

NEVER A GOOD WAR

A novel of the International Brigades

Robert T. Hunting

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There never was a good war, or a bad peace.

-----Benjamin Franklin.

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Note: To advance the story I took a few liberties with facts and timelines, but in the main stuck close to the events between 1936 and 1939. I hope serious students of history will overlook any tweaking, and still enjoy the read.

Except for a few historical persons, whose words and deeds come from my imagination, all characters are fictional.

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CHAPTER 1

The incessant bouncing, the cold and the wailing wind, the clickety-clack, clickety-clacking of wheels passing over countless rail joints, denied him any possibility of sleep. He'd half-doze for a minute or two, head on his chest, only to jerk up at the next strong bounce.

Arms folded, he shivered into his coat as the night dragged on and the car bounced on the tracks. A cold kind of hell. Daylight couldn't come fast enough. *I'll never ride the rails again. Never.*

Standing wasn't an improvement. And the wind, it found its way through the slats, and blew small bits of wood chips and dust around. He lost track of the number of times something landed in his eye.

A bit lightheaded on unsteady legs: lack of food and water would do that. Why hadn't he brought anything? Nothing to be done about it now. He returned to the corner and sat. His troubled mind took him back to what he left behind. Back and forth it went. *I can't believe I did that,* followed by *He needed killing.*

The growling in his stomach and dryness in his throat only increased his misery. *Maybe I deserve this; maybe this is my punishment.*

A strain from some song—he couldn't remember, maybe a Negro spiritual-- came to him: *Motherless children have such a really hard time, a long way from home.* Overcome with grief and despair he wept; wept for the loss of his mother, for Callie, Davey, and for his own plight.

When he had no more tears, he again tucked his hands high into the warmth of his underarms.

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His stomach growled. Had to be twenty-four hours or more since he last ate or drank anything. The Sally Ann soup kitchen gave him his last meal: If he ever came into money he swore he'd give some to the nearest Sally Ann church or whatever they called it.

Minneapolis should be coming up soon. Stop there? No, he'd move on to Chicago. Why, he couldn't say. He'd come this far, so no point in stopping now?

He jumped the moving train early yesterday afternoon. Caught it at the edge of Bismarck. It almost cost him his legs. One hand on the wooden boxcar's platform, the other on the sliding door he shinnied into the boxcar, but like a difficult-to-manage jackknife his legs flipped underneath, too close to the steel wheels. He barely managed to get them up in time. A few more inches and I'd have been pulled under.

With nothing to do Billy Lachance slid the bay door along its tracks and stared vacantly out at the dense fields, grateful to see the odd town drift by. In a few days he'd be in Chicago, and see what opportunities came his way. Couldn't be any worse than Mullion Mulls.

The train curved in and crossed a high roadbed. Billy looked down into the trees and saw people moving about. Shanty town? He'd been told that bindlestiffs, hobos, liked to make camp near the rails. Someone told him that you'd never be turned away at a shanty town. They may not have much, but what they did, they shared.

The train slowed. He stuck his head out. *Rail yards*. Had to be Minneapolis; he'd better get out.

A mile later the train gave a small lurch and stopped. He saw them but they hadn't caught sight of him—yet. Yard bulls, the enemy of all rail jumpers, checking each car door. Worse: these two had their coshes out.

He'd been warned about bulls. If they caught you, they'd rough you up before they turned you over to the cops.

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And the cops: good chance they'd have a go at you. Serious rail jumpers stayed clear of the yards and hid behind trees, bushes, sheds, or any type of concealment. When a train came by, they'd run alongside it before it picked up speed, and hopped on.

Billy took another look: they hadn't seen him, but drew closer. No time to waste. He wasn't about to get brained. He threw the strap of his bindle bedroll over his head, secured it behind him, tugged his peaked cap down, and lowered his legs out onto the ground.

At once a voice shouted, "Hey, you, bindle punk, c'mere; we wanna talk to you."

Nothing doing. Underfed and underweight, Billy recognized he'd have little chance against two well-fed-and-watered toughs with clubbing sticks.

He bolted over a parallel track, a second one, and plunged into the nearby trees.

"Get back here, you shit."

"Stop, you goddamn vagrant!"

Tall, thin Billy Lachance crashed into the trees, the bulls behind him. Low hanging branches tugged at his bindle and slowed him down. He cursed under his breath. The bulls narrowed the gap. One shouted out. "Get 'em, Eddie!"

Motivated by sheer animal panic Billy tore through the trees. He allowed himself a fast look over his shoulder. That proved his undoing. A thick gnarled protruding tree root sent him flying. The wind knocked out of him, his right shoulder temporarily paralyzed from the hard impact with the ground, he rolled and returned to his feet, able to escape the clutches of Eddie. On his feet again he raced deeper into the woods.

"Let 'im go, Eddie," a voice shouted. "Not worth it."

Billy rushed on, and winced at every step as Eddie yelled, "You have a nice night in these cold woods, kid."

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Better hope we don't see you again. We'll keep an eye out for ya."

The bulls tramped off, and left their prey to stop and catch his breath.

Minutes later Billy stood alone in the forest and listened to natural and unsettling sounds.

In spite of the cold and throbbing of his ankle, fatigue overcame him. He limped over to a tree, sat against it and let his head drop to his chest. He fell into a troubled sleep. Half a dozen times he woke to hear a train picking up speed. So close, and here I am stuck in these woods. Can't risk showing myself.

Stiff from the cold, his bottom damp, Billy rose at first light and made for the tracks. No sign of anybody. Hands once more tucked into his armpits, he waited. His empty stomach protested again. "Nothing I can do," he whispered.

Weak morning rays streamed into the trees when he caught a distinctive chuff-chuff chuffing. Locomotive.

Cheered by the sound, Billy readied his bindle and waited for the engine to pass before he left the clearing. He hobbled along as he checked the boxcars. Locked-all of them.

The train gathered speed. Billy stood defeated, ready to turn away when the caboose approached.

A gnarled face leaned out from the curved grab rail and waved to him. "C'mon. Run!" He held out an outstretched arm.

Billy couldn't believe his luck. Go, his brain told him. He hurried after the train as fast as he could. A few seconds too late, and he'd lose his chance. A mighty surge. His right foot made contact with the bottom step. He almost lost his balance when the other man grabbed his arm and pulled him up. Billy tumbled forward onto the landing, caught by his rescuer.

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A warm cup of tea in front of him, Billy's grateful eyes swept over the brakeman and cook at the small table as they argued about sports. Their treatment surprised him; he'd been told railway men seldom helped hobos. The rough-faced brakeman confirmed that. "Don't usually take passengers," he told the young man with sad eyes. "Ol' Gus here gets it into his bean to do different. None of us dumb enough to go 'gainst the man who sets this table. Never know what goes into your food if you're not careful."

"Keep rememberin' that," the cook advised and winked at their tall young guest with fine, dark hair that traveled low on his forehead. Dark, small eyes, almost black in a certain light, stared out of a serious, triangular face with a slight point to it. He didn't smile much, but when he did he showed off a good set of teeth.

"Your ankle better?"

"It is, yes, sir," the kid said with a fast nod of appreciation. "Thanks to you and your first aid kit."

The two men returned to their friendly argument as Billy sipped his coffee and considered his good luck. Food, shelter, and they never asked for a thing in return.

His mind wandered back to the farm and his father. Low life. Everyone, including Augie, lived in dread of him.

No one in the family escaped Al Lachance's unfavorable judgment or abuse, but something about Davey's unconquerable spirit set his father off. Al let his wrath loose on Davey more than anyone in the family.

At sixteen Davey did the unthinkable: he stepped between mom and dad and tried to stop another beating. For his troubles Al beat him senseless.

Mom and Billy fought to pull Al off. Callie trembled. Augie sat against the sofa and trembled.

Al got away with the beating. The local Highway Patrol detachment never laid charges, never bothered much to investigate.

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Mom picked up Davey from the charity hospital nine days later—a cripple. Within a year Davey hung himself in the barn.

“Damn mystery how that boy managed to do that in his condition,” Al muttered when he cut him down.

Billy remembered the house that evening, filled with women readying the body in the parlor. Mom sat on the sofa kneading a wet handkerchief, a vacant expression on her face. Callie pressed against one side; Augie against the other.

Al entered the room and demanded his supper.

“I’m not in the mood to make you anything right now,” mom whispered with a fierce glare on her face.

Shoulders bunched, Al moved toward her. Three neighbors stiffened in response. Al studied the situation, glared at his wife, turned and left the room.

Billy never forgave Al—or himself. He found it difficult to meet his father’s eye. Whenever possible he limited any response to one or two-word answers.

A melancholy sigh escaped him as he watched the landscape pass. Musta been some kind of sickness in that man to be so mean. I should have stuck up for Davey. Dad couldn’t have taken the two of us. Why didn’t I do something? Davey’d still be alive if I had.

Another sigh left him. Gone, all gone: sweet Callie, with her wheaten hair, Davey with his fun-loving, mischievous eyes, and mom, who kept the family together.

Stop thinking about it! He made himself watch the landscape. What would Chicago be like? Would he, could he, a farm boy, adjust to a big city? Only time would tell, but life on the farm hadn’t been a picnic. If he survived *that*, how hard could Chicago be?

The last few years made even harder to be a Lachance. Plagues settled in on the prairies. First the rains stopped. Days, weeks, then months passed, and not a drop. Crops

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withered and died. The land turned to dust; winds swirled topsoil everywhere. Billy recalled his mother dusting in the morning, only to do it again the next. You could taste and smell the dust. It got into your nose, mouth, and food. You couldn't go outside without covering your mouth and nose.

Parched, the Lachance cows died one after the other. Callie bawled her eyes red when Al shot Essie, her golden brown calf, its ribs visible.

If God intended to punish the Lachances, the locusts proved that. Swarms and swarms of them; so many, they turned day into night. Anything green and not killed by drought and dust surrendered to locusts.

And the bills came due. Al couldn't pay them. A court bailiff arrived one day and the Lachance kids learned a new word: lien. The bank gave Al four weeks to clear out, but Paul Korinski, the kind bank manager, convinced head office to give the family an extra three weeks.

Al couldn't take it anymore, and disappeared further into the bottle.

CHAPTER 2

“Kid.”

Billy looked around. “Huh. Oh, sorry, sorry. Daydreaming.”

“Can see that,” Gus said, not unkindly. “Anywho, look, we’ll be in Chicago in another hour. Want to give you this.” He shoved a piece of paper at Billy.

“What is it?”

“It’s a guy who works at the Continental. Know it?”

Billy shook his head.

“No matter,” Gus said. “Swanky hotel. Not far from the station. Go there and ask for Artie Vickers.” He pointed to the paper. “Maybe there’s some work. You can’t keep riding the rails. No kinda life.”

An appreciative Billy smiled. “Thanks. Thanks so much for hauling me in, feeding me, and letting me sleep here.”

“S’okay. You looked in pretty rough shape. Take care of yourself.” He pointed to Billy’s ankle. “Easy on that.”

“Yeah, for sure.”

“Get ready. Watch how you land when the time comes.”

“Will do.”

Gus busied himself tidying up as Billy’s mind returned to his last days at the farm.

Mom needed to go into town on that Saturday morning. She asked if anyone wanted to come.

“I do,” an excited Callie said, eager for the opportunity to leave the farm. “Can we bring Augie?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll drive,” Al said. “Gimme some money?”

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“What for?” mom asked.

“Never mind what for. I need money.” He held out his hand.

Mom shot him a long-suffering look. “And we need the money to live, Al. You can’t waste it on the bootlegger.”

“Gimme some money.” He wiggled his fingers with impatience.

She opened her purse.

Billy declined to come. The less time to spend with dad, the better.

From what Billy pieced together later, mom and a wobbly dad quarreled in front of the feed store. It took several clumsy efforts before he started the pickup. Less than a mile out of Mullion Mulls the truck took a curve too fast. It hit soft shoulders, spun and rolled. Mom, Callie and Augie died; dad walked away with only minor injuries.

That day Billy lost his faith.

Neighbors, friends, and even people from town came to the funeral to do what they could, but when the last well-wisher went home dad quickly returned to the bottle. The emotional pain and insult proved too much for Billy. When the old man at last fell asleep in his bed, his grown son reached a decision. He climbed onto the bed, straddled his father’s chest, placed a pillow over his face and pressed down with all his might.

Even drunk Al Lachance put up a fight. Billy’s pent-up rage proved greater than his father’s attempts to throw him off. He held fast as his parent thrashed about, pulling on Billy’s hands, clawing at his chest and neck, swinging his fists, punching whatever he could.

Billy found a hidden strength. Arms stiff and shaking, sweat rolling down his neck he held onto the pillow. “You son of a bitch”, he said through gritted teeth to the man

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beneath the pillow. “For mom; for Callie; for Davey and yeah- for-for Augie.”

Resistance slackened. At last dad’s hands dropped on the bed, but Billy refused to release his hold. When he at last did, he remained tense, ready to attack if his drunken father showed signs of life. His chest heaved as he noisily pulled air into his lungs, pulled back the pillow, and looked into the unseeing, horror-stricken eyes of his father.

Sweat rolled down Billy’s face. He wailed, “Mom. Forgive me. There wasn’t any other choice. I couldn’t let him live.”

Billy Lachance remained in the house with his dead father until the next morning. At eight thirty he roused himself from a kitchen chair, walked into the hallway, picked up the phone, and called the nearby police detachment.

Half an hour later Police Officer Peter Vladmar, who’d been a cop before Billy entered grade school arrived. He knew the Lachance family. “Where?” he asked as he stepped into the kitchen. Billy didn’t rise; only pointed to the bedroom.

The cop moved about in the bedroom. Billy remained seated.

At last Vladmar came out. He sat at the kitchen table and gave Billy a long, careful look. “Where’d you get the scratches on your neck and cheek, son?”

“Dunno,” Billy mumbled as he stared off at some distant place.

Vladmar studied the boy. *White. White as a sheet.* He rose. “Where’s the phone?” The last surviving member of the Lachances pointed to the hallway.

Vladmar had the operator connect him to Doctor Babich’s office, the area coroner. After a long pause he said, “I’m at the Lachance farm, doc. Can you get here? I know, but it’s urgent. I need you to write up a death certificate.”

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Vladmar returned the phone to its cradle and joined Billy. "You look in pretty rough shape, son. Do you want to talk?"

Billy shook his head.

With little else to do the policeman took a chair, sat, pulled his pocket notebook from his light brown tunic. Billy stared off into space as Vladmar wrote. "What time did you find your father?"

Billy said he wasn't quite sure, couldn't remember.

"That's okay," Vladmar said. "Likely died in the middle of the night. I mean you found him this morning, right?"

Billy didn't acknowledge the question. The policeman spoke again. "Doc Babich will likely confirm that," he said in response to his own question. He closed his note book. Nothing disturbed the silence but the rhythmic tick-tock of the mantle clock.

Forty minutes later the doctor arrived. He and Vladmar moved into the bedroom and examined the body. Billy listened to their whisperings. For the first time he winced at the soreness in his ribcage, where his father delivered quick, short blows.

At last the whisperings stopped. Both men came out and stood over Billy. "Son," the cop said, "Doc Babich is going to write heart attack as the cause of your father's death. Do you understand?"

"Yes," the young man in a state of mental numbness whispered. Vladmar moved forward, and put a hand on Billy's shoulder. "We're sorry for your loss, Billy, for what you've gone through in the last little while. As for your dad, he led a hard life, and it cost him."

Had Billy been more aware he might have caught the cop's double meaning.

The cause of death didn't fool anyone in Mullion Mulls or nearby. People figured it out fast enough. Most whispered

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that Al Lachance got his comeuppance. That poor wife of his they said; lord, how she wanted to leave him, but feared for her life. And those lovely kids—it's all too much to think about. Devil's got a special spot waiting for Al Lachance.

Billy spent the remains of his father's small death benefits policy to bury Al separately. No one questioned his decision.

Did he want a gravestone the manager and funeral director asked?

"Simplest one you've got," Billy said. "Name, date of birth and death. That's it."

A few days later Billy borrowed a neighbor's pickup and returned to the cemetery to visit his mother and siblings at the family plot. He laid out an arrangement of flowers. Alone, the weight of the world on his young shoulders he sobbed his pain over his great loss. At last, when he'd shed his last tear, he took a deep breath and said, "I have leave here. No choice. I'll miss all of you so very, very much."

He turned and walked past the mound of earth over his father's grave, never once turning his head.

Back at the farm he visited the site where he buried the beagle and laid out the remaining flowers. "You were the best little dog anyone could have, Augie, and so brave. If there is a heaven, I know you're there playing with Callie and Davey, and mom's looking on, laughing in her musical voice."

Two days later, perhaps as penance, Billy chose his most threadbare coat, cut up some leather straps and made himself a bindle bedroll. He stuffed in toothbrush and powder, razor, a change of socks, underwear, and a copy of *I Claudius*, the book his English teacher gave him. He took Davey's Elgin watch, the one his brother found. *It'll remind me of you every time I look at it, Davey.*

Should he take food? No, it would only weigh him down. With a final lingering look he left the house, and rail

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jumped a freight train. He wanted to put as much distance between himself and the place of so much pain.

CHAPTER 3

“Get ready to jump,” Gus said as threw a dishtowel over his shoulder.

Billy grabbed his bindle.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Okay, train’s not going to go much slower. Be careful and watch yourself.”

“I will, thanks.”

Five minutes later Billy found himself on Canal Street, not fully prepared for the vastness of the buildings. He asked several passers-by, and at last made his way to the hotel. How would he find this Vickers, he asked himself as he stared up at the huge and bulky hotel? He couldn’t walk through the front doors, especially dressed in his clothes. They’d toss him out in no time. What door would the employees enter? Had to be the back way.

True enough he found it, but a security guard stopped him and demanded his business.

“I wanna talk to an Artie Vickers.”

“Oh, you do, do ya?” the paunchy older man challenged as he sized up the bum. “‘bout what?”

“A job. Only take a few minutes.”

“Everyone says that, and he ain’t hiring.”

“I was told different,” Billy said, aware of the lie.

“Wuz ya?”

Billy stood, unsure how to respond when the guard took a breath and surprised him. “Tell ya what: I shouldn’t do this, but go to the kitchen, but only the kitchen, ya understand? You’ll find Artie there. Go anywhere else and I’ll find out and come for you. Got it?”

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“Got it. Straight to the kitchen.”

The guard gave Billy directions. “I’ll phone ahead. Nowhere else.”

“Promise.”

Billy hurried past the man. What kind of job might be available?

His face registered surprise when he met the five-foot dwarf in a tuxedo. *Don’t stare* he warned himself. *It’s rude.*

Fast enough Vickers made Billy forget the size difference. Black hair slicked across his dome, his face covered by a sparse beard, he smiled with warmth. “Hi, I’m Artie Vickers.” His eyes revealing alertness and energy.

“Hello, sir. Billy Lachance.”

“You’re looking for me?”

“I am. Someone said you might have a job.”

“Who?”

“Gus. I don’t know his last name. Met him on the train.”

Vickers considered the answer as he gave Billy an up-and-down inspection. “I see. “Can you wait?”

“Sure.”

The two studied each other until Artie spoke again. “Where?”

“Where *what?*”

“Where’ve you waited?”

The light bulb went on. Billy shook his head. “Boy, do I feel dumb. You mean wait, like a waiter? I’m not making a good first impression, am I?”

Vickers waved off the claim. “Not worth worrying about.” He shifted his weight to his right foot and looked up at Billy. “Your name again?”

“Billy Lachance.”

“Okay, here’s the thing, Billy. I could use a part-time waiter, but you don’t have any waiting experience. You look

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like a nice kid who needs a job. So do millions of Americans. I can't help them all, hire them all. Sorry."

Billy's face betrayed his disappointment. Only my first try he told himself. He nodded in response. "Thank you, sir," he said, ready to walk away.

"Hold on."

Hope nudged disappointment aside as Vickers spoke again. "I hope I don't regret this. Like I said, I could use a waiter who can fill in when we're extra busy. I also need a part dishwasher-busboy."

Billy waited for more. Artie obliged. "I could turn those two into one job." He studied Billy for a reaction. "How's your personality?" The question caught Billy off guard. "My personality? Fine-I guess. I'm not sure what you mean."

"I mean can you get along with people, smile, take crap, even when it's something's not your fault, that kind of thing, and still feel good about yourself by day's end?"

Might be my only chance to impress. "I can, yes."

Artie stroked his chin and weighed the comment. "Look, most of our customers are loaded. Have to, to eat here. Some believe that gives them the right to act badly. The bad ones, believe me, they can make your day flat-out miserable. I need staff that can roll with the punches. If you work hard and can smile, there's a job here for you. We're getting busier, and this might turn into full-time."

Billy forgot to breathe for a second. "That'd be terrific; honestly. Are you hiring me?"

Artie nodded. "I'm saying I'll give you a try."

"You won't be disappointed."

"Okay, see to it I'm not. Pay's forty cents an hour and you work five-hour days, including half Saturday. Be here tomorrow morning at six, and we'll get you started. I'll get somebody to show you the ropes."

Billy pumped Artie's hand as Artie's brow furrowed. "Wait. You got a place to sleep tonight?"

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“No.”

“Got any money?”

Billie shook his head.

Artie studied him for a few seconds before he held up a finger. “Stay put.” He turned and walked away.

Full of excitement, Billy wanted to dance around, but made himself stand still.

Several minutes later Artie returned and held out a piece of paper. “An address. In a minute I’ll tell you where it is. It’s a rooming house, not a flop house. You good with that?”

“Course; yeah.”

Artie continued. “Ask for misses Chisolm. She keeps a clean house. No bugs. Charges twenty-five cents a day; less if you pay by the month, and double-up with someone. Give her my name, and tell her you’ll settle up with her when you get your first pay. As for food, you can take most of your meals here.”

Billy couldn’t hold back his grin. ““This is great. I couldn’t ask better.”

“Glad you think so. One other thing: make sure you wash. Every day. I don’t want anyone complaining my staff smell.”

“No problem.”

“Now, here’s how you get to Mrs. Chisolm’s- outside the front door you’ll find ...”

Five weeks later Billy lay in bed and silently spoke to his mother. He told her about his new job. *An easy enough job, mom. Dishwasher. Lots and lots of dishes. And scouring pots and pans. Other times I fill in as waiter. What’s neat is I get to wear a tuxedo when I do the serving.*

He rolled to his side and let the talk in his head continue. *I’ve actually put on weight. You’d almost think there wasn’t a Depression by the food the customers order; the kind folks like me never see. And get this: they often leave*

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half. Can you believe it? Half! On my breaks I go in the kitchen, cut off the good pieces of meat and wrap them in paper napkins to bring here. You wouldn't believe how grateful the other roomers are. Artie isn't crazy about me doing it, shakes his head, but looks the other way. One day this waitress, Norma, asked what I do with the meat. When I told her she looked at me in a funny way, and told me I was nice.

How do you like my room? I share it with Cornelius. Everybody calls him Cornnie. Shy guy, but nice. We get along. There's a big library here at some college. Cornnie works there. I've never been, but he says it's a grand building

Did I mention my friend, Lum, Columbus? He's a communist and keen on politics and unionism. He's taken me to some of the meetings at the Union Hall, and to his Young Communist cell meetings.

Eyes heavy, Billy let out a weary sigh. I better go to sleep now, mom. I miss you, Davey, Callie and Augie. Give my love to them. I hope there's a heaven, because I want to see all of you again.

The American Brotherhood of Foundry Workers Union Hall, local 813, sat at the corner of Cornelia and N. Clark. The Hall expected a big crowd eager for Harold Glass' talk, *Halting the rising tide of fascism*. He'd recently returned from Spain.

Billy and Lum stepped off the streetcar. "Gonna be interesting to listen to what this guy has to say about Spain," an excited Lum said. He took a final pull on his cigarette, and flicked the butt into the air. Both men followed its arc down to the curb. They walked on.

Billy regarded Lum. Skinny and tall, but inclined to slouch. Lum contradicted the common image many people had of Italians- swarthy with brown eyes and thick

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eyebrows. A casual observer might mistake him as being Nordic. His hair lacked any curliness; its color neither blond nor quite brown. His blue eyes also belied his Italian ancestry, as did his skin, as light as Billy's. A straight, narrow nose, turned up at the tip separated dull brown eyebrows.

Lum's parents arrived in the country separately after the war. They saved enough money to open a restaurant, but lost it and their house a year after the stock market crash. His father moved the family over a Chinese laundry. Less than two weeks later he took his life.

Lum noted his friend's appraisal as they walked toward the hall. He adjusted his fedora. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Better by nothin:' I like girls giving me the eye, but guys, that's another story."

They climbed the steps to the hall. Inside the front door a man sat at a folding table with pamphlets. "Literature, comrades?" he asked, and waved an open hand over the table. "They're free. Take some."

The friends considered the dozen or so offering on various topics, but mostly on Spain. Many had crude caricatures of giant fascist hobnailed boots ready to step on defenseless women and children. Lum selected four.

They entered the hall. Lum studied a pamphlet. "See, here's proof the Falange are in league with the fascists of Italy and Germany."

"Who're the Falange?" Billy asked.

Lum turned his head and gave Billy a suffering look. "You poor, naïve country bumpkin; you got so much to learn. Lucky for you, uncle Lum is here."

Billy rolled his eyes. "Sure, sure, Lum; you're not older than me. You going to tell me about the Falange or not?"

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“Why not? The Falange is the Spanish fascist movement; they’re in bed with the military, and supported by the monarchy and Catholic Church. They want to keep Spain in the middle ages. Probably wanna bring back the Inquisition.” He held back and looked down at the pamphlets. “These generals, um, they’re the ones who’re leading this coup against the Popular Front of Spain.”

More people arrived and filled the rows of folding chairs. A fellow their age took the chair next to them. Slender and shorter than the two friends, he wore a light brown twill sports jacket, its best days long gone, a collarless white shirt, and brown high-waist wool slacks, shiny from far too many pressings. A long grayish-brown scarf fastened itself around his neck several times.

He turned his not-quite-bony face with its pock-marked cheeks toward them. “Greetings, Comrades.” No smile accompanied the greeting, but his hazel eyes held theirs; neither challenging nor subdued. “I’m Jerzy Szymanski.” He leaned across Lum and stuck his hand out to Billy. The arm shot out so fast that but Billy hesitated before he took it. “Hi, Jerzy. I’m Billy.”

Jerzy next offered the hand to Lum. “I’ve been waiting all week for Harold Glass. You too?”

Lum nodded. “For sure, absolutely.”

The two fell into a fast discussion about politics and the speaker. Billy turned his attention to the Hall, and studied the crowd: mostly men with a sprinkling of women. A man brought up a lectern, fussed with the microphone and placed a glass of water on the stand. Two others stood to the side. Billy guessed the one to be about his own age, and the other maybe in his late forties. *Gotta be the speaker.* He took in the closely trimmed goatee and small, round eyeglasses, hair short in the back, the sides, and parted it in the middle.

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The man faced his audience in a mustard green three-piece tweed suit, but no tie. One hand deep in his pocket, his weight resting on his back leg, he gave the appearance of someone comfortable with public speaking.

The younger of the two broke away and moved to the lectern. He turned on the microphone, tapped it with his forefinger and then leaned closer. "Brothers. Sisters. Welcome." He waited for the now filled-to-capacity hall to hush.

"My name is Archie Childs. In a few seconds you'll hear from our guest speaker, Harold Glass." He turned his head to acknowledge the speaker. "He's going to tell us about new dangers on the horizon, the enemy of freedom, justice, and the common man-fascism. He'll explain what it is, and what's to be done. Brothers, sisters, Harold Glass."

He stood aside and let the speaker by. Seventy or so audience members gave him a warm welcome. Glass moved behind the lectern, set his notes down and turned his gaze on his eager audience.

"Comrades, friends, I am a communist. Not all of you are, I'm sure, but you will agree that we face a new, dangerous enemy, one that requires the combined effort of men and women of good hearts and strong resolve to bring to heel."

Glass proved himself to be a polished speaker. A strong start, he connected with his audience with anecdotes, timing, emotionalism, eye contact and a touch of humor. Billy let his eyes roam over the audience as Glass spoke. *He's got them eating out of his hand.*

"The challenge, brothers and sisters," Glass said, "is to help freedom, and aid the duly elected government against its mortal foe, fascism. Volunteers from all over the world are arriving in Spain to be part of something new, the International Brigades."

NEVER A GOOD WAR

He broke off, adjusted his glasses and consulted his notes, flipped a page and read something before he raised his head again. "I have been to Spain. I have seen the new tanks and planes of Germany and Italy, sent to help the Fascist rebels. I have seen their devastation." He refreshed himself with a drink of water, and returned to his theme. "The Italians claim that their *Corpo di Truppe Volontaire*, the CTV, are only there in a voluntary advisory role; as does Germany with its *Condor Legion*. Nothing can be further from the truth. Italy and Germany are in Spain for the sole purpose of bringing it into the fascist fold, even as they try out their new weapons of war."

He stopped and listened to the murmurs. "So what," he said, "if innocent Spanish civilians die while the fascists perfect their war techniques?"

"It can't stand," someone shouted. "We won't let that stand."

"Exactly my point," Glass said. "Thousands of men and women from all over the world have responded to the cry for liberty, and are rushing to join the legitimate government of Spain. Their sole purpose is to stem the tide of darkness, fascism. They come from Australia, Turkey, Canada, Japan, Europe, the U.S, and elsewhere. Will you not join them?"

He let the silence work for him, wet his lips and said, "I leave you with this Popular Front battle cry from Madrid, comrades- '¡No Pasarán!' *They Shall Not Pass*. With your help you can make that become a reality. Thank you."

The audience rose to its feet in heavy applause. Billy turned to see tears roll down Lum's face. He wiped them with the back of his hand. "So true," he shouted. "Everything he said."

The applause let up. People headed for the front doors. A small group stayed and besieged Glass with questions and comments

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"I'm going," Lum announced.

"Going where?" Billy asked.

Lum shook his head in response. "Goddamn, Lachance, clean the wax outta your ears. Going to Spain."

Billy reddened at the rebuke. Without another word he turned and left the hall. Out in the cool night air he walked with purpose to the bus stop. *To hell with him. If he's going to treat me like that, fine; I don't need him.* He stepped on the bus and took his seat. City blocks passed. Billy didn't notice. His mind shifted from Lum to Mullion Mulls and his father. He stared down at his upturned hands as if they, not he, were responsible for the death of the man.

It surprised him he didn't feel much regret. His cowardice- that gave him no peace. *If only I'd helped. Davey, maybe he'd still be alive.* His chest tightened. *Davey, mom, Callie; I miss you all so much. Augie too.* He remembered how the beagle would jump onto his bed at night and tuck up against him. Callie's dog, Augie. He loved her the best, but Al wouldn't let him into her bedroom at night. As soon as the dog heard Callie moving about, he'd bound off Billy's bed and tear down the hallway.

His throat constricted. *Davey. If only I could turn back the clock. You'd never have had to take dad on by yourself.*

His stop approached. He rang the bell and stepped out the rear doors of the bus. Head down, shoulders slouched, he walked along, full of self-blame.

CHAPTER 4

Saturday morning Billy avoided Lum. The following morning Mrs. Chisolm tapped gently on his door.

Billy opened it. "Billy," she whispered as she attempted to fasten the pin to her church hat, "there's someone in the parlor waiting to see you."

"Me?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Who is it, Mrs. Chisolm?"

"No idea, dear. Some young man your age. Says his name is Columbia."

He looked at her. "Columbia? I don't know any . . . Oh, wait; could it be Columbus?"

"Columbus," she repeated. "Yes, of course; that sounds more like it. My memory isn't what it used to be." She glanced over his shoulder into the room. "Did I wake Cornie?"

"No, we're both up. We've been playing chess for the last hour."

"All right, then." With that she turned and headed for the stairs.

Billy followed her.

Lum sat in the small foyer, close to the edge of one of her chairs, hat in one hand, knees bouncing up and down in nervousness. He rose when he saw Billy. "Hey, man, you did a Mandrake."

"What? What're you talking about?"

"Mandrake! Mandrake," an impatient Lum said "The magician in the funnies?"

Billy threw his hands in the air. "Lost me."

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“All right; never mind. You disappeared last night. How come?”

Billy didn't want to talk about it but forced himself to hold Lum's gaze. “Forget it. I don't want to talk about it.”

“Ahh.” Lum pointed to Billy's face. “Your frown, man, says it is. C'mon, what'd I do to piss you off?” Billy wouldn't answer. Lum spoke again. “Okay, I get it. I can piss people off. Guess I did it again. How's about we shake, and I'll say I'm sorry for last night? You're a good comrade, and we have some laughs.”

He stuck out his hand. A reluctant Billy took it. “How's about I buy you lunch?” Lum asked. Billy shook his head. “No, thanks.”

“C'mon; ease up. I'm trying to make it right. ‘Sides, I sold a crate of rabbits. Made a decent penny. You wanna go or not?”

Billy considered the offer. It wouldn't hurt to stay friendly. “All right. Let me get my coat.”

An hour later the two friends stepped into the *Worth Mentioning* near the city Hall. A portly man seated them in a booth with thick, bright red and squeaky vinyl upholstery. He handed them menus, and told them their waitress would be with them soon.

“See something you like,” Lum advised as he read the menu, “order it.”

Billy scanned the menu, and focused on the specials.

“Coffee?”

Both men looked up at the pretty teenage waitress in her starched black uniform with a short white apron holding a pot of coffee. Billy liked her coal black hair worn in the Greta Garbo style, small face with a straight nose, come-hither lips, and bottle-green eyes with long lashes.

Lum gave her an overlong up and down inspection. “Say, aren't you a dish? Coffee, sure, and does it comes with