth in Port Washington, Wisconsin. That first summer almost destroyed the partners' friendship. Each man commanded the vessel on alternate weeks and Steve wanted to sail in the worst of weather. Tom worried that if he weren't there to stop Steve, his aggressiveness would someday damage the sloop or injure someone. They eventually compromised. Tom accepted that Steve wouldn't change. Steve paid for additional insurance.

Six-foot waves now slammed into the hull before sweeping over the deck. Feet jammed against the sides of the cockpit, Steve held the wheel as much for support as to keep on course. He had no choice but to accept the storm's staccato rhythm: the flash and crack of lightning; halyards twanging against hollow metal mast; deck rolling; bow lifting and then crashing into the lake. The screaming wind whipped spray into his face and inside his raingear's neck strap. Water trickled down his throat, dampness spread across his chest.

The wind's fury intensified, forcing Steve to reduce sail again. He crawled to the front of the cockpit. The furling mechanism there enabled him to adjust the jib's size without going to the bow. He freed the jib sheet and the wind's force against the straining sail almost jerked the rope from his hands. He quickly secured the rope's tail to a cleat, then wrapped the furling sheet around the smaller winch and ratcheted the foresail in until it was half its full size. The deck's tilt lessened and he slid on his butt back to the helm.

When the rain came, it fell hard on his cold hands and he cursed himself for forgetting his rubber gloves. Steve suffered the nausea and headache of seasickness but felt no fear. The worst that could happen was death and this had never frightened him. With nothing to do but keep the boat on course, he tried not to worry about work, or Pam, or his physical problems;

but like a starving man trying not to think about food, his recalcitrant mind dwelled on these very troubles.

Into every life rain must fall... But when did my downpours start?

Steve's thoughts traveled to the Iowa farm where his life began. The farm adjoined to the west the land that his great-grandfather, Anon Hagen, purchased when he emigrated from Norway. Steve's grandfather, Bjorn Anon Hagen, inherited part of the farm and bought the rest from his sisters. But Samuel Anon Hagen, Bjorn's firstborn and Steve's father, had died when Steve was two years old; his death the only legacy he left to his son.

Lightning cast a momentary shadow of Steve's body onto the deck. The thunder that immediately followed exploded like a cherry bomb set off behind his head, and he instinctively ducked. A second bolt tore apart the sky to his left; a third rent the darkness ahead. After the thunders' shock waves passed, he slowly straightened, aware now that he had stopped breathing. He sucked in air as another three bolts lit clouds to the south. Three distinct rumbles followed.

Growing up on the Iowa plains, Steve had seen many storms but never lightning bolts in such evenly spaced sets of three. He wondered if there were some significance to this and recalled what Leo Sunner, his high school Lit teacher, said frequently in class: "The number three in literature often represents the magical, the mystical." He hadn't particularly liked the subject but he liked Sunner, who treated Steve kindly when few others had.

With nothing better to take his mind off the elements while he held the sloop on course, he played with the number three. Because his mother had remarried, he had three pairs of grandparents. Each couple had three children. Of the six related to Steve by blood, three of them had died well ahead of their time.

Is God giving me a message? Does three mean life or death?

He smiled at the foolishness of his childhood belief that God was concerned with the likes of him. The lightning strikes were simply coincidence.

Whether by coincidence or Divine communication the number three did bond his life to death, for Steve's father, Sam Hagen, died in his thirtieth year, on the third day, of the third month of 1953. Steve's mother had told him the events surrounding his father's death but like so much of Steve's past; he forgot these. What he could never forget, however, was that Sam Hagen killed himself.

2 JOE FRANA

Tuesday, March 3, 1953

While Vaclav Frana smoked in Sam Hagen's barn, ten miles away his son, Joe, stood with hands on hips, looking at the frozen pig dung smeared over his truck's wood flatbed. He had just returned to his farm after delivering a load of hogs to Cadwell Center. The animals sensed death when they arrived at the meat packing plant and had released their bowels in terror.

He had seen men react the same way in combat. Joe's first time under fire, however, he was scared shitless but did what the Marines trained him to do; he killed other men. A good Catholic boy, he confessed his murders to the chaplain. The priest, a red-faced Irishman from Boston, said, "God forgives you, my son. The enemy you killed will not be able to kill. Their deaths have brought life to other Marines."

Joe did not have to go to war. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Vaclav was in Cherokee for alcoholism treatment and the Draft Board assigned Joe a II-C deferment—labor critical to the war effort. Joe felt guilty being safe in Iowa while men his age were fighting for their country, but his mother and sisters needed him. The Board let Joe's deferment stand after his father returned to the farm in the summer of 1942, for no one believed Vaclav's boozing would stop for long. They were right. When it got back to Joe that his drunken father told all who would listen that his son was a coward for not serving his country, Joe enlisted.

Joe grabbed a grain shovel and mounted the truck, thinking about how the hogs he took to slaughter that day meant life for his growing transport business. As he furiously chopped at the mess, freezing breath streamed from his mouth. Physical labor was therapy for him, which was one of the reasons he still farmed, and it kept his six-foot three-inch frame at the solid 210 pounds it carried in the Marines.

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He promised himself that if he returned from the Pacific in one piece he would make something of his life. The way Joe looked at it his body was “dinged and dented” but everything ran like it should. He wrote Agnes from hospital ships to warn her about his wounds, but she still cried when she saw his scars on their wedding night. After they made love, she laughed when he said she now had her own wound, one inflicted by a Marine’s God-given bayonet.

The indentations in his back and buttocks, “extra assholes” Marines called them, came from shrapnel taken on the Tarawa atoll. A bayonet wound on Saipan created the “zipper” that ran down his right thigh. The blade would have been in his chest if Lynn Oltragge had not clubbed the banzai-yelling Nipponese as he made a killing thrust. Joe had never told his wife that a moment later a bullet exploded flesh and marrow from his best friend’s face onto his own.

Agnes only knew that Lynn died saving Joe’s life. For this reason she agreed to name their first child after him. The breech birth in January 1949 nearly killed Agnes. The doctor said Lynne would be her only child. She wanted to adopt a boy. Joe said no. Although he could not give her a good reason, she did not argue with him. It wasn’t her way. In June 1951 when Marie had Stevie, Agnes sensed the boy would be like Joe’s own son, which is how things turned out. This pleased her. She loved Marie and wanted Joe to be happy.

Joe finished cleaning off the truck. He looked across the large farmyard toward the house just as Agnes stepped out the door of the small porch off their kitchen. She pumped her fist up and down, the signal he taught her that meant *come immediately!*

Agnes went inside and watched from the kitchen window as Joe walked briskly over a path of sand-covered ice to the house. The horrible news she had would cause him anguish, not for Sam’s death but for Marie, now a widow.

Agnes could not remember a time when she didn’t love Joe or hurt for him. After his Division landed on Tarawa, the newsreels showed dead Marines bobbing like bloated corks in a calm lagoon. Other bodies lay at the water’s edge, gentle waves lapping against corpses half-buried in sand. She feared Joe was one of them and found solace with Joe’s mother, who told Agnes that she *knew*, as only a mother could, her son was alive.

Agnes admired her mother-in-law more than anyone, even her parents. She gave nothing but kindness to others, never complained, and had raised two fine children, Joe and Marie. The third, Anna, remained an enigma to Agnes. The sixteen-year-old could be as sweet as Marie and her mother when she wanted something. Usually she was aloof.

“What’s wrong?” Joe said as he hung up his army surplus infantry jacket.

His leather-brown eyes showed no reaction as Agnes told him about Sam's suicide, but she didn't expect to see any. War had changed the shy, placid boy she grew up with into a confident man with guarded emotions. He easily expressed his pleasure at things but when something troubled him, his face became granite.

"Marie and the children are at your mother's." Agnes said.

Joe stood motionless for a moment longer and then started peeling off his work clothes. "Get Lynne dressed," he said. "I'll be ready to leave in ten minutes."

Joe didn't speed over the straight highway to his parent's home in Oak Forest; nor did he hear Lynne's questions. His mind was on the past. He believed fate played a large part in his life. It explained how he survived the war—the mortar shell that wounded him on Tarawa killed the three men in the foxhole with him. It was their fate to die, his to live. Joe's thoughts then went to how his fate caused Marie to meet Sam Hagen six years before.

The Sand Lake VFW had a good band for its New Year's dance. Joe decided to celebrate the beginning of 1947 by taking Agnes and Marie there. Like all the other young veterans that night, he wore his dress uniform. The large hall was full. Joe went to the crowded bar to wait to buy his setups. Iowa law prohibited the sale of liquor except at State-owned stores but allowed drinkers to bring their bottles to bars. The bars sold customers beverages like Coca Cola and orange juice, in glasses called "setups," for mixing with their liquor.

As Joe paid the bartender someone shoved him from behind.

"You candy-ass Marine," a taunting voice said. "Make way for a real man."

Joe stiffened. In the service "tough guys" had wanted to prove their manhood against big farm boys like him. Fists ready, he turned to see a grinning, blond-haired man whose Marine uniform, like Joe's, bore a Second Division patch on its arm.

"Semper Fi!" The man said extending a hand. "Name's Hagen, Ben Hagen. I told my gal, Hazel, I was the best looking guy in this joint. She thought you looked pretty good, so we had to see you up close."

An attractive blonde wearing a too much make-up stood beside him. Her eyes rolled, and she tilted her head toward Ben. "He had to see, not me."

Joe winked at her and dryly said, "Hazel, it takes times to recover from shell-shock. With some guys the delusions never go away."

Hazel smiled. Ben laughed. Joe introduced himself and the men assessed each other, hands gripped tight. Joe stood a couple of inches taller, but Ben had a heavier build. Ben noted the chevrons on Joe's sleeve and the ribbons on his chest signifying a Silver Star and Purple Hearts. Ben raised his glass. "To the Corps, Sarge."

Joe lifted his Coke. "To absent comrades."

Ben had not heard the toast before but understood its meaning. His hand lowered Hazel's glass. This toast was between warriors honoring fallen companions. "To absent comrades."

DREAMS OF LIFE

The couple joined Joe at his table. Not much of a drinker himself, Joe saw that Ben was. Between frequent breaks for dancing, the men regaled the women with Marine stories, though neither spoke directly about combat.

Later, while Joe swung Hazel to Glen Miller's "String of Pearls," he said he didn't like it that Ben danced with Marie so often.

"I'd be jealous of your sister if she wasn't so nice," Hazel said. "How old is she?"

"Seventeen, too young for someone like Ben. Are you and he serious?"

Hazel's eyes flowed up to his. "And the reason you're asking?"

Comfortable with the attention women paid him, Joe ignored her innuendo. "I need to know if I should worry about him."

"I hope we're serious," Hazel sighed. "Don't you trust your sister?"

"I do, but I don't want her to have to fight off a date."

"Agnes said you were childhood sweethearts. Why aren't you married yet?"

"I needed to sort some things out."

Hazel smirked. "Like why buy the cow if the milk and butter are free?"

Joe's eyes turned cold. He stopped dancing.

"I apologize," Hazel said. "I said that because I think that's Ben's problem."

"Apology accepted." Joe resumed their dancing. "You speak your mind."

"Don't worry about Ben. He's a flirt when he drinks, but he's harmless."

Joe didn't believe any Marine was harmless. When Ben headed to the restroom, Joe followed intent on ordering him to keep away from Marie.

In fact, Ben was wondering how to finagle things so he could take out Marie. He understood Joe's protectiveness. Ben's sister was about Marie's age and he wouldn't like an ex-Marine like himself pursuing her. When Joe entered the restroom, Ben smiled. "Joe, I've got a cousin a year older than Marie. I'd like to set them up if it's okay with you. Merle is a good kid. He joined a Jesus-Christ-Almighty Bible church, or whatever the hell they call it. I'm not sure they believe in sex even after marriage."

In Joe's mind, this was when his friendship with Ben Hagen started.

Joe trusted Merle Oblson more than Marie's other suitors because he was so religious. It was religion, however, that caused the relationship to end that summer when Marie told Merle any children she had must be raised Catholic. Merle felt the same way about his faith. Ben had counted on this happening, though he told Joe the day after the breakup, "It's a shame. I should have seen this problem coming. And speaking of problems, I'm getting married next month."

Joe's brows rose. He had never seen much genuine affection between Ben and Hazel. "Congratulations."

Ben laughed at Joe's shock. "It's a shotgun wedding but it's my Pa, not hers, who's holding the gun to my head." Serious again, he said, "When the baby comes, everyone will figure it out. For now, Hazel wants to keep this quiet. I'd like you to be my best man."

"I'm honored," Joe said, surprised Ben hadn't chosen Sam, his older brother.

Joe thought it fate that Marie's date became ill and could not go to Ben's wedding.

Marie noticed Sam was also alone at the church. At Oblson and Hagen gatherings she had been to with Merle, Sam always had dates though rarely with the same woman.

She had never seen him laugh. Except for this and his dark brown hair, he looked remarkably like Ben. Both men were handsome in a rugged, Gary Cooper way. He surprised Marie when he asked her to dance; he had all but avoided her before the wedding. Sam was an excellent dancer and she enjoyed his self-assured manner.

When Joe saw that Sam and Marie danced with no one else, he told Ben, "It's not personal, but I don't like it that your brother is with Marie. He's too old for her." Sam was twenty-five, Joe's age, seven years older than Marie.

"Relax, he's out of his league," Ben said with thick tongue. "My brother is a sourpuss. Besides, Marie isn't his type. He likes 'em big, blonde, dour, and dumb." He laughed at his wit. "Don't worry. She'll figure him out."

At the end of the evening Sam asked Marie for a date. Her heart almost stopped beating when he added, "I want you to know that it won't be a problem for me to become a Catholic."

After Marie started dating Sam exclusively, Joe complained to Agnes. "He's a draft dodger, a womanizer, and a mean drunk. My God, they sent him to Cherokee!"

"You know Sam wanted to enlist but they wouldn't take him," she said. "He's not a drunk. I like him, and Marie knows her own mind. Don't butt into her affairs."

The truth was Joe simply didn't like Sam, though he couldn't say why beyond what he'd told Agnes. Joe went to Ben again. If Marie would not listen to his advice, he would force Sam to end the relationship. He wanted to avoid friction with Ben, if possible, and spoke to his friend.

"Damnedest thing, isn't it?" Ben said shaking his head. "Who'da thought my brother and your sister would pair up. I will say that Sam's got good taste even if Marie doesn't. Believe me, it won't last." Or so he hoped.

"I'm going to ensure that." Joe said.

"Be careful, amigo. Sam's got a temper and he's as good with his fists as any man I've seen."

The next day Joe drove out to Bjorn's farm. He spotted Sam at the far end of a field repairing fences and parked his car on the gravel road. As Joe high-stepped through alfalfa, grasshoppers bounded before him while gnats swarmed around his head. The insects and jungle-hot September day reminded him of the Pacific.

"What brings you to these parts?" Sam called out. When he saw Joe's expression, his eyes narrowed under the straw hat shading his face.

Joe decided to take a nice guy approach. "I came to talk to you about Marie. It's nothing personal, but I'd appreciate it if you'd stop seeing her. You're too old for her."

Sam stared at Joe for a moment, spit, and went back to work.

Joe said softly, "There'll be hell to pay if you don't."

The men glowered at each other.

That Sam knew how to fight didn't worry Joe. The foot-long pliers he gripped like a club looked formidable but in the time it took to swing them, Joe could land a felling blow. The trick would be to not injure Sam too badly. Most Americans thought Japanese were small men but nearly all the Imperial Marines on Tarawa were six-foot or taller. The one Joe killed with his bare hands was as big as Sam, the killing as lucid as his last nightmare.

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Sam saw Joe glance at his hand. He dropped the pliers. Eyes locked on Joe's; he took off sweat-stained leather gloves and hat. "Get off my land, you Bobunk bastard."

Joe waited for him to throw the first punch to make his conscience clear. He slowly raised his right hand, feigned scratching his head. "I thought this was Bjorn's land, not yours. And you're wrong, my parents are married and Marie is Bohemian, too. Nobody, especially a shit-head like you, calls my sister a Bobunk."

Sam clenched his fists. "You're the only Bobunk bastard I know. I'm going to marry your sister. Go to hell if you don't like it. I'm only going to say this once more—get off my land!"

Joe lowered his hand as he took a step back. "Have you proposed?"

"If you're thinking I'm not good enough for Marie because I was in Cherokee, you're entitled to your opinion. But I'm not a drunk, or crazy, and Marie knows that."

Joe looked at the Knob off in the distance. The gold-tasseled cornfields leading up to the hill were now mottled with brown. In a few weeks the dying crops would be ready to harvest. He sighed, realizing he could not risk going against Marie's heart.

Turning back to Sam, the smile Joe forced came hard. "It might upset Marie if she thought we didn't get along." He wiped his forehead on a sleeve. "God-awful hot today. A cold beer would sure go down nice." In the Marines he had learned that having a drink with a man, if not a sign of camaraderie, at least signified a truce.

"Didn't think you drank," Sam said.

"Only for special occasions, like when I find out my sister is getting married."

Sam picked up his hat and gloves and nodded toward the farm buildings in a grove of oaks. "We've got some cold ones in the icebox."

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Born and raised in Iowa, Ron Miles graduated from the University of Iowa and then worked at IBM for 19 years. Nine of those years were spent in Madison, Wisconsin, during which time he co-owned a sailboat on Lake Michigan. After moving to California he had his own business before becoming an executive of a start-up company. Now semi-retired, he spends his time as a writer, EMT, school board member, and Rotarian, while living the good life on California's North Coast. You can find Ron online at www.ronamiles.com.