

# RABBIT TAILS

By

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# Chapter 1

## Rabbit Gets a Name



Dad had a gun and I wanted it. It set in the corner on the back porch and I'd been given explicit instructions to never, n-e-v-e-r, touch it; but as a seven-year-old, I'd dream. Growing up in the 50's and 60's with Roy Rogers, The Lone Ranger, Gene Autry, and Bonanza, having a gun meant having a status symbol. After all, anybody who was somebody had one, didn't he? Dad's was a Marlin, lever action .22 with a tubular magazine. Nothing fancy, but it was my father's and thoughts of shooting it filled my mind.

One Christmas, I received my first firearm, a Daisy pump-action BB gun. Somewhere there's a picture of me, standing in my pajamas in front of the tree, holding that beauty. Boy, I was proud. I'd finally arrived. My informal gun training began that day. I was never to point it at anyone. The emphasis was on 'never' and Dad made this an edict. If I disobeyed, I'd lose the gun. To a youngster with an impressionable mind, his meaning came across loud and clear. Safety was paramount.

Mom had breakfast ready but I was anxious to get outside. Shoveling eggs, toast, and cereal into my mouth, I swallowed without chewing and was out the door in a flash. Filling the chamber with BBs, I placed a tin can on a concrete foundation, aimed, squeezed—and missed. Too high. The sights were adjusted and I fired again. Plink. Whoopee, I did it. Several more rounds were expended and the can soon looked like Mom's colander from the kitchen.

Now that I was an experienced marksman, I decided to become a 'game' hunter. Dad's warning still rang in my ears, so that eliminated livestock, pets, and song birds. The only thing not covered by his prohibitions, and against which a BB gun would be effective, was the sparrow. On our farm there were a gazillion of them and they were noisy, dirty, and had nests everywhere.

Sneaking cautiously through the orchard, I used a branch as a rest, and I waited. The birds soon landed in the next tree. My heart began to palpitate, my breathing deepened, my eyes squinted through the sights as I lined up on the intended target. I fired. The birds looked at me and kept up their noise as if to say, 'You missed. Ha, ha, ha.' Cocking the gun frightened the sparrows, so I waited, this time more noisily. After all, how long could an excited boy remain quiet?

The birds soon landed in the tree and I touched off another shot. I watched the bird tumble from the branch, fall through the tree and drop into the waist high grass. The mighty hunter had his first 'kill'. I wanted the carcass for a trophy and started my search.

“Time to go to Grandma’s. Put your gun away,” Mom said from the back door. It was important to prove I’d been successful, that I was a skilled marksman. So, my probing through the weeds became more intense. Mom was persistent and the mighty hunter slunk sadly back to the house, empty handed.

I was close to twelve, by my recollection, when Dad felt I was old enough to handle *his* gun. I’d been rummaging through a cupboard and came across a bullet. A .22 shell is quite small, less than an inch and smaller round than a wooden pencil. I took it to Dad and asked if I could shoot it. The answer was ‘No’ but he did take me out back and showed me how to safely handle his rifle. He shot that bullet towards a can and missed, but my training had begun.

Later that week he purchased a box of .22 shorts and for the first time I fired his gun. Safety rules were ingrained into my mind. Always empty the gun before transporting. Know your target and, most importantly, what’s beyond. Never aim at a person, livestock, or pets. Keep the ‘safety’ on except when shooting. Treat the gun as if it were loaded.

Years later these rules helped me from making a costly mistake when four of my relatives decided to go hunting on our farm. We’d been walking the stubble field after the corn was harvested and were on the back side. A pheasant flushed and all five had our guns to our shoulder. That bird was flying directly away from me and for six or seven seconds I had a perfect shot. Dad’s training kicked in and I looked beyond the bird and found my gun aimed directly at our kitchen. For a split second I hesitated, then dropped the rifle from my shoulder, and uncocked the hammer.

Dad’s training occurred only that once. He trusted me to follow the safety rules and I in no way abused that trust. By default, his rifle became mine and I never saw him use it again.

Over time I became quite proficient with that weapon, knowing and understanding its quirks and idiosyncrasies. The sparrow population was reduced by half and I was proud of my expertise at hitting the center of a target.

Sparrows no longer provided a challenge and I set my sights on something larger. Birds were easy because they would land, giving me a clean shot. But rabbits, on the other hand, ran from place to place, and then into hiding. I never was good at hitting a moving object.

Small game hunting season fell during winter and tracking rabbits is always best after a new snow. I made several trips into the fields, occasionally flushed a rabbit, maybe getting off a shot, but never did I come home as the triumphant hunter.

Correction, once I brought home a rabbit. A large Mulberry tree was out back with a split in the trunk about twelve inches from the ground. Right in the middle sat a bunny. I was nearly fifty feet from that tree and I squatted down, took aim and proudly came home carrying meat for the table.

Earlier, I told you about Dad’s safety rules. Well, Mom had some rules too. If I’d bring home a fresh kill, then it was my responsibility to ‘clean’ it. I’d never done it before but Mom was

adamant, very adamant. Dad gave me some verbal instructions and I set about to skin and gut this thing. I'll spare the gory details, but later learned how to do it in about 4 minutes.

Then came the big blizzard of '63. Snow started falling the last day before Christmas vacation and the principal let school out early. My brother and I rode the bus. We were let out at the end of our driveway and made a beeline for the house. But because the roads were so bad, the driver missed the turn as he pulled out of our drive and his wheel slipped into the ditch. It was forty-five minutes before the tow truck arrived.

It snowed all that night and most of the next day with sixty mile per hour winds whipping it into huge drifts. I kept the milk-cows in the barn and we waited it out storm. The following morning the snow had stopped and the wind let up but was still gusting strongly. We figured maybe twelve inches had fallen and the place was truly a winter wonderland.

Our cars were buried and I was 'requested' to dig them out. After three hours of backbreaking labor, and despite the cold, I'd broken into a sweat. Finished, I returned to the house to warm by the stove. What intrigued me, while I'd been shoveling, were the numerous rabbit trails through the snow. This would be an ideal time to go hunting.

Putting on dry clothes and dressing warmly, I grabbed the gun and headed out the door. The snow was so deep it came over the top of my boots, filtering down inside, making my socks damp. There were animal tracks everywhere, but I saw no game during the next two hours.

In one corner of our back yard, there were four or five well used rabbit trails and despite the evidence, I was surprised I hadn't scared up any. I followed one trail and topped a small rise, looking down into a deep hole. All tracks led to this spot.

A little digging revealed a clay tile, eight inches in diameter. *Bingo*. A light popped on in my head. I knew this pipe and it was not possible for a rabbit leave this location. Everything went in and nothing coming out.

Years ago, refrigeration was not available to rural families. The solution to keep food for long periods was to 'can' fruits and vegetable in jars. The jars were then kept in underground caves. This particular clay tile was the vent pipe to the cave in our back yard. Mom had long ago stopped using it, but it was a reminder to a bygone era.

I returned the gun to the house, grabbed a torch, some twine, and a gunnysack. Coming back to the cave, I uncovered the outside door and stepped inside, closing it behind me. It smelled dank and musty as I walked down the steps to the other door. I could hear activity on the other side and squeezed inside, also fastening this door behind me.

The space was eight by ten and seven feet high. It was made of bricks and plastered with cement. The shelves, separated with kiln dried bricks, lined the walls. Several had collapsed, having clattered to the floor. The place was dark except for the circle of light coming from the vent.

The beam from the torch stabbed through the darkness and rabbits scattered, seeking protection in the dark corners. I set about my work cornering the animals, tying their feet, and stuffing them in the sack. Six, this would be a very good hunting trip.

I carried the bag to the house, depositing it on the back porch. I'm not certain why, but curiosity got the best of me and I returned to the cave. I found a seventh rabbit under one of the shelves and he quickly joined the others. For the next hour my brother and I worked at cleaning them and getting them ready for Mom to fry. If cooked right, they'd taste almost like chicken.

Seven rabbits and I never fired a shot. At first my friends didn't believe me when I'd told them. However, I convinced them after explaining in detail. It was at this time that they gave me a nickname. And so, "Rabbit" was named.

## Chapter 2

### Rabbit and Revenge



I don't like chickens. I really don't. They're dirty, noisy, and their beaks can be harmful weapons. However, what they produce is thoroughly enjoyable. Dad decided to raise a few of these birds. He went to town and placed an order at the produce store for two hundred hatchlings and my sister, three years my senior, was given the responsibility to care for them.

Dad brought home eight cartons and these boxes, made of cardboard, were four inches high and contained about two dozen chicks. The baby birds were soft and cuddly with a yellow fluff and very gentle. I was excited at the prospect of this new project as I listened to the *cheep, cheep* emanating from the boxes. These were carried to the chicken house and I dutifully followed along.

A wall of boards, two feet high was placed in a fifteen-foot circle. Glass drinkers and pans of feed were placed inside the enclosure. A blanket was hung over the top and heat lamps blazed, providing the warmth they needed. Dad stayed up late the first few nights to ensure they'd make it through the dark hours.

The cuteness of these chickens quickly disappeared as their feathers poked through the fluff and in about four weeks, they became small imitations of the full-grown bird. Little did I know that this would be a foretaste of things to follow.

Dad purchased feed in hundred-pound bags and each sack was made from colorful material. When the bags were empty, Mom, being a frugal woman, put them to good use. I can remember her viciously shaking them, the seam delicately cut and the colorful material washed. Then these large pieces of cloth were hung, flapping in the breeze from the clothes line in the back yard.

With six different patterns, she'd wait until she had several of one design, then the Singer sewing-machine was brought out and Mom set to sewing. She could produce the most colorful skirts, dresses, and dish towels.

By the time the pullets had grown to full size, Dad had built several nesting boxes. Before long, we were collecting eggs. This task normally fell to my sister, but every so often Rabbit was called upon to do the dastardly deed. Gathering eggs is a relatively simple chore if no hen was setting on the eggs and I retrieved the elliptical orbs, placing them in the basket.

My problem came when a chicken was nesting over several eggs. Reaching under her would be infringing on the brooding instinct and my fingers became the intruders. I'd watch her eyes and if she were sleepy, I could get away with the nest robbing. On the other hand, if she were alert, I could count on a quick jab, which occasionally drew blood.

I developed a strong aversion to the chicken house and almost maniacal hatred for the hens. On occasion I'd use a stick to force the bird from the nest before retrieving the eggs. Gathering the eggs usually fell to my sister and when she wasn't around, I would attempt to hide by being busy with other chores. Sometimes this worked, but not always.

Throughout the summer, my dislike, but perhaps hatred, for the poultry grew. I didn't fear them, I just loathed them. Feeding and watering them gave me no disgust; it was the act of collecting their eggs. It was this single-chore which made me wish for their demise.

As it happened, there came a time when keeping these birds was not very profitable. Their egg production dropped off sharply and continuing to feed them was a waste of money. This was the time I'd been waiting for, the Rabbit's revenge.

Eating chicken, to this day, brings a gleam to my eye, and back on the farm we set about to turn these fowl feathered fiends into a delight for the table. Slaughtering these birds was a large production and several relatives were to assist. Grandma and two of my Aunts arrived and we began the dastardly deed.

I helped in the capture of the soon-to-be dinner-table delicacies. We wore gloves and long-sleeved shirts, snagging the hapless birds with 'chicken hooks.' Holding them upside down, I delivered them to my Mom who secured them in rows on our clothes line. Twine had been fastened to their legs and they were hung from the four strands of wire.

Mom had a unique way of slaughtering chickens. I've never heard of this method being used anywhere else. Once the birds were securely attached, she took a large butcher knife and walked down the line of chickens, grasping their necks and severing the head in one quick motion.

Two emotions vied for my attention that day. I was happy at the execution of these fowl fiends, but curious at the drama unfolding before my eyes. The expression of *'flopping around like a chicken with its head cut off'* was real. These headless birds flapped wildly and fluttered aggressively on the wire to which they were attached. Mom continued along the row, attempting, without much success, to stay away from the blood being splattered everywhere. It took maybe five minutes for the activity to cease and the green grass was glistening red beneath our clothes-lines.

The crew of ladies collected the lifeless bodies and proceeded with the de-feathering. This was accomplished by immersing the birds into a scalding pot of water for a couple minutes and then pulling out the feathers. Wet feathers have an odor, peculiarly its own and is fairly unpleasant.

Stripped of the outer covering the birds were scurried inside and placed on a table awaiting the final step in the butchering process. I took a seat on the counter beside the sink and watched as

Mom worked on one of the birds. She had a method in the way they were cut and even to this day, I will follow the same pattern when working on a holiday Turkey.

Removing the legs, wings, neck, etc. was straight forward. What I found fascinating was the innards and how they were processed. The entrails were deposited into a pan and after several birds had been cut up, Mom worked with the giblets. The heart, liver and gizzard were the items she kept; the rest were discarded as slop for the hogs.

The gizzard had to be dealt with differently. This was sliced very carefully to reveal the crop inside and then the meat peeled away. If the knife was too aggressive and the crop was sliced, a smelly mess ensued; anything it touched would be discarded. Mom was careful, only once did I see her make a slip.

The next day was Sunday and '*Southern Fried Chicken*' was the main course. (This was before the Colonel made KFC famous). The meal was a feast and we could eat all the chicken we wanted. I felt that Rabbit had at last obtained his revenge for all the knuckle pecking. However, things were not over.

The following spring, my Uncle scheduled the cleaning of the chicken house and the manure-spreader was parked at the door to the building. The two of us set about to remove the bird droppings which had accumulated to a depth of two feet.

Chicken waste has an odor all of its own, completely unlike anything else produced. This manure contains the highest amount of ammonia; more than any other solid waste on the farm. My eyes would water, my nose burn, and if I opened my mouth, my throat became sore. My Uncle and I took frequent breaks and the main part of the floor was cleaned before we tackled the area under the roosts.

The first load had been spread across the fields and we'd started on a second. The boards from the roosts were removed and the wire mesh pulled away. I was anxious to get this job completed and stuck the pitchfork into the putrid mess. Not listening, I lifted a section up, and immediately wished I hadn't.

I'd uncovered a large nest of bumblebees. They disliked being disturbed, and I became the object of their displeasure. I suddenly lost all interest in this job and bolted for the door. The half-full manure spreader was barring my exit, but right then, I wasn't about to let that stop me.

My foot was on the edge of the spreader, it slipped and I landed in the gooey mess. Time was wasting; I rolled, reached for the other side and vaulted over it. In a flash I sprinted across the back yard, around the house and into the front. My arms were flailing to ward off the attackers. Dropping to the ground, I rolled in the grass several times.

Quiet ensued and I stopped. The aggressors had disengaged the fight and I was left, gasping for breath. Recovering, I sheepishly returned to the hen house. My Uncle decided it would be best to let the bees settle down before we continued. I wholeheartedly agreed.

While we waited, I could only think how those chickens were getting their revenge. It was almost like they had planned and prepared this surprise for me. They'd had their shots at pecking me when I collected their eggs, now they were adding insult to injury. I hate chickens; unless they're well cooked.

## Chapter 3

### Rabbit and the Skunk



Growing up in the middle of the ‘corn belt’ created an appreciation for the hard work which goes into making a farm successful. Dad had a small herd of Holsteins and I was always begging, at the age of four, to help with the evening milking. If he was in a happy mood, or I’d been especially good, I could count on him carrying me to the barn on his shoulders. The sparseness of his head never ceased to fascinate me and I’d play with the few strands which he faithfully brushed across his bald pate.

In the barn, he’d set me on a wooden beam, high above the parlor, beside the radio. The side door would be opened and a parade of bovine would pass beneath. Each one had a name; Bess, Whitey, Tootsie, Tina, or Babe. Those were the ones I remember. The radio was always on, usually with farm news. I once asked for a change of stations. What did I want? “Songs without words,” I replied. Try as he could, he didn’t find one that day and his second son was sorely disappointed.

Field work presented a different dimension to the farm, and ‘risk’ was present when working around implements trailing behind the tractor. Dad, ever the careful one, had resisted my persistent requests to accompany him when plowing the fields. A five-year-old can be very precocious. When I wasn’t begging him, I’d try a different tactic and Mom would have to fight off my constant appeals.

My steady pleas must have been successful because my wish came true. A small board was attached to the ‘axle housing’ between the seat and wheel of the Ford tractor. With a brace across the back side and Dad’s knee at the front, I was firmly wedged against the fender. During the ride to the ‘back forty’ I couldn’t have been happier. I was with my father and he was doing what he loved most.

That day I learned about the fascination men have for turning the soil. There’s an attraction to be able to see your work unfold behind you and to accomplish something important. Years later, someone asked if it were lonely riding a tractor in the field. In one way ‘yes’, there’s no one to talk to. But in a different way ‘no’, you’re communing with nature; working the ground becomes a conversation with God.

Economics caught him off guard, and my father wasn’t able to support a wife and four kids from the land. So, as the faithful provider, he found a sales position selling encyclopedias. The land

was rented to my uncle, Dad ceased to be a farmer and my relationship with him was altered. Oh, we loved each other and many good times lay ahead, but something was forever changed.

Dad traveled extensively and often was gone in the evenings. I'd be in bed when he returned home and next morning, he hadn't risen by the time I was in my first class. Sadly, I didn't see him much; even weekends were limited because of the 'honey do' jobs. Three or four cows were kept and as I grew, the responsibility for milking fell to me.

The herd was 'non-existent' and four stanchions were reserved for the remaining cows. The other stalls, over time, collected various farm items which, too, were no longer used.

Four ears of corn, dutifully chopped into nubbins with a corn knife, were deposited in each feed box. A bale of hay, the twine popped, was divided equally in the mangers. The animals, held with a neck chain, munched on the feed while I set about to extract the white liquid.

Fondly I look back on those years and yearn to put my hands under a cow again and wrap my fingers around their teats. Giving a gentle pull and squeezing rhythmically from top to bottom, I'd like to fill a bucket with warm milk and have a foaming froth on top.

As I recall, it was a Sunday afternoon, too early to do chores, so I looked for ways to entertain myself. The rest of the family was inside. A ten-year-old farm boy never lacks for imagination and I was examining a board pile at the side of our machine shed.

Movement caught my eye and I figured it was one of our cats. They usually kept the mice in check and I was wondering what this one was hunting. A couple of boards were tossed aside and I soon learned this animal wasn't what I expected. Instead, it was a 'two-tone' kitty with 'fluid-drive'.

I knew the business end of a skunk and this one was poking its head from under the pile, facing me. To this day, it amazes me that I didn't smell the pungent aroma so common to these animals. At that time, I clearly remember wanting to make certain I didn't get behind it. Sadly, to say, I lost sight of it as it ducked under a large board and I never saw it again.

Hanging around for another few minutes and not learning anything new, I went off in search of other adventures. My brother, who's less than a year younger, met me as I headed towards the barn. He caught wind of the bitter smell and I told of the 'find' by the board pile. He was curious and we walked in that direction throwing more planks off the pile. Nothing was found.

He helped me with the chores and afterwards we traipsed back to the house. Mom was in the kitchen, preparing supper and we were heading towards the stairs to go to our room when she called us back. Three quick questions followed by three long answers and we shed our clothes, depositing them on the back porch.

My brother didn't reek as much as I, so he got the bathtub first. While I waited my turn, Dad took our clothes outside and burned them. Our other siblings learned of the predicament and teased me until Mom made them stop. With no way to retaliate, I stuck out my tongue.

My time came to experience the feeling of lye soap. Simply put, it isn't pleasant. Mom ignored my pleas for privacy and set about to ensure that her third child did not cause a stink inside of her house. My skin was bright pink and quite tender when she finished and I ran upstairs to put on some clean clothes.

Dad wasn't finished, and my brother and I were on the receiving end of a close haircut. It may not have been as close as the military 'buzz' but I thought it was because my wavy cowlick was soon on the floor. With this over, the family settled down for a quiet evening.

My pride had been hurt because I'd certainly tried to be careful. Also, my older brother and sister would not let me forget this episode. I truly feared they'd spread the word at school and I'd never be able to live down the embarrassment. I needn't have worried.

The next morning started out well and only the occasional comment from family members. Despite the chilly temperature, mom opened the windows to 'properly air' the house. I didn't smell anything so it must have been working.

The ride on the school bus was uneventful, but that all changed when I sat at my 5<sup>th</sup> grade desk. Various conversations were heard and the word 'skunk' was oft repeated. I slouched lower in my seat and hoped to avoid notice. One of the boys talked to the teacher and she directed him to 'search out' the source. He proudly marched up and down each aisle, sniffing the air and stopped at my desk. Busted. "Hey, it's Rabbit."

My shoes were identified as the culprit, and I became a scapegoat. Hoots and howl of laughter were generated and right then I wished there was a way for me to truly disappear. But I don't think I could have found a hole deep enough.

Directed to the principal's office, Mom was called. During the time it took for her to drive to town, I was sitting quietly in a side room, 'alone' and suffering through the ignominy.

We drove to the big city and I was fitted with new shoes. Returning, I secretly hoped she would take me home, instead I had to suffer the unwanted shame from my classmates a second time.

Time has dulled the disgrace I endured. Today is the first time I've been able to openly share this without cringing inwardly. Rabbit learned a lesson that day, 'Stay away from skunks.'

## Chapter 4

### Rabbit and the Tornado



I'm called 'Rabbit'. I'd picked up that handle when I caught seven of the furry animals without firing a shot. But that's for a different story.

Our weather in the Iowa corn belt can be erratic. The winters are cold, snowy and blustery, while the summers are hot, sticky and humid. Spring and fall can be enjoyable, but they pass quickly, moving into the extremes of the season which follows.

1960 was a peculiar year. April was the wettest on record, yet it was the dustiest. We'd received repeated heavy rainfalls, followed by strong gusting winds approaching 50 mph. The topsoil dried quickly and then blew into billowing clouds which were deposited in the drainage ditches along the road. This was the 'black gold' of Iowa cropland being tossed around in the breeze. In the end it was washed away, down the streams.

Dad's farm was on the lea side of a hill which topped out to our west at a thousand feet. Eastward we could look out over the dell and see beyond the closest town, five miles away. Our area isn't flat, but neither is it hilly. I loved this part of the country. Not only was it home, but the passion for agricultural life remained embedded in my soul.

I have memories of walking the fields and working with the cattle. While in the pasture and on days with no wind, I could hear the noon whistle from the firehouses in six surrounding towns. They were never timed perfectly and would sound in succession.

On our farmstead, Dad planted a shelter break of evergreens along the north-northwest corner. This formed a wedge with the mulberry trees to the west-northwest. His management practices were quite effective and along with contour farming, terraces, and waterways, he'd received a 'Second Place' trophy in a conservation competition.

### May 5th 1960

It was a Thursday and the wind was blowing quite briskly. The clouds billowed darkly a couple hundred feet above the ground, rolling and tossing across the ragged sky. The rain had stopped and the forecast called for brighter skies on the morrow with anticipated strong winds. After starting chores, I happily waved to Mom as she drove into the yard.

In the barn, the haymow was nearly empty, with a few dozen bales stacked in a corner. The entire north wall to the barn would heave in and out as the wind whipped savagely against it. For a while I considered keeping the milk cows inside for the night, but decided against it.

Finishing the milking, I turned them out into the barnyard and watched them disappear into the pasture. Calling to the barn cats, I poured a pan of milk, and they lapped hungrily. Whistling to our dog Brownie, I squatted and playfully petted her, scratching behind her ears. She trotted faithfully beside me as I headed towards the house, kicking stones along the way.

Mom had supper on the table, which was the family evening-time for discussing daily events. She told us that one of the ladies from the church would pick her up for special music practice. We kids would go to choir practice, my older brother would drive our car.

At church, choir proceeded as usual, with me singing off key. Behind me, the wind rattled the glass in the frames. Clack...clack, clack...clack. Afterward, one of the men took a scarf and held it to an open window. The draft was strong and it blew the cloth inwards from the opening, keeping it aloft. The sun had long since gone down and darkness settled around the countryside. I shivered.

The four of us piled back into the car for the return trip and my brother drove cautiously as the car rocked from side to side, buffeted by the powerful gusts. Nearing the farm, my sister commented that someone's truck had dumped boards onto the roadway. We turned at the corner and headed up the road, the planks increasing in number. From the rear I placed my arms on the front seat; my chin propped on my hands and watched the scattered debris. *'This must have been some load,'* I thought.

Steering into our drive, I spied no lights from the direction of the house. Strange. There was a double 'two-by-six' stuck straight into the ground. My brother later told me he wondered why Dad would have done something like that. The car continued to inch forward, we'd crossed some downed wires and someone yelled that the barn was gone. That scared me. I was worried about the cows. Where were they? Were they alright?

The car was soon parked; we could see the house in the headlights. Later inspections showed only minor damage to the roof, a few shingles were missing. Inside, I grabbed a flashlight and a heavier coat to ward off the blustery wind before heading outdoors. My brother found three lanterns, lit them, and placed them around the driveway, giving warning to others. Brownie had wandered into a puddle, and we heard a shrill yelp; the power was still on and the downed wires had given her a stiff shock.

My light stabbed through the darkness as I anxiously looked about. The temporary corncrib was completely gone, scattered across the drive, the barnyard, and the road. An empty brooder house was missing, and we never discovered where it went.

Those didn't concern me much, it was the barn and the animals which I thought about. The building had collapsed in a heap; the roof was gone and the timbers scattered. In the pasture, I

anxiously searched for the milk cows. All were found except one. Thankfully they were alive, though extremely skittish. They had numerous wounds but none were serious.

My sister's mare was galloping around the pasture. I was unable to get close despite repeated efforts. From my observations she appeared in satisfactory condition, a few flesh wounds, nothing more. Only one animal was unaccounted for. The barn roof was discovered. It had been lifted off the structure and deposited intact a couple hundred feet from the foundation. I stayed away from it, not believing it to be stable.

My folks arrived while I was searching, and Dad took charge. It was past eleven when Mom called us kids to the house, we had school the next day. "Aw Mom. Do we have to?" Grudgingly, I dressed for bed within the glow of candles and slept fitfully because of concern for the missing cow.

I awoke early and after breakfast walked around outdoors to view the destruction. A few snapshots were clicked with the camera, catching images of the total devastation. Much of the timber had scattered across the field, down the road, and onto the neighbor's property.

Searching for my lost Holstein, I walked the pasture fence; it was intact. There was no indication where she had disappeared and I was completely puzzled. Dad also looked and discovered nothing. No additional clues were available in the daylight, it was a complete mystery.

School seemed to drag that Friday. In the afternoon, I exited the school bus, amazed at the completely different scene. A group of neighbors had assisted us in our calamity. They'd appeared with hammers, saws, and crowbars to disassemble the damage caused by the tornado.

All the wood was stacked in neat piles, nails were pulled and every joint disassembled. The timber fragments, which had been scattered, were heaped in a pile for a *'soon to be'* bon fire. All the cows were accounted for and when I asked Dad about the lost cow, he chuckled. "She's the lucky one. When the roof was lifted from the barn, it was deposited on top of her. She was protected from the flying debris, only received a couple scratches." I let out a sigh of relief. That made me happier.

The weekend was busy with a variety of activities. I helped Grandpa construct the new milking stalls inside a nearby building. It was fun working with him.

Mom took time to visit a neighbor, a Japanese woman with two daughters, living catty-cornered from us. She told of their storm door being ripped away and the wind sounding like a locomotive within a tunnel. They had hurried to the basement and she could recall a puddle of water on the cement stairs, being drawn uphill towards the back door.

Thankfully no one was injured; damage was confined mostly to our property. I figured it was a small twister and in my mind's eye I could visualize the shelter-break diverting it from our house. The corncrib took the brunt of it; it then bounced, sending the brooder house into oblivion. Increasing in power, the tornado struck the barn with full force, doing the greatest

damage. From there it lifted, passing over our pasture, skimming the trees of our neighbor before drawing back into the clouds.

We picked up the pieces and continued our lives, but this was a time which Rabbit and the family were treated to the power of a tornado. This wasn't the only time I came close to a twister, but it held the greatest impact.

## Chapter 5

### Rabbit goes Swimming



“We’re going swimming tonight,” said Mom.

My head pivoted like a swinging tennis racquet. This was a surprise treat from Dad. I shoveled the rest of the food into my mouth, cleaned my plate like Mom had taught me, and bounded up the stairs to fetch a swimsuit and a towel. Mentally I imagined the coolness of the water as I visualized my fingers stroking through the clear liquid, doing laps.

“Hey Rabbit,” Mom called, using my nickname, “Dishes first. You’re drying.”

Muttering inwardly, and carrying my towel with the suit rolled inside, I skulked down to the kitchen, dragging my feet. I loved ‘cold’ water, but not this hot soapy sudsy concoction in the sink where Mom stood.

“Put your towel on the table and grab the dishcloth.”

“Aw, Mom. Can’t I just wait in the car?”

“The sooner we get them done, the sooner we can leave. Come on.”

Reluctantly I obeyed but I didn’t want to; rebellion coursed through my nine-year-old thoughts. But that was always the case, my heart was never in it, I wanted to be at the pool or outside, anywhere but here. *‘Darn women’s work.’*

From the kitchen window I could still see the heat waves dancing, rising off the black Iowa topsoil and the wind rustling through the cornfields. The day had been oppressively hot and my shirt clung to my skin. Feeling like the wet dishrag in Mom’s hand, I silently worked on drying the glasses, the silverware, and the plates but my thinking dwelt on leaving for town, a treat in its own right. Going swimming was the epitome of rewards.

The last dish was tossed on the shelf, “Can I go now, Mom?”

“Alright; the rest of us will be along shortly.”

The towel thrown on the hook – mercifully hanging by a corner – I snatched my swimsuit and sped out the door.

“Dibs on the window. Dibs on the window.” I hollered to my younger brother, already seated in the car at the spot I was claiming.

“I got here first. No fair.” He retorted back with his teeth clenched.

The door was opened and I gave him a shove, pushing him aside. “You sit up front. I git this spot,” I ordered.

He clambered over the bench seat, giving me a dirty look as he went. Fearing he’d threaten to tell on me I acted like I didn’t care and ignored him. *‘Age has its advantages. Hee, hee.’*

I was bouncing up and down on the seat in anticipation when my older brother and sister came out the door, followed by our parents.

“Scoot over, Rabbit. Let your sister by the window.” Dad stated.

Grumbling, I did as ordered and scrunched over, my brother giving me a cheesy grin from the front. My tongue exited from my lips and pointed in his direction wiggling excessively. *‘Yeah age does have its advantages, my sister’s.’*

“Rabbit, stick that tongue back in and tell your brother you’re sorry.” Mom ordered.

*‘Drat.’* “I’m soooooorryy.” *‘I’ll get you later, brother.’*

It took about fifteen minutes to drive to town and park at the pool. During that time, I fumed and plotted my revenge. *‘Even Steven.’* I was thinking.

Our parents planned a quiet evening in the park watching their four kids from outside the pool fence. After pulling to a stop Dad handed us twenty-five cents and I sped for the door, beating everyone else. Plopping the coin on the counter I waited impatiently for an eternity -- five whole seconds -- to be handed a basket and then sped into the men’s changing room.

Remove shoes (smell like manure, pee-yew) -- wristwatch and glasses go inside my shoes -- stinky soggy socks (yuk) -- shirt --pants -- shorts -- naked -- swimsuit -- basket to window -- wait for ID pin while hopping up and down on the wet floor -- run like the wind and cannon ball into the pool. Wheeee.

“Hey, Rabbit. Over here.”

“Hi, Billy. Who else is here tonight?”

“Dani’s on the high board, Kenny is there, Ronnie...is...over by those girls.”

“What do you wanna do?” I asked, looking across the chlorinated blue water and viewing what activities were going on.

He was silent for a moment and shivered involuntarily as the breeze picked up. His skinny frame was about the same as mine though I had three inches over him. “I dunno. What do you want to do?”

“Bet I can do a better ‘slice’ than you,” I said as a dare.

“No you can’t.”

“Yes, I can and I’ll prove it. You first.”

We climbed out of the water and our bare feet padded on the wet concrete around to the high dive, climbing up the ladder. I watched him walk to the end of the board, bounce high and drop into the water. *‘Kerrrrthhummmmp.’* His form wasn’t right and the water spout reached the height of the diving board.

I waited till he surfaced and had swum to the side. “How’d I do? How high was it?” He hollered up to me.

“Bout ten feet, as high as this board. I can do better, you watch.”

One of the lifeguards was watching me from her chair. She probably knew what was going on and though it was not allowed, they sometimes turned a blind eye.

Walking to the end of the board, I clamped my toes over the edge. My eyes were closed picturing my body’s position and started my measured and increasing bounce. One – two – three – jump. I leapt high in the air, gaining seven more feet.

Mentally I checked off the steps of the jump. *‘Tightly tuck right knee to my chest gripping it with my arms, left foot extended, toe pointing, and leaning backwards slightly.’* It seemed good, it felt correct. Reaching the peak of my ascent I glanced around. Everyone was watching. *‘It’s the Rabbit show, folks and I’m the center attraction.’*

Down, down, down. I held my form. *‘KERRRRRTTHHWWAAAAAAAAPP.’* I heard the tune and it sounded right. Bubbles and water closed over me and pressure increased on my ear drums as I neared the bottom before bursting back towards the top. Breaking to the surface I glanced up, water was still descending. *‘Holy mackerel!!!’*

I struck out towards the side satisfied with my performance and heard hoots and howls from those who witnessed the feat. *‘Twwweeeeeeeeeeet’.* The lifeguard whistled to me and I swam in her direction. *‘This can’t be good.’*

“Do that again and I’ll have to ask you to leave,” she said. “You know it’s against the rules. Understand?” a frown on her face.

“Yes, ma’am.” I feigned humility but was really busting with pride.

Then she broke into a grin. “That was sweet kid, just don’t do it again.”

I clambered up the side and stood on the concrete walk, Billy was at my side. “How’d I do, man? How high was it?” I asked excitedly.

“See those lights? Just below.” Excitement in his voice.

“Wow, that over twenty-five feet. It’s gotta be a record.”

Some other kids crowed around and we talked about the dive, most agreeing they’d never seen it so high.

Billy and I walked around the pool and I spotted my brother, standing alone with his back to the side, watching some other kids play. *‘It’s payback time with revenge, sweet revenge.’* “Come on, let’s cannon ball him.” I said pointing in his direction.

Together we ran, timing our jumps to splash him from two directions and seconds apart. Thwmmp. ... Thwmmp.

“Hey, cut it out.” He hollered.

I stuck my out my tongue and wiggled it. “Naa ... nya..naa naa ... nya...I got even,” I said in a sing song voice before swimming away.

For the rest of the evening my friends and I competed on who could hold their breath underwater the longest, played tag, did goofy stuff off the water slide, and just hung out. This was the greatest evening ever.

The clock hands were spinning towards nine when I heard my name. My sister signaled to me from the side. “Dad said for us to get out. Time to go home.”

“Not now,” I moaned. “We just got here.”

“That’s what Dad said.” Pointing towards the fence where our parents stood looking in. Dad motioned for me to get out then he and Mom turned and walked away from the pool.

My sis walked to the bath house and I saw my brothers disappearing through the door. There was time for another jump from the high dive and I moved in that direction. I took my time and did two dives before strolling to the changing room. *‘No one is going to tell me what to do.’*

Handing in my ID pin at the counter, I was given my basket and moved to a bench. I went through the motions of getting dressed; my older brother stuck his head in the door. “Dad’s moved the car. It’s over there.” He said pointing. “Third row back.”

*'Yeah, yeah.'* "Okay, I'll be there in a few minutes."

Finishing up I handed my basket to the guy behind the counter. There was a nickel in my pocket and I figured to get a Tootsie Roll, one of the best sweets known to mankind, soft, chewy, and I loved the feel as it squished between my teeth.

The line was long and I had to wait, the staff was busy with other kids wanting candy, handing out and collecting baskets and other stuff at closing time. Patience was not a virtue for me, it was an irritation, a big one. Maybe ten minutes before I handed my nickel to the lady and she passed over the most delectable candy on Earth.

Walking outside I unwrapped the juicy morsel biting off a piece feeling it mush around my teeth and began my search for our car, moving in the direction my brother had indicated. *'Nope not here.'* I proceeded on around but didn't spy the family flivver near the pool.

A second circumnavigation with a closer inspection didn't locate our vehicle. *'Where did they park? Did they move it again?'*

My candy was gone, a lump in my throat, and I made a third circle around the pool examining each and every car; the results were the same. *'Surely they wouldn't leave me? Would they?'*

On the fourth time I fought back tears as a knot rolled in my stomach, the sweet candy long forgotten and a bitter taste in my mouth. *'Where are they?'* My teeth were clenched to prevent my jaw from quivering. *'They must be close by!'*

*'Think Rabbit, think.'* Slowly scrutinizing each car and watching searching for anyone from the family, I made a fifth revolution around the pool grounds. Nothing.

*'Why would they leave me?'* My mind wandered over the events of the evening and though I hadn't been the most sociable person there was nothing that could cause the family to drive off and disappear. Was there? *'I can't let anyone know I'm afraid.'* I put on a happy face and stopped on the platform outside the pool building.

*'Grandma and Grandpa, they can help me.'* They lived up in town twelve blocks away. Looking around and finding no one paying attention, I trekked uphill to their house and didn't fight back the tears flowing down my cheeks. One moment I was angry and wanted to get even, the next I was crying because no one loved me, then partial sanity would return and my next set of actions were planned.

The streets were dark in places and my feet scraped along the dirt, then on to the sidewalks. Traffic was very light for which I was glad, I didn't want to meet anyone and have to explain the streaks down my face. They were wiped away but more appeared; these actions were repeated – numerously.

Grandpa and Grandma would help me, they wouldn't leave me, they loved me too much. Drawing up to their house a bolt of fear flashed through me, their car was gone, their windows dark, the door locked. *'Where can I go? What can I do? My other Grandma, she's always home.'*

Five more blocks, another pint of tears and I banged on her door. Some relief coursed through me as a light flicked on from her window and in a few moments, she opened the door.

"Grandma I can't find my family. We were down by the pool and when I came out they were gone and..."

My words tumbled fast and incoherently from my lips but somehow, she understood my predicament and the heartache I was feeling. She had to know. My tears and anger and frustration didn't matter, she was my Grandma. Her questions elicited more information from my frightened thoughts.

A few phone calls, minutes which seemed like hours and my parents appeared at her door. Observing my aggravation, hurt, fear and embarrassment Dad didn't say anything but placed his arms around me and drew me close.

"I couldn't find you Dad." I bawled. "I tried but you weren't there. Where were you?"

"We waited on the backside of the parking lot and when you didn't show, we came looking."

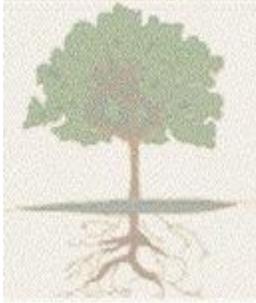
"I couldn't find the car. I looked and looked and looked," tears welling up again.

"It's alright. By the time everyone had left the pool, Mom figured you had walked to Grandma's and we drove straight here."

My emotions were boiling over and I wanted to cry from relief but didn't intend my brothers to see so I held back my pride, put on a stone face and we walked to the car. Dad wouldn't let the others say anything and we rode home in a thick silence, pregnant with unspoken comments. We were going home and that was the important thing.

## Chapter 6

### Rabbit Finds an Answer



The road of my faith has been long, though not arduous, sometimes tempestuous, but not difficult. It has been divided into two parts, the before, and then what follows; what I offer now is the first part of that journey. I'm called Rabbit and this is one of my tails.

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"Mom, do I have to go to church?" My stomach was tense for even considering the unthinkable. Attending services was a staple in our household; though not commanded, it was none-the-less a requirement. Mom would be the easier parent to ask and for me to even broach the subject took a lot of gumption, but right now I wished I hadn't.

"What's the matter? Are you feeling sick, Rabbit?" Concern was in her voice as she turned to face me.

"No, I'm fine. I simply don't want to go. That's all." The gurgling I heard was from the belly and my feet were ready to run, my head hung, not able to look her in the eye.

"Why don't you want to go?" This was an honest question which I didn't want to answer.

"Oh, never mind." I spun and quickly exited the kitchen, returning to the room I shared with my brother. He wasn't around, so I lay across the bed, staring out the window.

Church didn't 'do' anything for me, the Bible didn't 'mean' anything; so, what was the purpose? All my friends went but they also were expected to be in attendance. With the exception of the social contacts in the Youth Group, I really didn't want to go. But the recent interaction with Mom had quelled any thoughts of outright rebellion.

I would maintain the façade of an obedient son and dutifully attend the two Sunday services and the midweek choir practice, despite my strong lack of desire. Smiling at the Pastor's sermons, carrying my Bible, and participating in the various activities would be my plan of action, *for now*. But I knew something would have to give, eventually.

Billy Graham came to the Ak-Sar-Ben in Omaha, 1964 and our church made arrangements to go to the crusade, several cars would caravan. It would be a fun outing, especially being a school

night. He wasn't as famous then, as he is today; still everyone in our area wanted to hear for themselves what this man had to say. But I didn't.

It was a nice evening; I wore a light jacket and sat through the first part of the service. The songs were beautiful and the guests were entertaining, some were humorous. I was uneasy.

Then 'The Man' took the podium and my discomfort increased. I do not remember the illustration, but the main points were clear in my mind. Mankind has a sinful nature, I was a sinner and could not get to heaven on my own. Only by Jesus Christ and His sacrifice could anyone receive salvation.

Music started, the choir sang 'Just As I Am,' and the invitation given. If someone had personally asked me to go forward, I probably would have; instead I sat resolute, fighting the internal pull to walk down the aisle. The tug-o-war inside waged a mighty battle, but I won.

Traveling home, someone said others in our church had gone forward but I hadn't. In my mind I'd said 'no' to Rev. Graham and 'no' to God. Would I be forever damned? I didn't know and only wanted the uncomfortable feeling in my stomach to go away. Over the course of several weeks feeling disappeared. My mind forgot the message as I forcefully pushed it from my thoughts.

Graduation came, and that fall I left home to study agriculture at the state university. For the first time, the pressure to attend church was lifted and I took advantage of it. Sundays were reserved for sleep, chess, and card playing. I don't recall ever attending services that first year, except when visiting home. Freedom, at last and I could do what I wanted. God was certainly not in my plans.

At the beginning of my sophomore year, I switched to a church college in Kansas; it was cheaper. Despite the reduced expense, my pocket money was scarce and I was forced to find employment. After a couple of jobs to load turkeys on a truck, I was hired to help at a family dairy farm.

It took me exactly one week to learn that this family was serious in their Christian faith. I didn't cuss, drink, smoke or screw, which was good in their eyes. But neither did I go to church, read the Bible, or pray and for the next two years they sought to get me to attend their church. I politely declined, and tried to leave it at that.

Some of the farming tasks would not be completed till after dark, which made it late to return to the school cafeteria, so I was invited to eat with the family. Over the course of time we developed a very close relationship and it seemed as if they'd adopted me. I spent increasingly more time at the farm working, and then talking after supper.

At school I met a girl and we started dating heavily. After a couple of years, to me it looked as if we'd eventually become a Mr. and Mrs. She didn't agree and decided to break things off. This hit me hard, very hard; depression hard.

Even though I was doing 'okay' with my studies, they were still tough. After a couple failed tests, a warning from a professor, and a project which appeared near to collapse, I was on the verge of a breakdown.

Guys in a dormitory can sometimes be mean and nasty. Whether it was my attitude which precipitated it, I'm not certain, but they were pestering and irritating me with great success. Gags, snide comments, and practical jokes took their toll. I was close to the edge and knew it.

Anger was never far from the surface of my normal quiet demeanor. I'd become a raging and boiling pot ready to erupt. Periodic clashes with others revealed a picture of my attitude which could be interpreted everyone. Someone recommended I get counseling or at least talk.

I refused the suggestion because I could handle things, and could take care of myself. Inwardly this wasn't true, but I feared the stigma of not being in control. The male ego was in full swing.

The last week of January, it was a Sunday. The volcano within me was close to exploding. The hand at my side wanted to re-arrange my roommate's teeth. The foot in my shoe wanted to put a hole through the door. The desire to trash our room was highly imminent. I'd reached the breaking point.

My thoughts were fighting my emotions and it seemed like my feelings were winning. I knew help was needed, but who could I turn to? Professional establishments were closed, not having been to a church recently, I knew of no pastor, and I felt my dorm buddies were part of the problem.

The 'family' flashed into my mind and I made the call. At the farm, by the time I'd arrived, nearly everyone was occupied with activities but the wife agreed to listen.

"What's the problem, Rabbit?"

I unloaded my heart and didn't stop talking for over an hour. She listened, asking an occasional question, but otherwise remaining silent while frustration, bitterness, and anger spewed from my lips. I dumped my sordid and vile problems on her and she accepted them without hesitation.

Winding down, I paused to take a breath and she asked, "What did you expect from me?"

"I dunno. I needed to get these emotions off my chest."

"What about tomorrow? They will still be there."

I didn't reply, but had to agree. Nothing would be changed; my problems had been vented, but not solved. They would build up again, creating another pressure situation.

"Rabbit, are you a Christian?"

Now I was confused. I'd thought of myself as one, having been raised to go to church and had been taught the Bible. I was not involved with a lot of the bad stuff which people did. I was a good person.

I said, "I was raised in a church."

"Living in a garage doesn't make you a car, so going to church doesn't make you a Christian. I ask again, are you a Christian?"

She wasn't letting up. By now my comfort level had measurably fallen and was unhappy with the way this conversation was headed. To get her off my back, I answered, "No, I'm not."

"If you could wave a magic wand, what would you wish would happen?"

"All my problems would go away."

"Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you."

I knew this was from the Bible, though I didn't know where to find it. But something had happened because my uneasiness had jumped higher by a couple of notches.

"Rabbit, you have to first come to God. Then let Him take care of your troubles. I can't, but He can." She paused for a moment before saying, "Hold on a moment. I'll be right back."

With that she was gone and I was left with my thoughts which were confused, jumbled and not pretty. When she returned, she carried a Bible, and searched for a verse.

As the scriptures were opened, I had a torrent of vile, wicked, evil thoughts coursing through my mind. I was mentally swearing, cussing, cursing, and wishing the most heinous actions upon her and that book. Never before had such a flood of fiendish thoughts come to my mind, nor do I recall it happening since. That 'book' was the focus of everything and I wanted to be away from it.

I fought the urges which welled up inside me, but continued to sit calmly; my mind was in strong agitation.

She read a number of passages, though I can't recall them all. The thrust, *all men are sinners*, including me.

I could completely agree with that.

*God required punishment for those sins* and I could either, receive judgment or accept Christ's sacrifice.

I'd prefer to acknowledge his payment.

*“I stand at the door knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens it, I will enter and eat with him.”*

This last verse was given as an invitation. Would I ask Christ to forgive me and ask Him to enter my life?

At this point the uneasiness and discomfort spilled over from my eyes and I sat there crying, bawling like I've seldom ever done.

She waited through this, never criticizing or condemning; she was patient. When I was done, she asked. “Will you accept Christ?”

All resistance was gone, my pride no longer held sway and I said ‘yes’. For the first time in my life I talked to God like He was in the room, and I believe He was. A sense of contentment settled over me; though my problems remained. Somehow, I knew He would help me. Time proved that to be correct. My troubles didn't melt, but the answers were found in amazing ways.

Everything was the same, yet everything felt different. I found myself talking to God throughout the day. It seemed so natural, so I did it.

I received Christ's gift on a Sunday, Tuesday I met folks who introduced me to mission work and on Friday I had my first date with the woman who is now my wife. God has worked in amazing ways.

## Chapter 7

Rabbit, Smokey, and Cat



*“Dad, tell me a story; one of your Rabbit Tails. Please?”*

*I was visiting my daughter and she'd put the grandkids to bed, so the evening was intended to be a relaxing 'family time'. Ever since I'd begun writing about events of my younger years, she'd shown a strong interest in them, learning more about her father and his years on the farm.*

*“Which one do you want to hear, Princess? Anything special?”*

*“I don't know. How about a new one, one I haven't heard?”*

*I sighed, thought a while, then began.*

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*“Dear, did you feed Smokey Dog this morning?”*

*I stuck my head out the bathroom door, shaving crème still lathered on my left cheek. “Yes, I did, Hon, like I always do. Why?”*

*“His bowl is empty.”*

*That brought me up short. Staring back from the other side of the mirror were eyes which were not quite awake and a grumpy man, who hadn't wanted to get out of bed. I finished my business and threw on a shirt and pair of pants before walking to the kitchen.*

*We'd inherited Smokey, a miniature Toy Pomeranian from the Nylands, another missionary couple when they'd left on furlough, two years prior. Since that time this dog had become my closest shadow, following everywhere.*

*“Hey, Smokey. What's the matter? You hungry?”*

*His excited prancing was ample evidence that he waited for me to fill his dish; which I'd done thirty minutes ago.*

*Surely, he hadn't gobbled it all and wanted extra? This puzzled me. He'd been eating more lately, but he'd never finished this fast.*

It took a couple seconds to fill the bowl and place it on the floor. Smoky stuck his nose into his food and I heard him crunching away. “Better put dog food on the grocery list. We’ll have to get more on the next trip to Piet Retief.”

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*“Where’s that, Dad?”*

*“That’s a town in South Africa and we lived across the border in Swaziland at a wide spot in the road, affectionately named Mhlosheni. If you look for it on the map, you may not find it, because it almost isn’t there.”*

*“What does Mmmm plo shanie mean?”*

*“Place of the white rock. Are you going to let me tell this story?”*

*“Sorry, Dad. I don’t remember much and I want to know these things.”*

*“Back to the story.”*

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I didn’t care for the monthly drive to town; it was a major undertaking, though only fifty miles. Half of the distance was on roads that can best be described as horrible, and then there was the border crossing into South Africa before finishing the trip on tarmac.

Mentally I dreaded those trips, not because of the difficulty in travel, but because every other missionary, government teacher and student wanted items to be purchased. Keeping the individual lists straight and the money separate was like a nightmare, something I wanted to avoid.

“You figure Smokey’s sick or something? He’s eaten half a bag since last trip. That’s double what is normal,” my wife asked.

“I don’t know, dear. He looks healthy and doesn’t act different. Maybe the rainy season does something to his appetite.” I’d slipped up behind her at the sink, wrapped my arms around her pregnant waist, she leaned into me and I kissed her neck.

“Are you going to eat breakfast?”

A sigh escaped my lips. “I’ll grab a snack at break time. Right now, I have to switch the generators, and my class starts in twenty minutes.”

“Okay, I’ll see you at lunch.” She turned and gave me a kiss.

Grabbing a jacket from the nail, I whistled to Smokey and he trotted beside me as we walked to the shop, where I shut down the diesel and opened the valve on the water turbine. This would give electricity to the school while providing the irrigation for the garden.

A few minutes more and I strode into the school and grabbed my teaching materials, then walked to the class. Smokey settled down outside the door, his head resting on his paws. No one would bother him, he was a one-man dog and I was that man. 'Protective' was his way of life and he stood guard. Though he was small, he'd been known to nip at anyone he felt was infringing on my territory.

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*"Dad, what was Smokey like? I remember you and mom talking about him. Was he as mean as they say?"*

*I laughed. "He was mostly bark, with a little bite. But he had a reputation and nearly everyone avoided him. But he would protect my boot within an inch of his life."*

*"Your boots? Why's that?"*

*"He knew they were mine and it was something he could protect. I forgot, onetime, and set them by the door, Smokey wouldn't allow anyone in or out. Anyone except me."*

*"Even Mom?"*

*"Even Mom, Princess. Can I return to the story?"*

*She settled back in her seat and I continued.*

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The rest of the day progressed as was normal with three classes, a staff meeting, a discussion with Mr. Mamba, and a walk through the gardens. Class prep occupied the remainder of my time.

It was evening and after supper before I was able to relax. The day had been stressful, but uneventful, up to that point. I'd picked up my Bible, reading several chapters, our little 'Princess' had been put down for the night, my wife was doing some knitting and Smoky rested beside me. An idyllic scene.

"Where's Smokey?" my wife asked.

"Right here." And I reached down to give him a scratch behind the ears.

"Well, listen."

Sure enough, it sounded like the dog was eating from his bowl. Problem was, he lay quietly beside me. This situation didn't look good.

I snuck to the kitchen and poked my head around the door.

The resounding snarl, followed by a screeching hiss made the hair stand on the back of my neck. Clearly this was a feline, but certainly not of the domestic variety. About the same size, perhaps a bit larger; there it stood, tail in the air, fur raised, ears laid back, teeth bared and ready to pounce, a wildcat.

To say I was scared didn't cover half of my emotions. My pregnant wife was in the other room and my baby daughter a mere fifteen feet away through an open doorway. I wasn't about to give ground, despite the churning in my bowels and the soured mass desiring to rise in my throat.

An eternity passed within a second as I considered options. *Run?* No. *Retreat?* No. *Wet my pants?* A distinct possibility. *Attack?* Not a good idea. *Close my daughter's door?* The animal was too close. *Take a crap?* I was ready to.

The standoff ended when the cat turned and bounded to the casement and disappeared into the night. Tense as a piano wire, I stepped forward and shut the glass and then checked on our daughter, closing her window.

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*"Did the cat get into my room, Dad?"*

*"No Princess. That's why I closed your window."*

*"So, you were scared?"*

*"Very much. This animal was dangerous and completely wild."*

*"Did you catch it?"*

*"Let me finish the story and you'll find out."*

*"Okay, Dad."*

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"What was it, dear?" my wife spoke as I returned to the main room.

I was like a 'hang-fire,' primed, hammer forward, and waiting to discharge. I wanted that cat dead, fast. Having a wild animal in the house, and having entered with little fear of the occupants was not good. A year-old daughter, a pregnant spouse; my mind whirled with the potential calamities.

My wife may have noticed my pale complexion when I couldn't speak and was mouthing voiceless expressions. It took several minutes until I could coherently explain, whereupon the two of us set about to secure the house for the night.

The next day, I carried out my normal activities but my mind was active with other thoughts. I set a plan into motion which contained some danger, but we didn't have other options.

The evening arrived, similar to the previous one and the cat returned as expected. I stepped out the front door, Smokey followed and my wife closed herself in our daughter's bedroom. Running around to the back I placed the wire screen over the open window, trapping the animal inside.

Returning through the front door I set about to accost this invader of our home.

The cat, not realizing it was trapped, jumped to the window being stopped by the screen. Without thinking clearly, I reached for the back of its neck. In a flash it turned and clamped its teeth into my forearm. I imagined a fire poker, heated to a glow, inserted into my arm and rotating without remorse.

When it released the vice-like hold and fled to the back of the house, my lower arm hung motionless having lost its mobility. pain, Pain, PAIN. Fighting to keep my mind from fogging over, I knew the cat was still in the house and moved in that direction.

The cat had taken refuge in a side room, off our bedroom on a window ledge and had its hackles up when I entered. At this point I was uncertain how to capture it and maybe my hesitation gave it hope because it sped through my legs and back the way I'd come.

Normal sensation was gradually returning to my hand and I could flex my fingers. I pulled a comforter from the bed, folded it double and trailed the cat to the kitchen window, where it was again blocked by the wire.

Growling, snarling and hissing it hunkered in a corner of the casement, unable to retreat and unable to run. Its only option, attack and its forepaws were clawing the air. With the blanket I covered the window and wrapped the cat; rolling it with no gap to escape.

Full mobility, with limited strength, had returned to my arm, though the hot pain continued. It was time for this cat to take a bath, a permanent one. The neighbors had a galvanized tub outside, which I borrowed. Within a few minutes the comforter was submerged in the water, along with the contents.

The dastardly deed was accomplished. The home was secured, the family safe, and Smokey again master of the house.

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*“Did that really happen?”*

*“Yes, it did, Princess. I shudder to think what would have happend had the cat gotten into your bed.”*

*My daughter didn't say anything; instead she moved beside me and hugged my arm and give me a kiss.*

## Chapter 8

### Rabbit and the Horse



My sister dearly loved horses and it was this fondness for these animals which nearly cost me my life -- twice. Being raised on an Iowa farm gave ample opportunity for our family to be around livestock. However, my sister specifically wanted a horse and I easily remember her making this request to my parents. Perhaps her appeals became incessant, for she eventually got one, but I digress.

My first brush with death came at the young age of two; which was several years before I received the moniker of 'Rabbit'. The neighbors owned a gelding named 'Colonel' and Sis would stare across the road, daydreaming, while the horse grazed by the wire fence.

I was toddling around the yard that day; chasing and playing with our dog, Brownie. She was so much fun and would lick my face. I thought that was cool. From across the road, Colonel stuck his head over the fence and whinnied. I clearly recalled my sister stopping dead still and turning around to face the horse. To me it was evident that she wanted to cross the road, she wanted to be with that horse.

Excitement filled me, watching my older siblings walk down the driveway toward the neighbors. They stopped and hesitated before making that road crossing, which was against our parent's instructions. I ambled along the gravel, stopping at the edge, watching them traverse the drainage ditch and up the other side to where Colonel waited.

He nickered and tossed his head and my sister reached through the fence to pet him. I wanted to be with them, I wanted to pet him too, I wanted to be a big boy. My brother, seeing my hesitation, waved to me, encouraging me to cross. Two thoughts vied for my attention, I desired to pet Colonel as my older siblings were. But I also understood the admonishment my folks had given. The road was dangerous; it was not to be crossed.

With continued persuasion and a desire to be near this beautiful animal, I ventured onto the road. Three quarters of the way across, I observed dust billowing from an approaching car. My brother's unrelenting encouragement failed to override my knowledge that safety only resided on our side of the road. My feet stopped and I turned around, heading back. I never made it.

To this day my brother feels an over whelming sense of guilt, believing he was at fault.

The driver had seen me but could not avoid the inevitable. A broken left leg sent me to the hospital where I remained for six weeks. Three of those were spent in isolation and my family was not allowed to visit; I felt alone and abandoned. There is a vivid memory of my Mom watching through a window, but was not permitted to enter. I cried. I'm told she did too.

My leg healed and I returned home. I learned to walk for a second time, which was difficult because my left side was a half inch shorter than the other. Leg aches were common as I grew and time has healed the physical damage. My growth wasn't stunted; years later I grew six inches within a twelve-month span.

Through persistence, my sister eventually got the horse she'd always dreamed about. For a birthday gift Dad bought Lady, the old gray mare, and she became a member of our farm.

Sis took responsibility for Lady, but 'Rabbit' learned to care for the mare also. Brushing, currying, feeding, and saddling her were occasionally included in my farmyard chores. She was a friendly animal and easy to ride. Although we didn't know her breed for a certainty, I figured she was a cross between a Morgan and a Quarter Horse.

Lady was allowed to roam the farm and a single strand electric fence was all that kept her on our property. After the crops were harvested, she could eat the grain that escaped the picker, so feeding her wasn't difficult.

Sis eventually went off to college and I added Lady to my regular chores of caring for the other animals. This suited my fancy and I was 'at home' doing the work around the place. I loved the area, the animals, and the fields. It was my intention to get a degree in agriculture and perhaps return to farm Dad's acreage. Good grief, I loved the farm. I still do.

It was my senior year in high school when I pulled a foolhardy stunt that nearly cost me my life. Roaming the fields was a pleasant past time, and one particular March day, I set off across our back acreage. It was a lazy day and there was nothing I was searching for. I didn't care what I might find. Lady had wandered to the far corner and was browsing among the corn stalks, looking for a nubbin or two.

On a whim I approached the mare and was rubbing her nose, then her withers. The family loved this old girl; heck I did too. I don't know what got into me, but I hopped on her back, no saddle, no bridle, and no nothing. She stood there, quivering and I was considering jumping off, but that idea was abandoned in a flash as she bolted.

My first concern was to stay aboard. Bluntly, I was scared. I'd never ridden bareback, plus there was no means to guide her. I tensed and reached for her mane, pulling myself forward from the precarious position and almost falling off. By the time I'd recovered, she was running at a full gallop.

My knees were in a rigid grip, my arms were around her neck and my heart was pounding in my throat. Any thought of jumping off was tossed aside; my eyes wouldn't focus on the speeding ground beneath her beating hooves.

It was a half mile to the house and I took stock of my situation. My ride settled down into a steady rhythm and Lady must have observed my arm reaching towards her nose. She extended it and increased her speed.

We were moving directly toward the house, but this path would take us through the Mulberry trees. My fear quickly turned to shock as unpleasant thoughts coursed through my mind and I imagined being impaled by those branches. This was a ride for life and all thoughts of control were cast away. I hunkered down along her neck, and hoped to reduce the bough whippings.

Almost to the trees, this galloping mass of horse flesh did a move that I've only seen performed at a rodeo; she turned on a dime. My eyes opened in surprise as I was tossed sideways. My arms tightened around her neck and one leg remained over her back, but the other was hugging her underside. The ground became a blur.

We were moving parallel to the windbreak and I was hanging on the side of this mare, like a cowboy in the movies. My grip was tenuous at best and I seriously considered letting go. Looking around, my fear fled and I became petrified.

A large tree was at the corner of the windbreak. Years before, Dad had pulled out a section of fence, leaving the stakes piled haphazardly around the trunk. My head was now on the same level as two posts which protruded from that stack. Rolls of barbed wire were also nestled among the weeds.

My mind was numb and I wanted to get off this ride, but not at that location. Lady was smart because she must have sensed my predicament and swung wide, missing the hazard. Another 'ninety degree' turn, in the opposite direction and I was righted on her topline.

This old gray mare sure wasn't what she used to be, because she pulled out all the stops and poured on the coal. She had worked herself into a froth as foam flecked her flanks. My arms were hugging her neck and my knees were clamped around her withers. The mane was blowing in my face and I felt the blood pounding through my veins.

I managed to stay aloft until she pulled to a halt by the water tank. I slid off, uncertain whether my quaking legs would support me. Lady patiently stood trembling, waiting for praise. She'd come home, hadn't she? My pants were soaked from the crotch downwards. Had I...? Nah, it must have been from the horse's lather. Was it?

## **Books by This Author**

### **Beth's Wish**

Phillip York, a Nebraska horse-rancher, lost his wife almost a year ago. His adult daughter, Beth, seeing his loneliness and grouchy demeanor, has connived to set him up with someone. At a New Year's Eve party, things go terribly wrong, things over which she has no control. During a family meal, Beth and her husband become livid at what Phillip has done. Her children watch cartoons and are oblivious to family consequences.

### **Shunning Ida Mae**

In 1886, Ida Lapp, a plucky Pennsylvania woman, secretly loves an Englisher, something strictly forbidden by the Amish Ordnung. When discovered by her parents, her penalty forever changes her life and sends her on a journey to face persecution, at the same time she desires the impossible—to return home to a family who despises her.

On an Iowa farm, Anna dies and leaves Joseph Melroy with the daunting task of raising two small children. Faced with the heartache of losing his wife, looming financial troubles, and a promise he is loath to keep, he must do something he'd not thought possible to survive the attempts of the area's only unmarried woman to corral him before a preacher and to do it before she ruins everything.

Ida seeks the job to care for Joseph's youngsters and discovers that only marriage to the English outsider can extract her from a homeless situation. She acquiesces to a loveless union on the condition she can walk away.

Immersed into a local setting where few people comprehend her Amish background, she endures whispers, side-glances, and outright hatred from the town's gossip who claims matrimonial rights to Joseph. The woman learns of the late-night wedding and spews her venom against Ida. Shunned by her family, and circumventing barbs by those who don't approve of her, Ida must navigate the corridors of a vastly different culture. Will she stick with Joseph? Will Joseph save the farm? Will Ida return home to parents who want nothing to do with her?

### **Gifted Heart**

In 1947, Ray Petriani flees Texas in the middle of the night with a wife and young family. Desperate for work, he takes a job in California and is sent to inland China on a business venture. A gift exchange with the local potentate provides him with two things he doesn't want, things he cannot reject, and things he is forced to protect. Those gifts change his life.

Through his research of the first item, a gilded antique music box said to have belonged to a Chinese Emperor, only uncovers additional shrouded historical doubts which raise further problems as to its real intent. Ray refuses to give up his investigation and believes the meaning of its significance lies hidden in the way it was presented.

But it's the possession of the second gift, a pretty female slave, which rocks his world and generates friction with his wife that reaches atomic proportions, and plants a minefield of

impossible complications. Town's people, officials, family, and associates, all full of righteous-hatred toward Orientals due to the recent war, seek to purge the area of this Asian beauty who clearly doesn't belong, but who is forbidden from returning to her homeland.

Can Ray, his family, and this newly freed slave navigate the corridors of bitter animosity from the people of their two countries, attempts on their lives from both sides of the Pacific, and bungling government bureaucracy, to uncover the deep Chinese secrets that have come to entwine their lives?

### **Rabbit Tails**

I grew up on a family farm near central Iowa, where Corn, Beans, Dairy, Beef, Chickens, Pigs, and a Horse were part of my upbringing. The rural area and the Christian community stamped me as an outdoor person. Hunting rabbits was as much a part of me as was plowing, making hay, and caring for livestock. Part of my life involved raising the lovable animals as pets and for the dinner table.

As a boy, I picked up the "handle" of Rabbit after catching seven of the furry animals without a gun

### **Bought and Paid**

Mr. Johansen, a successful businessman, connives a circus-style job fair to find a replacement for his executive assistant. Things don't proceed well, especially when his partner chooses to step in and create trouble.

Charlotte Hunter responds to Mr. Johansen's online advertisement. But during her interview, the business partner viciously opposes her. She struggles to stand up for her rights and beliefs as a Christian, but pays a high price, which could cost her the job.

Mr. Johansen selects a man named Matthew to escort Charlotte though the myriad of difficulties encountered during the application process. When Mr. Johansen chooses Charlotte as one of the finalists for the assistant position, his partner unleashes a whirlwind of chaos against her and two others during a training class. Charlotte's life, along with Matthew's, takes off in directions neither of them could have imagined.

Because of the partner's actions, a judge subpoenas Charlotte into a trial. She can't avoid the court's verdict and it forces her into hiding to evade a horde of media reporters. During their seclusion, Matthew's sordid past catches up with him and entangles Charlotte in situations he believed everyone had forgotten.

Can Charlotte extricate herself from the enmeshing web of Matthew's childhood? Can Matthew forgive himself and others for the sins of his past?