

1 **BACKSTORY**

A little over five years back, I had a message on my voice mail from one Al Mac-Teer—which I heard as *Almick Tear*—from a number in the 310 area code. This no-nonsense woman asked me to call her back regarding a thin little memoir I had written called *A Stairway Down to Heaven* about my years of tending bar in a small subterranean club that played live music way back in the '80s. At the time, I was also, sort of, a freelance journalist in and around Pittsburgh, PA. And I wrote movie reviews. These days I teach Creative Writing, Common Literature, and Film Studies at Mount Chisholm College of the Arts in the hills of Montana. Bozeman is a gorgeous if stark drive away. I get very few voice mails from Los Angeles, California.

“My boss read your memoir,” Ms. Mac-Teer told me. “He says you write like he thinks.”

“Your boss is brilliant,” I told her, then asked, “Who is your boss?” When she told me she worked for Bill Johnson, that I had reached her on her cell as she was driving from her home in Santa Monica to her office in the Capitol Records Building in Hollywood for a meeting with **Copyrighted Material** for *Bi-Bi-Bi-Bill JOHNSON*? The movie director? Prove it.”

Some days later, I was on the phone with Bi-Bi-Bi-Bill Johnson himself, and we were talking about his line of work, one of the subjects I teach. When I told him I'd seen his entire filmography, he accused me of blowing smoke. When I rattled off many salient points from his movies, he told me to shut up, enough already. At that time, he was "noodling" a screenplay about music in the transformative years of the '60s going into the '70s—when bands evolved from matching outfits and three-minute songs for AM radio to LP side-long jams and the Jimi Hendrix Experience. The stories from my book were full of very personal details. Even though my era was twenty years after what he was "noodling"—our club booked unheralded jazz combos and Depeche Mode cover bands—the stuff that happens in live-music venues is timeless, universal. The fights, the drugs, the serious love, the fun sex, the fun love, the serious sex, the laughs and the screaming, the Who-Gets-In and Who-Gets-Bounced—the whole riotous scene of procedures both spoken and intuitive—were the human behaviors that he wanted to nail. He offered me money for my book—the nonexclusive rights to my story, meaning I could still sell the *exclusive* rights, if there should ever be an offer. Fat chance. Still, I made more money selling him the rights to my book than I did selling copies of the thing.

Bill went off to film *Pocket Rockets* but kept up with me through calls and many typewritten letters—missives of wandering topics, his Themes of the Moment. The Inevitability of War. Is jazz like math? Frozen yogurt flavors with what toppings? I wrote him back in fountain pen—typewriters? honestly!—because I can match anyone in idiosyncrasy.

I received a single-page letter from him that had only this typed on it:

What films do you hate—walk out of? Why?

Bill

I wrote him right back.

I don't hate any films. Movies are too hard to make to warrant hatred, even when they are terrible. If a movie is not great, I just

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wait it out in my seat. It will be over soon enough. Walking out of a movie is a sin.

I'm guessing the US Postal Service needed two days to deliver my response, and a day was spent getting it to Bill's eyeballs, because three days later Al Mac-Teer called me. Her boss wanted me to "get down here, pronto" and watch him make a movie. The term break was coming up, I had never been to Atlanta, and a movie director was inviting me to see the making of a movie. I teach Film Studies but had never witnessed one being made. I flew to Salt Lake City for the connecting flight.

"You said something I have always thought," Bill said to me when I arrived on the set of *Pocket Rockets*, somewhere in the endless suburb that is greater Atlanta. "Sure, some movies don't work. Some fail in their intent. But anyone who says they *hated* a movie is treating a voluntarily shared human experience like a bad Red-Eye out of LAX. The departure is delayed for hours, there's turbulence that scares even the flight attendants, the guy across from you vomits, they can't serve any food and the booze runs out, you're seated next to twin babies with the colic, and you land too late for your meeting in the city. You can hate *that*. But hating a movie misses the damn point. Would you say you hated the seventh birthday party of your girlfriend's niece or a ball game that went eleven innings and ended 1–0? You hate cake and extra baseball for your money? Hate should be saved for fascism and steamed broccoli that's gone cold. The worst anyone—especially we *who take Fountain**—should ever say about someone else's movie is *Well, it was not for me, but, actually, I found it quite good*. Damn a film with faint praise, but never, ever say you *hate* a movie. Anyone who uses the h-word around me is *done*. Gone. Of course, I wrote and directed *Albatross*. I may be a bit sensitive."

I lingered on the set of *Pocket Rockets* for ten days and, over the summer, went to Hollywood for some of the film's tedious Postpro-

* "Fountain" refers to Hollywood's Fountain Avenue. Bette Davis was once asked her advice for actors wanting to make it in Hollywood. She said, "Take Fountain"—meaning as opposed to Sunset or Santa Monica Boulevard or Franklin Avenue.

duction. Making movies is complicated, maddening, highly technical at times, ephemeral and gossamer at others, slow as molasses on a Wednesday but with a gun-to-the-head deadline on a Friday. Imagine a jet plane, the funds for which were held up by Congress, designed by poets, riveted together by musicians, supervised by executives fresh out of business school, to be piloted by wannabes with attention deficiencies. What are the chances that such an aeroplane is going to soar? There you have the making of a movie, at least as I saw it at the Skunk Works.

I was not on location for much of the making of *A Cellar Full of Sound**—which is what later became of some of my little book. My loss. Bill had me paid another bit of coin when the movie began shooting, more when the film came out—the man is generous. I saw the first public showing at the Telluride Film Festival, where he referred to it as “our movie.” In January, I rented a tuxedo and sat at a back table at what was then the Golden Globe Awards (at Merv Griffin’s Beverly Hilton Hotel, the very definition of a H’wood party). When my colleagues ask me about my weekend in Fantasyland, I tell them I didn’t get back to my hotel until five in the morning, very tipsy, dropped off by Al Mac-Teer and none other than Willa Sax—a.k.a. Cassandra Rampart—in her chauffeur-driven Cadillac Escalade. There was no other way I could sum up the experience in terms they’d understand. Willa Sax? No way! I’d prove it by showing them the Facebook photo she posted—there I am, with Al Mac-Teer, laughing our heads off with one of the most beautiful women in the world and her moody bodyguard.

COVID-19 had been dividing up our country into its Mask/No Mask politics and turned my job into online classes. Then came the Vaccine/Anti-Vax dialectic. When Al Mac-Teer called me with an invitation to join her, Bill, and his merry band to observe the *full duration* of his next film, I thought shooting a movie was neither legal nor possible. But her boss “had a thing” that looked like it was going to be “green-lit” and shot under “Guild protocols” and

* A wicked, surprise hit of the pre-COVID days. Good worldwide numbers—despite no audience in China. Those nominations and the AMPAS nods were a salve to the ego. Not a single win, but still . . .

I was invited to “join the Unit” from the start of Cash Flow to the Final Dub.

“You’ll have an ID badge,” she explained. “You’ll be one of the crew and be tested twice a week. We won’t pay you anything, but you’ll eat for free, and the gratis hotel room will be nice enough.” Al added, vividly, “You’d be a very big dope to say no.”

I asked Bill Johnson himself why he would allow an interloper like me to observe what is often treated as something akin to a top-secret project, one with badges and flashing red lights and signs warning THIS IS A CLOSED SET. NO VISITORS WITHOUT APPROVAL OF UNIT PRODUCTION MANAGER.

Bill laughed. “That’s just to intimidate the civilians.”

One night on location, after another long, hard, yet average day of shooting, over YouGo FroYo, Bill told me, “Journalists—the lazy ones anyway—always try to *explain* how movies are made, as though there’s a secret formula that we’ve patented, or procedures that are listed like a flight plan for a voyage to the moon and back. *How did you come up with the girl in the brown polka-dot dress who could whistle so loud? When did you first imagine that last, indelible image of those blackbirds on the TV aerial, and where did you find trained blackbirds?* Why, they ask, *did this film succeed when this other film went flat? Why did you make Bonkers A-Go-Go instead of Moochie Spills the Beans?* That’s when I look at my watch and say, ‘Hot damn! I’m late for that marketing meeting’ and bolt the interview. Those people look at the Northern Lights as having been designed. If they saw how we movie-orphans do our job, they’d be bored silly and very disappointed.”

I never got bored. Disappointment? While hanging around for the making of a motion picture? *A fig!**

There is always a good conversation to be had on a movie set, around the Production Office, and during the Postproduction process because most of moviemaking is spent *waiting*. The question *How’d you get started in this racket?* prompts hours of very personal, improbable stories, each saga worth a book of its own.

When I said this to Al, the subject came up about writing a book to explain the making of movies through my time on the movie.

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* Shakespeare’s *Othello*, act 1, scene 3. Iago to Roderigo.

I was going to bear witness to so much of the creativity, friction, surface tension, and balls-out fun on the project, what if I were to write about it all and, well, publish a book? Would her boss be enraged by that idea? Chuck me off the set?

“Oh, Cowboy,” she said. “Why do you think you are here?”

I hope to have taken myself out of the narrative; to write about the making of a movie like *Knightshade: The Lathe of Firefall* from a first-person perspective would be self-serving, like covering the Battle of Okinawa as though it was about the reporter (“I was worried that sand, stained with the blood of dead Marines, would get into my typewriter . . .”). Much is owed to all who talked with me over the many months they worked while I watched. They shared not just what they do but who they are. If their names appear—there are some whose don’t—it means they have seen what I have written and either approved of these pages or okayed the changes I made at their request. I went back to many of them again and again to clarify what I thought I had seen, what they had told me of their own journeys along Fountain Avenue.*

Movies last forever. So do characters in books. Blending the two in this volume may be a fool’s errand, wasted effort in the mining of fool’s gold. Don’t hate the final product. Think of it as *quite good*.

Joe Shaw

MCCA

Mount Chisholm, Montana

* Two groups on the Unit asked to *not ever* be mentioned in this book: The stand-ins for the actors who hope to be actors themselves and not be pigeon-holed as stand-ins. And the personal assistants, those who tend to the upper echelon of the key players. Their anonymity was sacrosanct, for if their names and job descriptions were made public, their lives would be made a living hell. Let me say, though, I saw how hard and long they all work, and the ton of nonsense they so expertly deal with. They are loved.

The following is based on a true story.
Characters and events have been altered for dramatic purposes.

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ANOTHER FRANCHISE

“What would be wrong with another franchise?” asked Fred Schiller—a.k.a. the Instigator—of the Fred Schiller Agency. He had once again flown into Albuquerque for a dinner with his distinguished client Bill Johnson. As usual, they were at Los Poblanos—one of Albuquerque’s better restaurants.

It was July of 2017, and Bill was about to head into the shooting of *A Cellar Full of Sound*, for which he had also written the screenplay. As was their tradition, the client and agent met to talk about what would come after the present picture was done; the deep look into their future that kept a career going with forward momentum. There was no talk of the movie about to be made, just the options for future enterprises.

“Franchises are killers,” Bill said, speaking from well-known experience. The pressures to have *Horizon of Eden* match the quality and popular success of *Border of Eden* and then *Darkness of Eden*—all “written and directed by”—had been like holding on to political office. By the final day of shooting on *Horizon*, Bill had lost twenty-five pounds, stopped shaving to save time in the mornings, drank three shots of ZzzQuil every night to sleep, and had survived the last two weeks of Principal Photography running on the fumes of triple espressos. Bill Johnson, who once typed out this one sentence on his 1939 Smith-Corona Sterling—MAKING FILMS IS MORE FUN THAN FUN—had had none whatsoever completing that last chapter of *Eden*, which took nearly two years of his life.

In his three-decade run of films, Bill was firmly—to the envy of many—in the win column, save a couple of so-so performers and the one unmitigated disaster.* Bill now developed his own material, turning down big works that would have replenished his coffers, and with his 10 percent made the Instigator happier, too. *A Cellar Full of Sound* had been a relative pleasure to write, a pain in the ass to prep, and could go any way in the shoot.

But since *Pocket Rockets* had brought Bill back from the disaster

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* *Albatross*—aptly named.

that had been *Albatross*, the Instigator saw that the filmmaker was at the top of his game, and he wanted that to remain the case.

“Franchises become cruel masters. I don’t want to work for a cruel master,” Bill said. “I don’t like *being* the cruel master, except in meetings with marketing.”

“Audiences have so many options for entertainment,” Fred said over grass-fed veal medallions and garden sunchoke. “They need a reason to exchange their money for a ticket to a movie. Bill Johnson is a reason. A superhero franchise is coin of the realm, like westerns were in the ’50s and ’60s and action movies in the ’80s. The Comic-Con fans go to see *everything*.”

“If only to hate it. Just ask Lazlo Shiviski.”* Bill leaned back. “I like the antiheroes, the flawed and haunted ones.”

“Marvel would give you the next Thor.”

“Tell them I’m Thorry, but no.”

“D.C. would give you anything on their slate.”

“The Batman, the X-Men, Spider-Boy, Green Giant, Lady Kick-Your-Ass . . . You don’t see a glut?”

“Dynamo will back up a truckload of cash and drop it on your driveway if you said yes to one of their Ultra movies.”

“Superheroes saving the galaxy and kitty cats stuck in trees. Hohum.” Bill finished his Blue Sky cola in the tall glass of ice, no straw. “I’m not against the genre, just the tropes in them. Evil lords from other galaxies who speak English. Super guys and girls that want to kiss but never do. Whole cities being destroyed, but we never see the corpses.” Bill waved to the waiter and pointed to his glass for another Blue Sky. “And Pat is on me to do a boy-meets-girl movie.[†] A movie for *her*.”

“What’s wrong with that idea?”

“A girl-meets-boy story depends on two things. The girl, the boy, and why they need each other. Three things.”

* Lazlo Shiviski was excoriated by the fanboys for his *Quadrant: The Seeker*, which was the fourth in the *Quadrant* saga. Bill thought the movie was grave and special, but something pissed off those fans, and they beat the living daylights out of Shiviski and the film. Lazlo had been in the trophy run season for awards with *Luna and Sweet*, the same year Bill was for *Barren Land*, but they both lost every time to Lisa Pauline Tate, who was due for her fabulous *The Getaround*.

[†] Dr. Patrice Johnson, Bill’s love.

“The world is waiting for another Bill Johnson motion picture,” the Instigator said.

“It will be called *A Cellar Full of Sound* and should be in a theater near them in twelve months, give or take.”

“The future is not next year. It’s three years from now.”

“I’ll ponder.” That had always been Bill’s process. He’d land on some source material by accident, which would spark an idea, which he would then turn into another major motion picture masterpiece.

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2 SOURCE MATERIAL

1947

BOB FALLS

On the morning of the seventh of July, the sun, a full disk in a bald, cloudless sky, was beginning to sear Lone Butte, California—population 5,417, officially—a rural town in the North Valley, not far from the capital of Sacramento, less than a day on the road from the city of Oakland, a bit longer to the Babylon that was San Francisco. In the heat of summer, with temperatures always hovering at the century mark, the place was more akin in pace and temperament to the small towns in Kansas or Nebraska or Ohio, in Iowa or Indiana. Few of its citizenry *chose* to live in Lone Butte; many left and never came back. Granted, the town was the county seat, but by default, because of its location on the Big Iron Bend River, which had been the main route of commerce during the gold rush. In 1947, there wasn't even a train depot in Lone Butte.*

Like most boys his age, Robby Andersen, who would be celebrat-

* Trains made stops in nearby Welles, California, but only at a siding. The nearest depot was nearly an hour's drive away, in Chico.

ing his fifth birthday on the eleventh of September, greeted every morning, especially those on another hot summer day, as twenty-four hours of ripe, carefree living. He would start his kindergarten schooling after the Labor Day holiday, but already knew his ABC's, and his father had explained to him the differences between upper-case and lowercase letters. So, he would surely spell *living* with a capital *L*.

He knew to make his bed first thing every morning right after going potty. Then he'd change out of his pj's and into his playclothes, before coming downstairs. His father would already be off to the shop when his mother set a breakfast down for him—usually toast, milk, and a fruit, often the plums picked off the trees in the backyard. Robby wanted to taste coffee, to find out why grown-ups drank the stuff all the time, but he was told he was too young. His morning tasks were to put his own dishes on the counter, see if the trash pail needed emptying, give a good sweep to the floor of the screened-in porch and, outside, the back steps that led to the gravel driveway and, just beyond it, those four plum trees. His chores done, he would get out his crayons, coloring pencils, coloring books, and newsprint tablets and, lying on the braided rug in the living room, lose himself in drawing whatever was in his head.

Everyone who had a look at Robby's drawings—*artwork*, even at his age—saw a natural ability, an instinct for dimension, space, and movement. There was abandon in his drawings, too; there was joy. The boy drew for *fun*.

At 10:00 a.m. on most days, he would put his drawings and supplies away in a drawer of the living room cabinet—the *chifforobe*—and leave the house through the screened-in porch, having learned to keep the spring-closing door from slamming behind him. Beyond the plum trees was a short hedge with a small gap worn through it, a passageway used by Robby to cross into the Burns family's backyard, which also had a quartet of plum trees; the property line had split what had been a small orchard. Their daughter, Jill Burns, was already six years old and the best friend Robby Andersen had in his life. The two played together almost every day, with neither kid bothered nor hampered by Jill's slight clubfoot. At lunchtime, Jill would come home with Robby to eat a routine agreed upon by both sets of parents. Then, they kept themselves busy until the

three o'clock snack time when the radio could be turned on for the shows meant for kids. At four Jill passed back through the gap in the hedge for home.

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Robby's mother, Lulu Andersen, had worked out this routine with Mrs. Burns and loved the arrangement, for it allowed a slow windup to her long day of work work work. Her mornings were calm, unlike those of so many of her gal pals, young women (still) who all had kids and working husbands and the never-ceasing regimen that was homemaking and housekeeping and child-rearing. Work work work and *work*. Some of those women were raising monsters, little hellions, so Lulu thanked God and the rhythm method for Robby, who did his chores and kept himself busy with crayons and, too, for the baby, Nora, who had been a colicky infant but was turning a year old in two days. It seemed that Nora just might be settling into a female version of her contented, easy-natured older brother. Who in Lone Butte had two kids who caused such little hassle?

Lucille Mavis Falls was called Lulu right from the get-go, after her father had first laid eyes on his daughter and hollered, "What a *lulu* of a baby girl!" from the other side of the maternity ward window. Twenty-plus years later, Lulu Falls became Lulu *Andersen* on January 18, 1942, just weeks after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the Second World War had ruthlessly, finally ensnared America. Every house in California was blacked out at night against the *next* air attack, including those in Lone Butte should enemy bombs be dropped on the rural towns of the North Valley of California.

Lulu's husband, Ernie Andersen, had been one of her half dozen boyfriends in high school despite his going to Saint Philip Neri (she was a Union High *Yankee* and a Presbyterian). He worked at the Flying A filling station at Main and Grant Streets and, over time, Lulu found herself volunteering to drive the family Chevrolet over to have Ernie fill 'er up and check 'er oil. One thing led to another, and, as Lulu said herself, "That was that." Ernie was the most fun of all the boys her age in Lone Butte, though, at times, as serious a young man as the era had created. And, oh, his eyes . . .

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When Nazi Germany invaded Poland and war was declared, he talked seriously about going to Canada to learn to fly planes for the Canadian wing of the Royal Air Force, but his father talked him down from going as “there were plenty of Canuck boys to do that.” He knew the United States would, when needed, enter the war and “start doing our fair share.” But not able to wait to become a part of the history that was raging up on-screen in black-and-white newsreels shown at the State Theater, Ernie enlisted in the United States Army Air Forces in June of 1941 so he could be ready to fly American planes. As Fate or God or Saint Philip Neri would have it, he had a color blindness that washed him out of flight school. Still, Ernie had a sense of all things mechanical, so his enlistment helped keep the planes of the AAF flying, ready for the coming war. He was sent to an aerodrome in Texas—a place he called Camp Desperation in his many, many letters to Lulu.

Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941. On the night of January 10, 1942, at 11:17 p.m., the California Limited stopped at a siding near Welles to take on passengers bound for Los Angeles. Lulu was one of them, riding through the night and most of the next day as the Limited made many stops. At Union Station in LA, she almost missed her coach seat on the Texas Special. After what seemed like a million miles over two nights of knotted-body semi-sleep, she transferred to the Katy Special for a half-million miles more. Then a cold, drafty bus dropped her smack at the main gate of Camp Desperation, where Ernie was waiting for her with a bouquet of what he thought were bluebonnets. They weren’t, but Lulu didn’t care.

For eleven nights, the bed of a dollar-a-day hotel room allowed Lulu and Ernie, when he had a pass, the best sex of their lives, since they were no longer fumbling in the back seat of a car, on a blanket in the Gum Tree Grove, or finding each other at night in the Little Iron Bend River Public Park. They wanted each other with the bursting passion that spills from the hearts of the young when, separated by time and distance and a global upheaval, they are young no more. Ernie had his duties during the day, but at night he and Lulu downed ice-cold beers and danced to a raucous band at a genuine Texas honky-tonk. They enjoyed cheap meals of Mexican-style food and more ice-cold beer. On their fourth night of great

passion, lying naked in sheets damp with sweat, enveloped by the dark of the hotel room, and with only an hour remaining before he had to return to the base, marriage was discussed, agreed on, settled. “And that was that.” Their wedding was held at the base chapel with an army chaplain and witnesses whom Ernie knew but Lulu didn’t. Outside, a Texas hailstorm threw down stones the size of peach pits.

Ernie had taken up smoking Lucky Strikes, so Lulu did, too, giving her something to do as she reversed her journey away from Camp Desperation, returning to Lone Butte a *married woman* with a husband in the service. When Ernie was sent to the B-17 air base on Long Island, New York, a plan was hatched for Lulu to get to the East Coast, but by then train travel was limited for civilians, especially pregnant women who suffered from weeks of morning sickness. Ernie and other Air Corpsmen were flown to England in new weaponless and seatless B-17s by way of Greenland, then Ireland. As passengers, they simply lay in the naked fuselage of the unpressurized, unheated, heavy bomber. Ernie never felt as cold as he did during that days-long flight, despite his fleece-lined clothes and multiple wool blankets. He never claimed to have seen Greenland, though his plane was grounded there by two days of ice storms, wind, and a ceiling of heavy clouds.

When the war ended, his son, Robby, was two years old and worth twelve demobilization points, according to the Department of War, so Ernie was discharged ahead of the childless servicemen. He needed a full week to make his way across postwar America, back to Lone Butte, and the best sex of his civilian life.

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The Fourth of July 1947 had come and gone—Ernie was in the parade, once again riding up on the Air Corps float with its papier-mâché twin-engine bomber, his old uniform not yet tightening up at his waist, chest, and thighs like many of the other veterans in the procession. Lulu and the kids waved to him from their claimed spot on the sidewalk in front of Clark’s Drugs, the storefront done up in the same bunting and forty-eight star flags that hung all over

America. The celebration of 171 years of independence had gone on all day in the 101-degree heat. The parade, the Junior Chamber of Commerce BBQ with the Cake Festival and band concert, then the hours of waiting for darkness and the fireworks show made the sober adults exhausted, the drinking adults drunken, all the kids overstimulated, and Lulu just plain *pooped*. The baby upchucking a stomach full of macaroni and pureed beets didn't help. Robby fell into the shallows of the Little Iron Bend River Park as he'd done the year before. Three days later, Lulu Falls Andersen was still pooped.

That morning, Ernie had *galumphed* out of the house and off to the shop. Robby was drawing, Nora was in her high chair cracking saltines and eating the pieces. The breakfast dishes were washed and air-drying in the wooden rack by the sink. The screened doors and windows of the house were open and the big trees—ninety-year-old sycamores—shadowed the front lawn, with physics pulling the cool, scented, soft air into the house.*

Lulu took a Blue Willow mug and saucer and poured that most satisfying *next* cup of Maxwell House from the Pyrex percolator on the stovetop. “Come to Mama,” she said to the coffee, adding three slaps of condensed milk. With the help of Elsie the Cow, Lulu took her coffee beige, and the teaspoon scoop of sugar made life worth living. Ernie took his coffee black and strong—he'd lived on it through the war, crediting his “joe” with defeating the Axis powers. Given an hour, such stuff would melt a porcelain cup and eat away the spoon.

“Robby,” Lulu called. “Bring in the newspaper, would you?” Robby was always so lost in his coloring that she knew she had to call out to him twice. “Robby? The paper, please.”

“Of course!” he shouted. “I almost forgot!”

“Pipes like a church organ,” Lulu said to herself, then sipped Maxwell House number two. *Ahhhhhh*.

Lulu heard the front door open, then close, then Robby appeared in the kitchen unfolding the paper. “Can I have the comic strips

* Air-conditioning was still *years* away for the Andersen home—for the *world*. Ernie eventually installed a rooftop swamp cooler to blast a column of refrigerated air straight down into the front hallway, but that didn't happen until 1954.

again, Mom?” In the last year, he’d gone from *Mommy* to *Mom*, a crossing from baby into boyhood that rendered a tiny rip in Lulu’s heart.

“Of course.” The comics were on the inside back page of section 3, and with them, Robby skidded back to his crayons and tablets in the living room, where he would copy and color *Blondie*, *Barney Google*, and *Dick Tracy*, not bothering with the words in the dialogue balloons that he couldn’t yet read.

The *Lone Butte Herald* was the morning newspaper, published and printed right there in town, in the former Merchants Bank Building. Lulu preferred the *Valley Daily Press* for its national features, but it came in the afternoon from Redding, up north, and there was no time to sit with the paper late in the day. The baby would be done napping, the house had to be straightened up, and dinner had to be started.*

Lulu had the morning *Herald* all to herself that day, wandering through its pages from back to front—from the comicless section 3 (advice, radio listings, the crossword) into section 2 (local news and obituaries) and finally the front section, starting with the editorials and letters to the editor on page 6. She had gone to Union High with the *Herald*’s coeditor, Tommy Werther (Tommy *Werth-less* when he was a sophomore), who fought the war from a desk in the navy yard in Vallejo. His editorial that morning lamented the behavior of idle veterans who, in times of opportunity afforded by the G.I. Bill of Rights, never went to school, never went to work, never took on the responsibilities of good citizens but opted instead for a life of hooliganism and lawlessness. Lulu lost interest in the column after two and a half paragraphs.

Pages 5, 4, 3, and 2 were mostly advertisements in bold graphics

* Ernie read the *Daily Press*, however, lazily, from front page to final, as he was at the end of his workday—home from the shop, in his stocking feet, his steel-toed work boots unlaced on the floor beside the La-Z-Boy, savoring two successive cans of Hamm’s beer, pondering the state of the Free World. He finished the paper just as Robby had set the forks, knives, napkins, and spoons, right when Lulu put the food on the table. A television would not be in the house for another nine years, by which time a third Andersen child, Stella, at age six, was talkative and bossy and would surely change the character

announcing Summer Sale-a-Thons! Hot Deals! ALL MATTRESSES MUST GO! Beside them were the lesser stories and those that were continued from page 1. When she finally folded over from section A, page 2, to the paper's leading headlines, Lulu was looking at a grainy wire-service, two-column square photograph of her brother, Bob Falls.

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He was not identified in the caption, but Lulu knew her baby brother, his wide nose, the crooked tooth in his grin, the question-mark shape of the back of his head—these had been in Lulu's vision most of her life and all of his. The photo had been snapped at night, the harsh contrast of the camera's flash capturing Bob Falls in a flippantly defiant pose, leaning back in the big saddle seat of a parked motorcycle, wearing cuffed jeans and a white T-shirt, his boots resting on the handlebars. He had a beer bottle in each hand. Other bottles and cans, empty dead soldiers, were scattered around him on the curb and in the gutter.

LAWLESS GANG TAKES OVER TOWN was the headline. The caption: *A drunken thug. A weekend of crime. Photo by AP.*

Bob had grown heavy. He looked older than his absence of a half decade should have made him look. His eyes were half closed, sleep lidded. He was jowly and needed a shave.

The story ran for six paragraphs on page 1, continuing on page 4 alongside the ad for Patterson's Appliances offering pay-per-month purchases. Earlier, Lulu had skipped the story but had studied the advertisement.* Now she read all about the two-day "riot" caused when "outlaw gangs" on motorcycles descended upon the small town of Hobartha, California, causing a day and a night of "mayhem." Hobartha was a 279-mile drive south on Highway 99, then 59 miles inland.

Lulu read and reread the story, flicking between the separated pages of the paper, looking for *Bob Falls* in print, but none of the

* Lulu and Ernie had been talking about putting money down on a new Norge refrigerator, moving the old one to the back porch for leftovers.

outlaw names were reported. Lulu read about fistfights, smashed windows, wild beer-drunk partying, and the roar of racing engines up Hobartha's main street at four in the morning. There were quotes—horror stories—from the police chief, a barber, a lady who owned a dress shop, the attendant of a filling station, and many terrorized citizens. The rule of law was restored only when a squad of highway patrolmen arrived. Arrests were made; some of the gang members fled the town, roaring away before dawn.

Had the sole brother to Lucille Falls Andersen fled as well? Or was he being held in the Hobartha City Jail? In another half-second click of her mind's eye, Lulu *saw* Bob Falls—in a jail cell, behind bars, on a hard, bare bench with a tin cup of soup in his hands. (Why the tin cup? Why the soup?)

Lulu went to the house telephone in the front hall, carrying the newspaper. She sat at the telephone table and dialed FIreside 6-344 so she could talk to Emmy Kaye Silvers Powell. E-K and Lulu had known each other since they were schoolkids, since the Silverses moved in next door to the Fallses' old place out on Webster Road in 1928. E-K and her older twin brothers, Larry and Wallace, had been constants for both Lulu and Bob despite Mr. and Mrs. Falls never quite getting used to living next door to Jews. The Silverses were never more religious than having one special dinner on a night called Passover (Lulu and Bob were regular guests at the Seder feast), and they put up a Christmas tree (free of any Jesus-in-the-manger images). But still, Lulu's parents afforded E-K and her family little more than neighborly civility, a coolness that thawed when Larry was killed on Guadalcanal and, months later, when Wallace's B-24 Liberator was vaporized into a mist of metal and flesh somewhere over Nazi-occupied Holland. Capping off that horrible stretch of time, Lulu's father, Robert Falls Sr., had a stroke, followed soon by a lethal heart attack. Her mother's frail temperament led her to fold up like a card table and spend her remaining days afraid and confused, expecting her husband to walk in the front door any second. The pneumonia she caught in late '43 took her life in twenty-six days. But as is the case in this world, some good and godly things happened as well: Claude Brainard purchased the Falls Printing Works for a good price, and he served in the war out

of harm's way, little Robby went through his baby illnesses with no disasters. Still, Lulu's little brother was a Marine somewhere in the Pacific, and she was alone with a kid back in Lone Butte. If black coffee defeated the Axis, Lucky Strikes and the friendship between E-K and Lulu saved two lives on the home front.

Few people in town had more than a single telephone in the house, and that phone was usually near the front door. A call would have to ring a number of times before someone could get to it. But E-K made a point of picking up her jangling receiver quickly, so as not to wake her husband, George, who worked the night shift at the Westinghouse lightbulb plant. His habit was to come home at dawn and read, falling asleep on the davenport in the living room, not far from the phone.

"Hello?" E-K whispered.

"Did you see the paper this morning?" Lulu, too, whispered into the Bakelite handset, although she wasn't going to wake anyone up.

"No, Lu. We take the *Daily Press*. George does the Word Jumble before he heads to the plant."

"Oh, shoot. Then you haven't seen."

"Seen what?"

"The front page of the *Herald*," Lulu whispered. "It's Bob's picture."

"Bob who?"

"My brother."

This was news that couldn't take a whisper. "Your brother? What in heaven for?"

"Oh, E-K." Lulu's voice caught deep in her chest. "It's just terrible . . ."

"Wait, kiddo," Emmy Kaye said with a hush. "I'll go next door. The Sapersteins get the *Herald*. I'll steal a look and call you right back."

Lulu hung up and looked in the directory for Western Union, which had changed its number since moving to an office in the lobby of the new Golden Eagle Hotel. Simon Kowall answered on the second ring with his trademark greeting: "WES . . . tern Union?"

Simon had learned Morse code as a signalman in the army. On his return to Lone Butte, he walked into the Western Union office,

still in his uniform, to ask for a job and had been hired on the spot. He was glad to tap out, at Lulu's request, IF ROBERT FALLS IN CUSTODY PLEASE CONTACT LULU LONE BUTTE down the wire to the Hobartha Police Department. "That'll be thirty cents, Lucille, the next time you're in town," he said.

Lulu did not notice that her son was up from the floor rug, now standing in the opening between the front hall and the living room. "What does that mean, Mom? *Custody*."

The phone rang BRRRNNGG! Before picking up, Lulu managed a smile at her good boy. "I bet Jill is waiting for you next door. Why not go play now?"

"It's not ten on the clock yet."

"Almost." BRRRNNGG! "Go have fun." Robby was gone like a breeze.

BRRRN . . . E-K was no longer whispering. "Dear heaven, that is Bob as I'm standing here. I've got the paper in my hands. Is he some kind of *crook* now?"

"I don't have a clue." Lulu sat down in the phone chair with its little table, absentmindedly taking up the pencil by the message pad. "I sent a telegram."

"To whom?"

"The police down there." Out of habit, Lulu took to writing long rows of cursive X's that would eventually cover the page; a worried pencil doodle. "Maybe Bob needs a bailout."

"Sit tight, Lu. I'll set a cold plate for George when he wakes up and come over. You and I are going to *smoke*." E-K smoked. A lot. Viceroy.

Lulu had a sudden desire for a lung full of Lucky Strike. Last winter, Ernie had sworn off cigarettes after a long, vicious bout of streptococcus, so Lulu quit, too. But she also kept a hidden pack in her sewing kit. She'd get it out when E-K showed up.

Lulu went to her bedroom. She had already stripped the morning sheets off the bed. Her husband sweated as he slept, so much that his pajamas were always soaked and the bedding needed changing every morning. In her half of the closet, up on the shelf, she pushed around the folded winter sweaters and holdalls full of the small things that never got thrown out, and she found the old hatbox where she kept her letters. Those from Ernie—dozens and dozens

of long, smartly composed pages filled with intricate details of the burdens of his duties, the longing for “all this” to be over, going all the way back to Camp Desperation—she kept neatly knotted up in twine. The letters from her old friends—her gal pals who had married and moved away or had just moved away—were in mismatched-sized stacks held together by rubber bands that were losing elasticity. As a record of her youth, Lulu retained form letters from MGM Studios, Hollywood, in response to fan mail she meant for the eyes of Franchot Tone, kept as a reminder of how silly she had been to assume a movie star would open mail from a girl in Lone Butte and then compose a response.

In the five years since he’d joined the service, Robert Falls had written home to Lulu all of eight times, those letters now aging upright against the side of the hatbox, kept separate from the others by a paper clip gone to rust; six were from his time in the service, two had been written since VJ Day.*

She sat on the bed and separated the wartime gospels of Bob Falls. His first, from May of 1942, had been sent from the Marine base in San Diego, scribbled in a smeared-ink scrawl on United States Marine Corps stationery.

Lulu,

I was in a truck crash and got busted up. I was in the back so took less of a beating than some of the other fellows—one of whom almost died. A dozen of us are in the Infirmary. I’ve got no broken bones beyond a wrist that looks like barb wire in the X-rays. It hurts like h—l to hold a pen. Got a hole in my gut, too, so I’m drinking my meals for a while. I can walk, as long as I take it easy. The USMC says I’ll be laid up for a while, but I’m still their property. I guess Uncle Sam Still Wants Me. There is a fellow in here with a case of, no kidding, the mumps. The guy is in agony. He’s still a Marine, too. I hope Ernie is well. I should have joined the Air Corps like him. You married a smart cookie.

*Love you lots,
Bob*

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* Victory Japan, August 15, 1945. Victory Europe was May 8, 1945.

As a boy, Bob Falls was not shy. He was merely busy *listening*. He would linger at the dinner table until the conversations were over. When the plates needed clearing, he would help his mother and Lulu, listening to their chatter during the washing, drying, and putting away. He was no reader of books beyond what his schooling dictated. When he went to the movies, he had few opinions on the picture other than “pretty good” or “nice enough.” He let everyone else talk about the Scarlet Pimpernel’s heroics or Bette Davis’s brittle voice. He nodded politely when Lulu called *Mutiny on the Bounty* a masterpiece.

When his father expanded Falls Printing Works into a going concern, Bob was only nine years old, but he learned the machinery and how to print a precise number of flyers, invitations, church bulletins. By the time he turned twelve he was at the shop most days after school and every Saturday, so it was only fair that his father pay him a salary of two, then four, then five dollars a week, which he rarely spent, collecting the greenbacks in, first, an old cigar box, then two more. Through his years at Union High, Bob had but one girlfriend—Elaine Gamellgaard, a self-confident young woman who, beginning in the second week of their freshman Latin class, had given Bob no option in the relationship. Elaine arranged for Bob to empty his cigar-box vaults in exchange for her brother’s very old Ford. (“All that rust?” Lulu had warned him.) He had the oil-leaking bucket-of-bolts running before he had a driver’s license. There was a joke going around—which Bob was sure to have heard, with no comment—that it was a good thing the Japs* had bombed Pearl Harbor, or else Elaine Gamellgaard was going to be Mrs. Robert Falls the day after graduation and a mother by Christmas, if not Halloween.

As it was, Bob did not attend his high-school graduation with

* A note on the use of that racial slur to define the enemy. During the war years, “Jap” was in such common usage that newspapers used the slur in headlines. Other racial slurs were common in a vernacular of ignorance, ease, and prejudice. Using such dog-whistle slurs in these pages is meant to communicate that that was Then, this is Now, and we all know better. And back then, the Germans were usually called Nazis. Not, say, Krauts or Luger-Heads.

Elaine Gamellgaard or anybody else. He turned eighteen years old on the first of February, enlisted in the Marines the day after blowing out his birthday candles, gave Elaine a quick kiss with no promises attached, and was gone off to boot camp after Easter. The jilted Miss Gamellgaard rebounded with aplomb, snagging Vernon Cederborg that September and moving to Pocatello, Idaho. Vernon's heart condition made him no good for the service, but he did teach hydraulics to navy machinists and, postwar, had his own plumbing outfit and five daughters.

★ ★ ★

While USMC Private Robert A. Falls—#O-457229—was convalescing from a punctured gut and a fractured wrist, his class of Marines completed boot camp, weapons training, and was shipped off to take on the Japanese forces at Guadalcanal—a place no one had ever heard of.* Bob's injuries took weeks to heal before he was sent back to complete boot camp, assigned the M2-2 flamethrower as his tool of war, and trained in its use and tactics until, finally, he and other Marines were marched aboard ships and sent sailing over the western horizon to an undisclosed place where he was yet another *Fucking New Guy* waiting for his chance to kill the enemy, too.

Every week, for as long as the war lasted, Lulu sent her little brother a letter, a card, a package—*something*—to a military post office in San Francisco. From there, somehow, her mail would get to Bob. Ernie was in England, but Lulu had no idea where her brother was other than somewhere in the PTO—the Pacific Theater of Operations.

Six of the letters in Bob's return correspondence traveled via V-mail—V for Victory—each short note a miracle of imagination, technology, and logistics. From somewhere in the Pacific, Bob Falls and all the other servicemen would take government-issue pens to single pages of government-issue writing tablets and write letters home. Every guy knew not to write about where they were, where they were going, or even the names of their officers,

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* Some maps named the place Guadalcan-nar.

because censors would CENSOR such critical, top-secret information. Bob Falls joined the Marine Corps to fight the war, but other guys served their country by reading his V-mail just to blacken out words like *New Caledonia*, *U.S.S. Wardell*, and *Lieutenant Colonel Sydney Planke*. Bob didn't mind that the single sheet of a V-mail didn't hold much of a letter. True, his cursive handwriting was big and slanted and took up a lot of space on the page, but he wrote down all he had to say—everything that was allowed, anyway.

The original V-mail letters were photographed, then shrunk down to a size smaller than a fingernail and connected to long spools of microfilm, holding as many Victory-mails as possible. Airplanes then carried thousands of spools of the microscopic letters across the Pacific Ocean, as many as a *million* V-mails, to be processed in America, enlarged to half their original size.* The distinctive V-mail, with the addresses of parents, wives, girlfriends, or Lulu Andersen lined up with the envelope's transparent window, made the receipt of one an event. Bob's oversize penmanship made easy reading; small handwriting made some V-letters undecipherable gibberish.

Lulu spread Bob's letters in front of her on the bare mattress. Taking them out of the envelopes took more time than reading them.

12/26, '42

Sis Lu,

I was at a place for awhile, now I'm here. Can't say where here is. Might as well be on Mars. We see movies outside. All this time and the only Jap I've seen is Charlie Chan. The other fellows saw plenty before I got here. You know they get ice cream in the Navy? Now they tell me. I'm doing good, but the Japs might want to change that. Haha. Happy New Year. Bob

* Imagine having to deliver full-sized letters. The drain on matériel, aircraft, fuel, and personnel. Whoever came up with this idea was a genius.

May 17, '43

Sis Lu,

Happy Birthday. Can't believe I have a nephew with my name. Bet Ernie is busting. Some days, I'd do anything to be in one of his airplanes and off my feet. **CENSORED CENSORED CENSORED CENSORED**. The nights are beautiful here. No Japs but plenty of stars. Guys are saying the war won't be over til Golden Gate in '48. Some say Not Done til '51. By then, I'll be either too old, or a General. Haha. Bob

Dec. '43

Sis Lu,

The papers might write about our unit and the fight the Japs put up. Don't think for a minute they got the best of me. We are sitting pretty right now, free cigarettes and Coca-Cola. An all-girl band came through and put on a show. Half the guys asked the sax player to marry them. I'm holding out for a tromboneist. Ha ha. Bob

Aug 4, '44

Sis Lu,

Got your pictures. "Little" Bob looks like a tough cowboy. When did you start smoking? Sometimes, that's all we do around here. Japs had us busy for awhile but now we're back and sleeping a lot. **CENSORED CENSORED CENSORED CENSORED CENSORED** I miss driving. I dream of that Ford of mine. I must be in LOVE. Ha Hah. Bob

December 1944

Sis Lu,

I hope you have a great Christmas and New Years. Back in a place I cant say, but its as good as any. A buddy made corn-bread in a mess kit and it tasted like cake to us. Not sure what else to say. Bob.

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October 2, 1945

Lulu,

Made it to Japan, after all. How did these people make such trouble? Why did they keep at it for so long? Lots of little kids and lots of old women. We took care of most of their men. V-J Day? I'll believe it when I'm home. Bob.*

On a day in 1946, Bob Falls trooped down the gangway of the USS *Tressent* with a few hundred other Marines. Setting foot once again on *Terra Americana*, he was soon mustered out of the uniform he had worn for half a decade. The exact dates of these life-altering events he kept to himself. He spent much of his accrued combat pay on the purchase of a 1941 Indian Four Inline Motorcycle. A few other ex-servicemen did the same thing with other makes of motorcycles, either prewar models or war surplus. The lot of them began riding around Southern California, then beyond, living much as they had during the war, as itinerants, waiting for a reason to move on to the next camp, the next town, the next fight.

Where Bob had gone was unknown to Lulu until she received his most recent letter. No longer sent via V-mail, it came folded in a brown envelope with a teepee printed on the flap. The postmark said Albuquerque, New Mexico. His full-sized penmanship was in full flower in dark green ink.

X-mas 1946

Sis Lulu,

I hope you and Ernie and Little Bob have a white Christmas.

I'm in Albuquerque N.Mex. We came along Route 66. You know the joke they tell about this place? It's not new and it's not Mexico. I have a job lined up in Texas. Put this in little Bob's piggy bank. Happy New Years, too. Big Bob.

Enclosed were two one-dollar bills.

* After the Japanese surrender, Bob's Marine unit was stationed in Nagasaki, which had been atom-bombed on August 9, 1945.

His appearance on the front page of that morning's *Herald* was the first sign she'd had of her little brother since those teepee Christmas dollars. Last July, Lulu had sent news of Nora's birth to the only address she had for him—the APO—a pink birth-announcement card, a letter, and a small square photograph of the baby and the mother. He never saw them.

"Yoo-doodly-hoo?" E-K walked into the kitchen and put on a fresh pot of coffee while Lulu collected the baby from her crib in the tiny nook meant for a sewing machine. They went out to the sycamore-shaded front porch and sat at the old table with the new chairs.

"Give me that little bag of muffins," E-K said, taking Nora in her arms, the first of many Lucky Strikes crimped in her lips. Lulu lit up and inhaled like she had during the war, when cigarettes evolved from affectation to medicant; she smoked to relieve her stress, her fear, and her anxiety during the three years of dark nights.

"What got into Bob?" E-K asked, running her fingers through Nora's adorable baby curls. "Some soldiers came back and can't hold jobs, can't sleep through the night. Some are in mental institutions. I read that in the *Saturday Evening Post*."

"Bob wasn't a soldier. He was a Marine." Lulu poured more coffee, adding her dose of sugar and evaporated milk. "Maybe he was shell-shocked . . ."

"Mysterious is what he is. When we were little, he'd have those eyes open, but his mouth shut, like he was keeping a secret from all of us. Did he tell you that he had a motorcycle?"

"You saw all he wrote." Lulu had shared Bob's eight letters. "I didn't know a thing. If I don't hear from him or the police down there, I'll still have nothing but questions."

The ladies had finished almost the full pack of Luckys when Robby and Jill Burns came in after playing next door.

"Good heavens. It's lunchtime!" Lulu rubbed out what was left of her lit cigarette, hoping Robby had failed to see her smoking.

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Ernie came home from the shop just after 4:00 p.m. to find the *Daily Press* waiting for him on his La-Z-Boy. The afternoon paper carried a story about the motorcycle gang that destroyed the tranquility of Hobartha but ran no picture of Bob Falls or any of the other thugs. By the time Robby and Jill were out back in the mini orchard playing Wag-a-Bump, Ernie had his boots off and was in the La-Z-Boy with Nora in his lap, tickling his daughter and saying silly things like *Who is this little thing? Who is this in my lap?* Nora giggled, in love. When Lulu brought him his first open can of Hamm's, she also carried the front page of the morning's *Herald*.

"You see anything familiar here?" she asked.

Ernie was confused. He wasn't home for half an hour and here was his wife playing twenty questions. But then he saw what Lulu wanted him to see.

"Jesus H!" Nora cackled again at Daddy's funny face.

While Lulu got the meal on the table—calling Robby in to do his usual chore and set the utensils—Ernie read about what had happened down in Hobartha, the riots and the fracas with the highway patrol. During dinner, the parents kept mum on the subject and stayed quiet all around, which Robby noticed. When the meal was done, his mother sat at the table longer than she normally did, the dirty dishes still in front of them all. His father asked about E-K and her husband, saying that no man should have to work all night to raise a family and there was no way he was ever going take a paycheck from Westinghouse Light. Robby sat, listening to both the chitchat of his parents and the quiet lulls of what was not spoken between them, until his mother let out a sigh and started clearing the dishes. Robby did not have to be told to collect all the forks, knives, and spoons.

"At least his name wasn't in the paper," Ernie said in a low tone as he took Nora out of her high chair and back into his lap. "The town might not ever know."

Nora's very first birthday came on July 9, so every friend of the family, who all had kids of their own, came by to watch the little girl make a mess of her single candle and large lemon cake with white icing. Lulu was still waiting for word about her brother, but the phone never rang any. Did a telegram come from Simon Kowall down at Western Union.