



# When the Music Stops

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A Novel by

**T. C. McNulty**



Strategic Book Group

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*This book is dedicated to the men and women  
who served in the Armed Forces of the  
United States during World War II,  
especially  
Andrew Zavatsky, Robert Youngquist,  
Joseph McCarthy, and Walter Gold.*



# Part One

It was the winter of the phony war; the period of uneasy calm that followed the German Blitzkrieg victory in Poland. French troops remained stationed behind the Maginot Line, an eighty-seven-mile-long series of massive underground fortifications along their eastern border. The British Expeditionary Force hunkered down in northeastern France, content to wait for the Nazis to make the first move. The Wehrmacht rested confidently as Hitler devised a bold strategy for a spring offensive. Americans vowed to stay out of the conflict; hoped neither side really wanted war; prayed that a peaceful resolution would be found. They wondered if Hitler would be satisfied now that he controlled Poland and joked nervously about the inaction, calling it sitzkrieg. The sitting would soon be over.



# 1

A thick blanket of bleak, arctic air had settled into the Valley for its annual stay. Streets were glazed with ice, snow was piled high along frequently shoveled walkways. A weak sun, hardly visible in the gray sky, made afternoons almost bearable, but early evening darkness brought plunging temperatures with howling winds.

The big clock on the rear wall of Gronski's Market clicked 6:00 p.m. as Johnny Miller locked the entrance and switched the sign in the window from 'Open' to 'Closed.' The young man hurried across the creaking wooden floor to the back room, yelled "Good Night" to his boss before grabbing his coat. The brutal cold stole his breath as he stepped out the door to head home, almost two miles away. A tattered coat and threadbare scarf offered little protection from frigid gusts of icy air as wisps of snow swirled about his face.

Johnny's teeth chattered madly as the streetcar rumbled slowly past him. Through the frosted glass, he could make out the silhouettes of passengers nestled inside, safe from the bitter January night. *I'd love to be on that trolley, but I'm not giving in.* He cracked a slight smile as he continued inching his way up the hill on the slick sidewalk. *The money I'm saving by walking is my way out of Wilkes-Barre. I am not staying here, bagging groceries and shelving boxes for the rest of my life.* He pulled his hat tight across his forehead, shivered, and trudged along.

At the top of the hill, Johnny turned onto Main Street and hurried past the tightly spaced, wood-framed homes that lined the street just a few feet off the curb. *Almost there.* His feet ached, mucous dripped

from his nose. A small dog scampered across his path. *Poor little thing, he'll freeze to death.* Johnny's eyes began to water so he stopped for a moment to wipe his face with his frozen gloves. *Tonight's cold as a witch's tit.* He smiled slightly. *What in the world does that mean?* The soles of his shoes were soaked from the snow; his socks wet against his feet. Seconds later he broke into a slow trot near the Miller home, a narrow two-story with a small stoop, a rarely locked door, and three slender front windows. He swung down the alley, entered the side door, and bounded up the stairs to the warmth of the kitchen.

"Johnny, Johnny, warm yourself by the stove. You must be frozen. You'll catch your death of cold for sure. Dinner is almost ready. Father's not home yet. Herman and Uncle Stanley are waiting to eat. Your brother is listening to the radio as usual. How was that nice Mr. Gronski today?"

Johnny's mother, Mary, greeted him every evening with a stream of conversation, reports on the whereabouts of various family members, questions she didn't wait to have answered, and a bit of information about the food being prepared.

"Aunt Ethyl walked all the way to Bullard's butcher shop in this awful weather to pick up this beautiful fresh ham. Look how nice," she said, pulling the top from the bubbling pot.

*Wow, four whole blocks. Aunt Ethyl is a regular Sergeant Preston of the Yukon braving the wilds. I walk nearly two miles, twice a day. Of course, Mom doesn't know that.* He chuckled to himself and nodded approval to Ethyl, seated nearby, enjoying a cigarette.

The Miller's were proud to have meat on the table for main meals at least three times a week. "We've been fortunate to have eaten so well through these lean years," Johnny's father would say.

"Yes, we have," Mary would answer as everyone at the table nodded in agreement.

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By the beginning of 1940, the Great Depression had dragged on so long that most working people believed the hard times were permanent and barely scratching out a living was the best they would ever manage. With the nation's unemployment rate hovering at 14 percent, only a few brave souls were willing to consider that the economic nightmare might be at its end. Ever so slowly jobs were becoming more plentiful, and wages were rising, but most folks were afraid to hope the worst was over, afraid to be disappointed again. Johnny's

father, Henry Miller, was one who struggled to maintain a positive attitude during the gloomy years.

“Things are improving,” he would say. “Government programs are paving the way to recovery.”

In reality, government efforts throughout the 1930s were mostly ineffective, frequently disastrous. President Hoover fretted over balancing the federal budget while economic activity contracted more than 30 percent. His administration exacerbated the initial downturn by raising taxes, tightening the money supply, and passing the devastating Smoot-Hawley Tariff that sharply limited foreign trade. Franklin Roosevelt swept into the White House to the tune of “Happy Days are Here Again,” however the success of his ambitious New Deal fell far short of expectations. Idealistic administrators sought to micro-manage the economy. They attempted to bolster entire industries by setting prices artificially high at a time when consumers had little money. The result was most often a precipitous drop in demand. The jaunty FDR restored a degree of the nation’s confidence, and bold public works projects helped bring about a slight recovery. The meager gains evaporated after he was re-elected in 1936. The Recession that began in September ’37 was actually more severe than the first year downturn of 1929–30. Unemployment soared, business profits collapsed, relief roles skyrocketed in response to a new round of government regulations and onerous taxes. Especially harmful was the Undistributed Profits Tax that greatly increased levies on retained corporate earnings discouraging investments essential to business recovery. Despite the President’s glowing rhetoric, the government had done little to improve the economy. It was easy to understand why most of the nation remained skeptical of any positive news.

Stanley Milosovich never shared his brother’s optimism. “The bankers and business men sold us common folk out,” he complained, conveniently forgetting the thousands of banks and businesses that failed during the Depression. “We’re nothin’ to them big shots. It ain’t gettin’ no better, no matter what them damn politicians say.” Stanley was bitter, not beaten. “When life throws punches at you, punch right back,” he would say.

Stanley was an infant when he came to America with his parents in 1895. As with many nineteenth century immigrants, Stanley’s mother and father weren’t sure of their heritage. They described themselves as Ukrainian, Russian, or Slovak, whichever came to mind. Their land had been fought over and divided so many times that nationality was unimportant. Most Eastern European peasants knew little

beyond their village. The small town in which the Milosovich family lived was poor, cold, desolate. They left with no regrets, not quite convinced America's streets were paved with gold but certain the new land had to be better. How could it be worse?

They settled in northeast Pennsylvania along with thousands of other newcomers drawn to work the anthracite coal mines. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the Wyoming Valley, long an isolated farm area, transformed into a busy metropolis. The success of the coal business brought a steady stream of entrepreneurs who built factories, mills, and stores. While the businessmen prospered, miners and their families led a hardscrabble life. Pay was low, the work tortuous. Clean burning coal was deep underground. The long shafts needed to reach it were dangerous, dark, filled with choking dust. Accidents, mostly from falling rock, caused injuries and fatalities with frightening regularity. Miners who avoided unnatural deaths frequently succumbed at early ages from black lung or other respiratory diseases. When the breadwinner was gone, many widows were forced to send their sons, sometimes as young as seven or eight, to work the perilous mines.

Mischak Milosovich defied the odds and managed to dig underground for nearly twenty years. He and his wife had six babies. Only two sons survived to reach adulthood. The couple died a few months apart in 1915, still hoping a better life lay ahead for their children in the land of opportunity.

Henry was a natural born American citizen who never tired of saying he was "first generation." He Anglicized his name in 1916; on the day he turned twenty. Henry had no interest in knowing anything about the place his parents had left. "I'm an American. That's all that matters."

During the early 1920s, Henry Miller opened a barbershop near the center of Wilkes-Barre. Located amidst fancy offices close to a street-car stop, his shop was an instant success. Prosperous businessmen enjoyed Henry who was always ready with a compliment, a lively story, or a slightly bawdy joke. The ladies of the town trusted him and felt safe leaving their children for a cut while they ran across the street to the millinery or down the block to Harney's Department Store.

Miller's shop added two barbers as the business thrived. Henry was so successful that he and Mary managed to put enough aside to make a down payment on the house on Main Street. They bought a radio, a modern gas stove, and a wringer washing machine all through the

miracle of installment buying. "It's the latest idea. One dollar down, one dollar a week, and before you know it, you own it. Why wait to save up? Buy now," Henry said. "This is America. The President believes economic prosperity is here to stay, and we are close to ending poverty forever. President Hoover should know, right?"

One sunny June day in 1929, Henry cruised home in his very own Model A roadster. His sons beamed as their excited neighbors hurried to admire the beautiful bright blue Ford. Henry smiled broadly. Mary was so happy for him that she kissed him on the cheek, right in front of everyone! Johnny and Tommy hopped in for their first ride. The boys hardly noticed how uncomfortable the rumble seat was as the neighborhood flew past their eyes, the wind tousled their hair.

Sunday became a day of adventure. Riding through town, visiting friends, or heading for the country with a picnic lunch, the car provided a freedom the Millers had never known. They talked about visiting the Philadelphia zoo, Hershey's Amusement Park, and Atlantic City's boardwalk, however their dreams were not to be.

Henry Miller learned of the stock market crash the way most folks did. He read the newspaper headline on Wednesday, October 31, 1929, "Stocks Plummet in Wall Street Panic." It did not mean much to him or anyone he knew. Nobody in his neighborhood owned stocks. Just a few unfortunate millionaires would suffer.

Unexpected things soon began to happen. Businessmen who stopped in the barbershop once a week began to come less often. When they came, it was only for a trim, they didn't bother with a shave and hot towel. Ladies visited downtown less frequently. Most walked past the shop, their children at their sides. With money harder to come by many trimmed their children's hair at home rather than pay for a fancy cut and a splash of tonic at Miller's.

Henry held out as long as he could before he had to lay off both his helpers. He spent more hours in the shop, but worked less. The owner of his building went bankrupt. Henry began to pay rent directly to the bank. A short time later, the bank failed.

Stores and offices shuttered throughout the city. One-time successful businessmen spent their days aimlessly walking the streets. Henry took particular notice of Mr. Fairbanks, an accountant who had patronized Miller's shop each Friday morning for years. Mr. Fairbanks was a true gentleman, well attired, perfectly mannered. One Friday passed without his visit, then another, and another. Mr. Fairbanks had joined the growing number of downtown wanderers. Henry watched as the proud man moved past the shop window day after day,

dressed in his fine suit. At first, Mr. Fairbanks waved a bright hello to Henry but as the weeks passed the man's stride slowed, his smile faded, his suit became wrinkled, his shoes in need of polish.

On an unusually cool September morning in 1931, Mr. Fairbanks stopped in front of Miller's shop with a few pieces of wood, a hammer, and some nails. He painstakingly constructed a makeshift stand, placed it on the sidewalk, and affixed a hand printed sign that read "Apples 5 Cents." He explained to Henry that everyone should "buy an apple a day and eat the Depression away. This is the way for me to get back on my feet. I purchase six dozen apples each morning, on credit, for \$1.75. When I sell them for a nickel apiece I realize a profit of \$1.85!" The eager entrepreneur quickly discovered that selling seventy-two apples was nearly impossible. Each batch contained at least a few that were bruised or rotten, competition from other stands was fierce, and the number of willing customers small. Despite the difficulties, Mr. Fairbanks operated his stand from morning until night, day after day, rain or shine. "I lost my job, Henry, but I can still be a worthy provider," he said.

A few weeks before Christmas a soup kitchen opened three doors down from Miller's. The line of gaunt men waiting for a meager meal frequently stretched beyond Henry's doorway and past the apple seller. One day Henry watched as Mr. Fairbanks melted into the line for lunch. He never returned to the stand. At closing time, Henry removed the cardboard box of apples to safeguard them for the night. He counted 64.

The next morning a squat man smoking a large cigar paced in front of the shop for several minutes before entering.

"Hey, you know the guy who works this stand?"

"Mr. Fairbanks," Henry answered.

"Where's he live?"

"Don't know."

"Shit! Listen, if he shows up today tell him Barney was here. I want my money for yesterday's apples. Never should have given that bum credit."

"I don't know if he's coming back. I have most of the apples. Brought them in last night."

"Good. Give them to me."

Henry was immediately sorry for mentioning the apples. Barney rapidly counted the fruit. "If this guy shows up tell him I'll be back later for my dough," he growled. "Remind him he owes me for all of them."

“What are you going to do with these?” Henry asked.

“I’ll sell them to some other poor slob,” the man with the cigar answered as he clumsily maneuvered the box through the barbershop door.

At noon, Henry noticed that Mr. Fairbanks was back in the soup kitchen line. He described the stranger’s visit, and Mr. Fairbanks nervously thanked him before hurrying away. Barney returned at three o’clock looking for the apple seller. Henry lied and said he had not seen him. The squat man walked off in a huff.

Henry waited about an hour before he carried the small stand to the basement of his shop. He was not sure why he bothered to store it. He knew he wouldn’t be seeing Mr. Fairbanks again.

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The Millers tried valiantly, but they could not maintain the car payments. A large man from the finance company took the keys one dreary Thursday. As he drove away in the Model A, Henry stared blankly out the window. It was nearly an hour before he said, “The car is a luxury we can’t afford. We will take the streetcar like everyone else.” He put on a brave face but Henry Miller did not smile for weeks. No one in the family did.

The bleak years of the early thirties were even more trying for Henry’s brother. Stanley’s hours were cut; he was laid off once, and permanently lost his job when the mill closed in March of ’32. He sought steady work everywhere, but everywhere he looked, he met other men seeking work. Stanley cleaned a church, painted an orphanage, picked coal by the side of the tracks, anything to earn a few dollars. His son, Herman, dropped out of school when he found part-time hours in a drug store. His wife, Ethyl, worked as a secretary for a short time before her employer went bankrupt. The family savings evaporated. Bills mounted rapidly. Stanley was compelled to apply to the local relief agency.

The government office, housed in the basement of a neighborhood grade school, was packed with applicants when Stanley entered. He warily approached the front desk. Without looking up the clerk told him to write his name on the list. “You can write, can’t you?”

“Yes,” Stanley answered as he printed his name.

“Sit down, wait your turn.”

He found an open seat in the far corner, next to the coal bin. As he sat on the hard, straight-backed chair, Stanley scanned the room filled with desperate people. Shabbily dressed men, their hands cracked and

dirty, spaces where teeth had been, shoes worn through, string holding up their trousers. Drained women in stained dresses, their eyes sunken, jaws slacked, hungry children on their laps. Downtrodden, crushed souls, overcome by fear, not a glimmer of hope among them.

The room was hot. It smelled of perspiration, dirty clothes, baby vomit. Stanley waited, sweated, clenched his hands tightly together. The chair was uncomfortable. His buttocks ached. As time wore on, he could not bear looking at the faces of the pitiful, forlorn souls. He stared at the floor, the ceiling, the clock. Stanley squirmed in his seat. The air was stale. The room pressed in on him; his chest tightened; he could barely breathe. It was nearly three hours before an investigator called his name. Stanley did not move. At that moment, he realized if he answered, he would be finished. He'd become one of them, one of the beaten, miserable human beings who lined the walls of this dungeon. The investigator called his name again. Stanley held tightly to the seat of the chair. The investigator called "Milosovich" one more time. As he turned to say something to the clerk, Stanley dashed through the door.

He asked his younger brother for help. Moving in with Henry hurt Stanley's pride, but he was convinced anything was better than being on the dole. Johnny surrendered his bedroom to his aunt and uncle to double up with his brother in a tiny room at the end of the hallway. The space was barely large enough for two single beds and a narrow, three-drawer dresser. There was no closet, just six hooks on the wall for "hang-up" clothes. Although the boys were not happy about the situation neither said a word. Adults could moan about high prices, bad weather, corrupt politicians, poor radio reception, ground-in stains, bad report cards, anything and everything. A negative word from a son or daughter, however, was not tolerated.

"How can you be so ungrateful?"

"Don't you realize how many boys would praise the Lord just to have a roof over their heads at night?"

"Yes, and a meal on the table."

"Times are hard. We battle through every day, and then we have to suffer from your whining. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Depression kids understood. There would be no complaints from the Miller boys or from Herman. He cleaned up a corner of the basement and settled in.

The arrangement was intended to be temporary however as the years slipped by, they melded into one family. Henry and Stanley both understood they could not survive on their own. They pooled what-

ever money they earned, adjusted their lifestyles, and struggled to make do. The two women let out the boys' pants, patched shirts, darned socks, and even re-soled shoes. Everything was used up and then used over again. The women complemented each other and got along remarkably well. Mary was talkative at home but reserved with outsiders. Ethyl loved to share the local gossip with neighbors. She was an excellent shopper and an organized housekeeper. Mary was a talented cook. They were happy to be mothers and wives, loyally supporting their husbands, caring for their children. They soon became fast friends, and the women knew how to stay out of each other's way, something the two men never learned.

In '34, Stanley started to pump gas at Roswell's filling station. He was good with his hands; so Ed Roswell kept him on to make minor repairs on cars, trucks, and farm equipment. A part-timer at first, Stanley's hours gradually increased. The pay wasn't much, but the work was steady, and steady work was precious.

Mary landed a part-time job in the bakery of the local hospital. She was a childhood friend of the head chef, so he chose her from more than one hundred applicants. Mary came home day after day with flour in her ears, up her nose, and caked in her hair. "Sure it's tough," she said, "but we can't wait for someone to feed us. We gotta do it ourselves."

The tough times shattered lives everywhere. Desperate men left their families, took off on the own, and traveled about the country. Many became hobos riding the nation's rails seeking something, anything. They begged for work and fought over jobs that paid only a few dollars a week. Families moved out of eastern Pennsylvania hoping for a better chance elsewhere. Most times, they only met families from elsewhere seeking the same better chance. Eviction became an all too common experience for many that stayed behind.

Henry Miller stood at his parlor window and stared across the street as the Ranoviche family was forced from their home. He gasped as Mr. Ranoviche grabbed his rifle and fired a shot at the bank official, hitting him in the leg. A few moments later the police dragged the enraged man off to jail in front of his terrified wife and three small children. That was the last time Henry saw or heard of any of them.

Another family on the block, the Barchuks, was thrown on to the street. They had no place to go so they moved to the local 'Hooverville.' Derisively named in 'honor' of the feckless President, 'Hoovervilles' were areas of tin and cardboard homes that sprang up

across the country in the early '30s. Henry decided to visit the Barchuks to see if he could help in any way. He was slightly fearful as he entered the field crowded with ramshackled huts. The residents warily eyed the neatly dressed man as he walked. A young boy approached with an outstretched hand. Henry quickly turned away. A boisterous argument turned into a fistfight. Babies cried everywhere. A burly man slapped a young girl and pushed her to the ground. Henry's pace quickened. He was desperate to find the Barchuks without speaking to any of the bedraggled people he passed. Henry continued walking through the rows of shacks that stretched endlessly. Eventually he realized it was useless.

Henry spied an older man seated on a wooden crate smoking the stub of a cigarette. "Barchuk? No, I don't recognize the name. Let me ask my wife. She's in contact with many of the women, especially the ones with children." The man stood up, pulled aside the cloth door of his patchwork hut and called, "Martha." Henry was stunned by the way the man spoke and carried himself. His clothes were old but neatly tailored. This was no hobo; he was well educated, maybe a teacher or perhaps a lawyer. In a moment, Martha appeared. She was neat, even if her dress was soiled and ripped at the hem. How did these two people end up here, Henry asked himself as she motioned for him to follow. A short distance later, the woman stopped, pointed to a windowless shack. She left without a word. Henry stood, nearly paralyzed, a few feet from the rusted metal door. He wanted to see his friends, wanted them to know they were not alone, and wanted them to believe someone cared. What should he say? This place was much worse than he imagined. What could he possibly do to help them escape this misery? A lump formed in Henry's throat, his hands began to shake. He waited about a minute; sweat poured down his cheeks. Staring straight ahead Henry walked past the Barchuk's hovel, slowly at first, then faster and faster until he was running. Running away from what his friends had become, running away from what he feared his family might become.

The Depression slammed the rich like a hurricane wiping out fortunes in an instant. For working people, it was an endless drought that drained their strength and withered their spirit. As the difficult years ground on, hope wilted and died.

At the end of the wretched decade, help came from a most unexpected place. An ocean away, a charismatic fanatic set the German nation on a path toward world conquest. Western leaders, who first

ignored Hitler and then cajoled him, were finally forced to confront his ruthless ambitions. With great reluctance, the allied powers, including the United States, began the mobilization that pushed their economies back into high gear. In early 1940, the greatest economic depression in history was at its end, the greatest war in history was at its beginning.

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Johnny strode from the kitchen into the parlor. Uncle Stanley filled the easy chair, a heavy sweater his protection from the wind rattling through the drafty window just inches behind his head. He peered over the newspaper, pipe clenched tightly in the corner of his mouth, and nodded hello.

Tommy lay on a throw rug next to the heating grate directly in front of the Philco floor model radio.

“Hey, Johnny, don’t forget Bob Hope’s on tonight at 10.”

“Is listening to the radio all you ever want to do?” Johnny asked.

“Pretty much,” his brother replied through a wide grin.

Tommy wasn’t the only one. The radio was the family’s window to the world. It provided news, information, excitement, and humor. Everyone spent time in front of the Philco, staring at the illuminated dial, drawing images in their minds from the words broadcast. They envisioned President Roosevelt seated in an overstuffed chair, his dog Fala at his feet, a warm glow of light behind him as he confidently delivered one of his ‘Fireside Chats.’ The distinctive voice of Lowell Thomas painted vivid pictures of exotic, faraway places filled with mystery and intrigue. Bing Crosby and Kate Smith flooded the parlor with their glorious voices. Jack Benny’s legendary stinginess, Charlie McCarthy’s wisecracks, malapropisms from Gracie Allen, and Fibber McGee’s jam-packed closet temporarily buried the worries of the Depression in raucous laughter.

The radio was an essential part of the household. When there was no money for movies or magazines or family outings, there was always the radio. In ’35 when the old RCA Radiola44 signed off for the last time with a loud crack and small waft of smoke, the family did not hesitate to replace it immediately with a bigger, better set. They squeezed every penny to pay for it. The family had to have a radio.

“I need to practice tonight. If I finish in time, I’ll listen with you,” Johnny answered his brother.

“Practicing is all you ever think about,” Tommy shouted.

“Practicing’s my ticket out of dumpy, old Wilkes-Barre. Playing the clarinet is going to pay off. You’ll understand when you see my name in lights,” Johnny said as he bounded up the stairs two at a time.

Tommy was sixteen, four years younger than his brother. He was outgoing, loud, into everything. Johnny was serious, quiet. He planned his moves while Tommy reacted, bulled ahead, and did what seemed right at the moment.

Alone in his room with the door tightly closed, Johnny grabbed the tin box wedged in a small crevice behind his bed. He carefully counted its contents, added the day’s dime, and returned the small container to its hiding place.

Henry handled the family’s finances. He collected the money, paid the bills, and provided a weekly household allowance for Mary and Ethyl. Johnny contributed his entire \$18 per week from Gronski’s Market, plus \$3 he earned playing in Ernie Grover’s Band every Friday at Jablonski’s Tavern. In return, he received trolley fare for the week and a small amount of spending cash, rarely more than fifty cents.

*I’m not letting Dad know that Grover raised my pay to four bucks. I’m saving that extra dollar a week for myself. I know it’s wrong, but I just have to do it otherwise I will never get enough saved. If Dad is ever very short I could give a little extra from my fund, but heck, Herman has been working at the factory for over a year, Uncle Stanley’s on regular hours, and we’re still struggling. They can’t be putting in everything they make. They have to be keeping something for themselves.*

He hopped off the bed quickly when he heard Tommy yell, “Time to eat.” His mother tolerated no excuses for being late to dinner.

The evening meal was the family’s meeting time. Lively conversation flew across the table. Stanley mentioned a newspaper article about troop movements in Europe. Mary stopped him cold. “Dinner’s not the time for Hitler and Stalin and bombings and U-boats and God knows what else. It’s all too frightening. If you must discuss such things,” she told the men, “do it in the front room after we’ve finished eating in peace.” Ethyl nodded in agreement, so talk of the Soviet invasion of Finland waited while the family chatted about the price of eggs, grumbled over the frigid weather, wondered why the streetcar was always late, and gossiped about the neighbors.

When dinner ended, Herman headed to his basement space. At first, the adults felt sorry for him because he was sleeping ‘down there.’ “It’s a shame we don’t have a comfortable room for Herman

on the second floor,” they lamented. Eventually they realized that Herman was cool in the summer, and the nearby furnace warmed him nicely in the winter. Johnny envied his cousin’s solitude. The basement was off limits when Herman was home. “After all,” Aunt Ethyl would say, “he deserves his privacy.”

Herman was content to be alone much of the time. He enjoyed whittling while listening to the small radio he received as payment for patching a hole in a neighbor’s roof. He had no close friends and rarely went out except on Tuesday evenings when he attended the factory’s union meeting. Johnny normally used the time to practice in a small area he blocked off near the coal bin. On this particular Tuesday he was startled to see Herman propped up on his bed.

“They won’t let me in the meeting ’cause of last week,” Herman said.

“Last week?”

“Things got a little out of hand. I threw a few punches.” Herman chuckled. “You know, I usually don’t say much, but last week it got to me. This guy, Andy Summers, starts saying we gotta be careful pushing for better working conditions. Heck, the plant is hot as blazes all the time, even on a freezing day like this. The summer’s damn near unbearable. The machinery is dangerous. The other day a belt snapped and flew clear across the room. Would have killed somebody if it hit him. So what do the managers do? Sit in their fancy offices counting their money while we’re sweating to death, breathing in the stink of the plant, working with bad tools and patched-up equipment. Why should we be careful?”

Johnny didn’t know how to answer so he said nothing.

“Summers said remember that they’re in charge. I told him they aren’t in charge of me. He calls me a dumb bastard so I socked him on the chin. Boy, he went down like a ton of bricks. Union guards threw me out the door. I have to wait for the officials to let me know when I can come back to a meeting. Ain’t right. I was standing up for all of us. Nobody on my shift is mad at me. Told me I done good punching the jerk. Ain’t fair, Johnny. I tell you it ain’t fair.”

Johnny wished he could retrace his steps and be gone. He stood silent. *Damn, how did I get myself into his? What can I say?*

After a few seconds Herman said “Aw, don’t stand there looking like a dope. Come down here and play your clarinet. I’ve heard you’re really good with that band at Jablonski’s. I guess I should stop in there one night, even though I’m not much for dancing and music. Come on, play.”

Johnny felt uncomfortable in front of Herman. *This is dumb. I perform in front of people all the time.* He started with chords before moving on to new songs. Once he started swinging Johnny was at ease. Herman listened quietly as he shined his shoes.

“Not bad, for a knucklehead,” he said after his cousin finished.

“Knucklehead? You haven’t called me that in a long time.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said through a wide grin.

Herman walked into Jablonski’s the next Friday night. He stood alone in the back and stayed just long enough to down a beer. Johnny was pleased when he noticed him. Herman was the first member of the family to hear him play with Ernie Grover’s band.

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