

CHAPTER 1

On a Wednesday in late October in 1986 my newspaper, *The Stanton, Illinois, Post-Times*, sent me to a small town south of us. There'd been a grave robbery.

What began as a lark that afternoon soon got my full attention. As I eventually found out, a young person—just a boy, in fact—had been willing to die for something he believed in.

In between—after I started asking around about the empty grave, and before I understood about the boy—some people died. Sometimes now I lie awake at night, blaming myself for what went wrong, and what I might have done differently.

I remember the year of the grave robbery, and even the day of the week. I was to have a drink with a new woman on the staff. Reagan was in the White House, the Challenger had exploded, and—important to me, anyway—I had just turned forty, and, sadly, my wife and I had split—separated, anyway. At my age, she thought, I should have been more than a reporter for a small-town daily.

Our attention to the cemetery incident began with a phone call to our newsroom. Our stringer there had seen a blurb in the local weekly and phoned it in to us. The little item said:

Vandals Violate a Grave

A grave in the Goddard Cemetery has been dug up. The sheriff's office is investigating. Persons with information are asked to call Sheriff Overman or Elvin Tarwood at the funeral home.

Our state editor, Ralph Petros, called the funeral home down there, and the sheriff too, but all he got was “no comment.”

“Morrison, you go,” our editor, Frank Fosden, called out. He was standing in the entry to his glass-enclosed office, the one and only enclosed space in our antiquated newsroom.

I nodded at him. To me he was a comic figure. I called him Fosdick.

Usually, when I took on surprising assignments like this one, with no clue as to the angle, I just lifted the lids off a few garbage cans. If I smelled something funny, I nosed around some more. By and by, often as not, I came up with an interesting story, or at least an idea for my column.

Driving my banged-up old Ford Maverick, another feature of my life that dismayed my wife, I got to Goddard in about twenty-five minutes and headed south and east toward the cemetery. The day was sunny, cool, breezy. On such a day you could throw a lure and land a two-pound bass. On the edge of town I passed a string of double-wides. Further on, a two-story house sat among old oaks. We were past Labor Day. Stubble, no corn in the fields. Lots of pheasants along the fences. Goddard sits at the end of the glacial moraine and, for whatever reason, the pheasants never go south of that line.

In about five miles I arrived at the graveyard. Fronting the place was a fancy iron gate, closed. No fence. I parked, walked around the gate, and followed the path, taking my time. I smelled cut grass and listened to the caws of crows.

One tombstone I noticed bore only a first name, “Sadie,” and beneath that the word “Companion.” The stone could have marked a pet, but I figured a human being. The monument next to Sadie's grave said “Fielder A. Clark, 1763-1838.” I wondered if Sadie had first been his slave. Illinois had not been a slave state, but slaves were traded.

Another stone, dated 1942, had a horse's head in bas-relief. It said, "Thomas Jennings, God's little cowboy."

Toward the back of the place I came to the dug-up grave. Behind yellow crime-scene tape was a toppled stone and a pile of dirt. The hole had been squared off, but once the digger had gotten about halfway down he'd quit being so tidy. I smelled the smell you get when you turn over a rock looking for night crawlers.

The hole was too neat to have been dug on a whim. It could have been a prank, of course, Goddard being only twenty or thirty minutes from Stanton, with its rows of splendid fraternity and sorority houses.

I wondered who'd discovered the robbery. I doubted people showed up every day. Probably the caretaker. I didn't plan to drop by the County Annex to get the answer to this question, or to any other question, for that matter. A while back I had found out that the sheriff's son, who was one of his deputies, was scamming the families of teenage drivers. My interest in that didn't sit too well with the sheriff.

We didn't print my story, but I got a message from him, indirect but clear enough, to stay out of Goddard County. We often chased news in Goddard County because it bordered on Flag County, where my newspaper was situated. So when I went down again, on a different story, deputies happened to spot me and pull me over. They found two empty beer cans in my car. I do not drink beer. And nobody drinks in my car. They charged me with open containers.

As I stood there in the dappled sunshine, my court hearing, to be held in the County seat, a town named Hopefull, about ten miles south of Goddard, was about three weeks away. Leaves on the trees were turning to gold, and here and there a falling leaf caught the breeze. The air was turning cold.

I walked back to the car for my flashlight. When I pointed it down into the hole I saw torn bits of rotted wood and stained fabric. No bones, nothing. The burial had been on the cheap, I thought. No vault, just a plain pine box tarted up with velour.

A few leaves lay across the inscription on the tipped headstone, but I made out the words. "Richard Hartley, Feb. 7, 1925-Jan. 15, 1941. RIP." Just a kid. Having lain for about forty-five years in a pine box in damp soil, he would have rotted away, I thought. As I looked around I did see one thing, an odd tint in the dirt just inside the yellow tape, something foreign, half-hidden in the leaves. I picked up a broken piece of chalk. It stained my fingers blue. I put it in my jacket pocket. The silence of the graveyard was broken by the belch of a Harley out on the road.

In an enclosed family plot just a few yards from where I stood I spotted a plynth topped by a concrete angel with a whimsical smile. Thomas Wolfe described such a cemetery figure, with "a smile of soft stone idiocy," as he'd put it, in his novel *Look Homeward, Angel*. I read that book cover-to-cover more than once.

In that same book he'd said, "Destinies can be touched by that dark miracle of chance that makes new magic in a dusty world." I believed him. We human beings try to control things, and occasionally do, but we are caught by fate like soap bubbles in the wind.

Looking back over the years, I've occasionally considered my visit to the Goddard Cemetery on that crisp fall afternoon, listening to this crow and that crow as the leaves fell silently to earth, sensing the senseless dead, thinking about what Wolfe had said, and about all that followed as the strange story behind the open grave unfolded.

I walked over to look more closely at the happy little stone angel. The low iron gate to the enclosure was shut but not locked. I squeaked it open and went in. The plynth said "TARWOOD." I counted about eight headstones, some not so old.

Heading back out of the cemetery, I wandered a bit. The dead were all over the place under my feet. I paused to read the inscription on the tilted tombstone of a boy who'd been only fourteen months old when he died in 1924. "Allan Ramsay, beloved son." A discolored wreath was attached to the headstone by a rusty wire. For a moment I felt lonely.

Wandering, I read more stones. One boy, James Leroy Eckert, had been fourteen when he died in 1940. Another, Samuel Bass, had been fourteen as well when he died in 1943. Using my flashlight to read inscriptions in the descending dusk, I came across the graves of a boy of twelve, buried in 1938, and a boy of eleven, buried in 1946.

I could go to Hopefull to get copies of the death certificates at the county clerk's office, or—to draw less attention—I could inquire at the County Historical Society. I doubted I'd learn anything. Lots of people had seen these tombstones of boys dead within a few years of each other. But you never know.

I figured I could get to a phone, call in what I had for the AP wire, and still get to the funeral home in time to talk to the owner.

CHAPTER 2

The asphalt parking lot of the Tarwood Funeral Home was black as obsidian beneath my feet. Pristine white pillars propped up the two-story entry into the one-story red brick building. Entering the foyer, I stepped into carpeted silence, a whiff of flower blossoms, and the faint odor of formaldehyde. A skinny young guy carrying a tall vase of gladioli was startled to see me and almost dropped it—not exactly the sort of person you’d want greeting people at your funeral parlor.

This no doubt explained the hurry in the step of a large man in a gray suit who came striding up the hall, his face set in welcome. Elvin Tarwood, funeral director, no doubt in my mind. Sixty years old, maybe. Straight back. Flat gut. Looked like he could clean and jerk two hundred pounds and more.

“May I help you?”

I stuck out my hand. “Morrison. Stanton Post-Times. Have you got a few minutes, Mr. Tarwood?”

He glanced at his watch. “I’ve got maybe a minute.”

On the bookcase in his office, flanking several leather-bound volumes, stood two tall white china angels. He seated himself behind his maple desk as I took one of the two facing chairs. “So. How can I help you?” he asked. His inflection suggested he didn’t plan to.

“I’m covering the grave robbery,” I said.

He shook his head. “I doubt I can add anything to what’s been said.”

Already convinced how this interview would go, I tried indirection. “How long have you been running the funeral home, Mr. Tarwood?”

Puzzled, he cocked his head. “Twenty years?”

“Have you had any other grave robberies?”

“No.”

“So this was unusual?”

He sighed. “Look. We don’t need a media circus here.”

I suppressed a smile. “Maybe a story in my paper would help you find out who did it.”

“We already had the story in the Gazette.”

“With deference,” I said, “we do have a bigger circulation, in a wider area.” As I listened for a response I heard a small noise outside the door.

“To tell you the truth, that’s what I’m afraid of, young fella.”

“What’s that?”

“Bad publicity.”

When somebody says, “to tell you the truth,” I wonder what I’ve been hearing so far. The word “publicity” in reference to my work also gets my attention. “Do you think your grave digger might be from around here?” I asked.

“I have no idea. Look, we really don’t need any more publicity.”

“Yes. Well, the cat’s out of the bag,” I said. “We put what we had on the AP wire.”

He grimaced. “Who said you could do that?”

I could not resist. “The U.S. Constitution. The First Amendment, I think.”

“Huh. What do you think this person would do if he saw a story in the Post-Times, young man?”

“Let me ask you,” I said. “Why would somebody dig up a grave right next to your family plot?”

His eyes betrayed anger. It hadn't occurred to him that I'd been to the cemetery and looked around. “I have no idea.”

“Who was the boy?” I asked. “Do you know?”

More in control of himself, he looked at his watch. “That was a long time ago.”

When people try to con me they develop what I call liar's rhythm, responding to everything but revealing nothing.

“Pretty young, fifteen,” I said. “How did he die?”

“As I told you, Mr. Morrison, it was before my time.”

“Can you help me get in touch with the family?”

“I don't believe they live around here.”

“Then why was he buried here?”

“Look, Mr. Morrison, my time really is up.”

“I'd prefer to get the story directly from you, Mr. Tarwood, but I guess I'll have to go somewhere else.”

“Be careful, Mr. Morrison,” he said. “You're not on your own turf here.”

I gave him a wide-eyed look.

“Don't get the wrong idea.” He switched on a fake smile. “Country people tend to put a high value on their privacy, that's all.”

Somewhere outside the room I heard the sound of an organ.

I thanked Tarwood and put my card on his desk. As I walked down the hall to the exit I passed a viewing room. The young man I'd seen earlier was arranging flowers around a bronze-colored casket. Yet, the organ music was still in the air. Canned.

“Goodbye, now,” I said. He didn't look up.

As I went out into the parking lot the sky was darker and the air was cold. I drove past the County Annex building and headed north. I became aware of a motorcycle behind me and wondered if a sheriff's deputy had spotted me in town. The sound of the bike like a pebble in my shoe, I drove with an occasional glance at my speedometer.

I reflected on what I'd learned. The boy, Richard Hartley, had been just fifteen years old when he died in 1941 and was buried near the Tarwood family's little fenced-in plot. The Tarwood plot was still in use, the cemetery certainly well known to Elvin Tarwood. Yet Tarwood claimed he knew nothing about the boy. Things to ponder, nothing to write.

I'd had a long day. I'd agreed to meet our new staffer, Lee Ann Thomas, at Tony Spuds, a café a block from our office. She'd said, “You're the *èminence grise* around here. I'd really like to know what you do, get your perspective on the paper.”

Èminence grise. A flatterer, or, sadly, respectful of the years I had on her. Eight or ten, maybe? She looked to be about thirty. After a trip to Goddard and a chat with Elvin Tarwood, I needed a drink. Having it with a pretty young lady would be okay. As I drove across the White River bridge, recently rechristened the Dawdle Bridge after a local developer, lightning hit like a giant flash bulb popping. As I looked in the mirror, another strike lit things up. The motorcycle had disappeared. Hail banged like gravel on the roof of the car.

CHAPTER 3

As I shook the rain off my coat in the foyer of Tony Spuds the elegant guy at the piano was playing “Old Paint” and singing it softly. It was a pretty tune, and the opaque lyrics had always appealed to me. I spotted Lee Ann Thomas and went to her table. Nodding, draping my coat over the back of the chair, I sat down and looked around for a waiter.

Lee Ann Thomas appraised me over the top of her wine glass. “Hi. How was your day?”
“Okay.”

Closely cropped straight blonde hair, longish face with high cheekbones, blue eyes—sort of how I imagined a Dutch boy might look. I think I got that image off a paint can. Blue silk blouse. Pale skirt. Button earrings. Cool chic. She’d probably dismissed a few supplicants in her time.

Me? I was about six feet two in 1986, and weighed about one-ninety-five. As for my own attire, expecting to snoop around an open grave, I’d gone down to Goddard in jeans, a plaid shirt and my fishing jacket.

“Learn anything more?”

Her question suggested she knew where I’d been, why I’d been there, and what I’d called in for the wire.

“Not really. The funeral director’s not talking, and I guess the sheriff isn’t either.”

“I gather you didn’t talk to the sheriff. As I understand it, he wants your head on a pike.”

“Fosdick talks too much,” I said genially.

“Who?”

I sipped my newly arrived martini. “Fearless Fosdick, our editor.”

When she smiled her upper lip rose slightly higher on the right. Sardonic. “Ah. Al Capp,” she said. “As to Mr. Fosden, he was giving me perspective on how the paper operates, instructive commentary. And yes, we talked about you and the sheriff.”

“Okay,” I said. “Here’s some perspective for you. On Friday nights, Rodney Overman, that’s the sheriff’s son, who happens to be one of his deputies—”

“Mr. Fosden told me about that,” she said. “He stops kids for speeding—or running red lights, whatever. Right? He books them for alcohol or drug infractions. The charges are almost always bogus, or so the kids and their parents tell you. Mr. Fosden isn’t so sure.” She sipped her wine. “How does it work, this scam?” she asked.

I was irritated. She seemed to know all about me, and didn’t choose to join me in denigrating the name of our editor. “Parents show up at the jail, over in Hopefull, usually in the middle of the night. They’ve never experienced anything like this. They want to get their kid home. This is a jail, you know. Outside their experience. The jailer recommends a particular lawyer, always the same guy. Okay, so the parents bail the kid out, and after a rough night and only a few hours’ sleep they call the lawyer. The lawyer quotes a flat fee, fifteen hundred dollars, to take the case. Just hearing his words—‘to take the case’—is alarming. The lawyer then says he can probably get the kid off with a four-hundred-dollar fine plus ten weeks of driving school. Now we’re up over two thousand dollars. The parents find a way to get the money.” I paused to let her think about the money. “No surprise, another buddy of Rodney’s runs the driving school. You getting it?”

She nodded. "Just that observation, that he can probably get the kid off, would freak me out too."

"A couple months ago, Deputy Rodney gets drunk at a bar, and tells some people he's made a fair amount of money on this little dodge." I paused, took a sip.

She flicked three fingers. "Unwarranted stops, unwarranted charges, kickbacks."

"Umm. When this came to my attention, as such things will, I checked with a few of the parents and wrote the story. But Bert Lahr squashed it."

"Bert Lahr?" she said.

"Our cowardly lawyer."

That interesting smile again. "The Wizard of Oz. Do you have pet names for everybody at the office? Anyway, as I get the story, a few weeks back they stopped you in Goddard on some violation or other and found a little something in your car."

I shook my head, took a sip. "Correction. They put something in my car. Two empty beer cans."

"Okay, they planted them, which reinforces your belief that you're on to something."

"Yep. So I pleaded not guilty. Number one, I don't drink beer. Number two, I want these kids' parents to realize they can fight these people."

"So who are you? Don Quixote?"

I shrugged.

She considered. "The sheriff runs the county, not everything in his domain is kosher, and he has it in for you."

I waited for her point.

"So why do you go down there when Ralph can do it without stirring up trouble? It's his beat, right?"

Clearly she already knew Ralph Petros, our state editor, and what his beat was, just like she knew Fosdick. "Ralph was busy and I was available," I said.

"So what's your real job, Mr. Morrison? What do you cover?"

I slipped my moorings a little. "Young lady—"

"Stop," she said, her blue eyes squinting. "My name is Lee Ann, Lee Ann Thomas. I just wanted to know what you do, Mr. Morrison. To interact around here I have to find out what people do. That's why I'm asking questions. But I am not 'young lady.' So tell me about today."

In an instant she'd gone from skewering me to resuming the interview. With that kind of balance, she could walk an I-beam like a Mohawk. "The kid was fifteen years old," I said.

"This was a teenager?"

"Yeah. And here's the thing. I counted six or seven other graves of boys around that age, all from 1940, more or less."

She leaned in. "What? You think you tripped over child abuse? Murder?"

I shrugged. "All things are possible."

Two dimples came into play. "I think you just murdered a line from *Candide*."

Well, she had a funny bone.

"No matter what kind of scuz the sheriff might be," she said, "I seriously doubt he'd ignore child abuse. Mr. Tarwood at the funeral home, too. Not likely."

"You'd think so," I said. "But, as you appear to know, Goddard County law enforcement is not as advanced as it is in a lot of other downstate counties. So you don't know who gets away with what."

She smiled. “Maybe. But I do know this. When you catch a fish on the surface you can catch bigger ones deeper down.”

Before I could switch the main topic to fishing, she went on. “It frustrates me,” she lectured, “that you get to go on an assignment like this, outside your job description, and I don’t. Since joining this paper—what, three months ago?—I’ve been editing, doing rewrite, handling wire copy. Nobody’s asked me to go on a special assignment.”

“So why is that, do you think?”

“‘Big things are ahead for you, Lee Ann,’” she mimicked. “‘We’re grooming you, Lee Ann.’ That’s why I’m here having a drink with you tonight, Mr. Morrison, trying to figure out how you get away with coming and going the way you do.”

“You’re picking my brain to get my job?”

She ignored this. “What if they already know who dug up the grave?” she said. “What if it’s a local nut? They could just be pretending to look for the guy, you know?”

“Why?” I said.

“I don’t know. Maybe the family has clout.”

“Ralph wasn’t too pleased about my going, which you probably already know. I don’t know if I’ll get to go back.”

“Maybe Mr. Petros is jealous. I would be.” She glanced at her watch, finished her wine, and stood up. “Thanks,” she said. “I appreciate it. I have to go feed the cat.”

Then she was gone, as abrupt in action as she was in speech. There was something else about her. Here was this playful, smart, good-looking girl—woman—but there was something else. What? Wise beyond her years, maybe. She’d come from New York. Maybe that was it. New York attitude.

The man at the piano had been through some jazz and pop and was back to playing old cowboy songs. This one was “Streets of Laredo.” I smelled steaks cooking. Talking about me, we hadn’t talked about her. I admitted to a certain rush, while at the same time, suspicion. What was she after, really?