

LIFE IN THE 1950s

BITTER RAPIDS, Minn., Jan. 23, 1952

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

/National Newswire/ -- Last night's low temperature in Bitter Rapids, Minnesota plunged to -30 degrees, the area's second-coldest temperature since 1909, which was recorded at -55 degrees. The town with a population of 6,200 people sits along the Rainy River, near the border of Ontario, Canada. It is recognized as the coldest place in the continental United States and the fifth coldest on Earth.

(Source: National Weather Service)

May 1952

Bitter Rapids, Minnesota

Maakade (*mok 'a-day*) drove his shovel into the springy brown carpet of spruce needles. The solid dirt beneath held strong. Reverberations from the impact of steel striking earth traveled up the handle, shocked his joints. Though the spring thaw was well underway, the rich soil deep within Koochiching State Forest was never entirely free from the bitter freeze. Maakade believed some foundations were impossible to fracture. Still, he lifted his shovel and attacked the earth again.

The men working beside him also struggled with the mandate to break the earth between the Rainy River and the old logging road, to reinforce a retaining wall built by Civilian Conservation Corps workmen during the Depression. Sweat darkened the underarms of their striped jumpsuits, despite the raw morning air. The government no longer funded the CCC to do such work. Why would they when inmates were in abundance to provide free labor? The men jabbed their tools toward the ground, jumped onto the shovel blades with their leather boots and hefty weight, endeavored to split the earth, perhaps an inch, if they were lucky.

Maakade paused to catch his breath. He watched the water churn and rush downstream, frigid and pure from fresh snowmelt. A chiffon mist drifted out over the smooth rocks of the riverbank. He inhaled crisp, pine-scented oxygen deep into his lungs.

Prison guards watched the work crew from up the bank. Distanced from the icy mist of the river. Close enough to crack a skull when necessary.

“Get your black ass back to work, boy,” the foreman shouted. “Don’t make me come down there and get my boots wet.”

Maakade thrust the shovel back at the frozen ground without looking back toward the voice. No need to give Foreman Ogren a reason to get his boots wet or his baton bloody.

Most men still called him “boy,” even though his raven hair was streaked with gray. They called his ass black. That, he did not mind. His mother had named him *Maakade*, the Anishinaabe word for black, out of love, so he would always remember the blood his father had given him. When his father died and his mother took Maakade to live with her family among the Ojibwe tribe, he learned he would never be permitted to forget the black half of his blood, for better or for worse.

Across the river, an enormous bird swooped down from the jagged treetops, sounding an alarm call. *Kyak-kyak-kyak*.

It was not only Maakade who paused at his work now. All the jumpsuit-clad men halted their shoveling to watch the massive creature – easily four feet from wing tip to wing tip – glide down to the river. Its snowy, ebony-flecked feathers and vast wingspan gave the bird an otherworldly air. It perched upon a fallen cedar and folded up its great wings. Even the guards were intrigued and eased their way down the embankment for a closer look. They rubbed their jaws, scratched their heads. None had seen such a bird, had ever even imagined one could exist.

None, except for Maakade. His eyes darted downstream and into the woods. His head jerked to look sideways and over his shoulder.

The other inmates noticed his agitation and a prickle of unease crept up their hairy arms. “What’s the matter, Maak?”

“That is a gyrfalcon.”

“So?”

Maakade could’ve said more. He could’ve said the mighty falcon comes down from the Arctic only in winter, never in spring. He could’ve said it flies and hunts by night, never by day. He knew the falcon was an omen, a warning sent to him by his Wolf Brother. He knew he could not say such things.

With a flourish, the great bird took flight again, winging low, its orange feet skimming the choppy water. The men watched until it disappeared into the mist upstream.

“All right,” the guards said. “Show’s over.”

The work crew returned to the task of breaking the earth, but Maakade’s attention remained upstream. Ogren strode toward him, smiling, baton poised, pleased with the excuse to release some pent-up frustration. Maakade sensed the guard’s approach. He did not flinch. He merely extended his arm to point upstream.

Ogren slowed, despite himself. He glanced upstream, squinting into the sun that had finally broken over the trees and made the river sparkle. He saw what had captured Maakade’s attention. A small canoe, careening downstream, pitching and bobbing over the torrents.

“Still too damn cold to be out on the river,” he said.

Maakade nodded slowly, his gaze fixed on the tiny watercraft. In the distance, somewhere in the mist, the gyrfalcon sounded its warning cry again. Once more the group was captivated by the change from the mundane. They moved together in a huddle along the riverbank watching the canoe and its two small passengers approach the white water.

“Jesus, they’re just kids,” said one of the inmates.

“They’ll never make it through those rapids,” said another.

A pulse of energy surged through the group. Heavy boots shifted on the hard-packed riverbank. The men glanced back and forth, at one another, out to the river.

Voices mixed with the roar of the water in the distance – panic-stricken young voices – as the canoe angled down into the first tier of rapids. The craft disappeared in the foam. Maakade counted his heart beats. One, two, three, four. Finally, the canoe spurted up out of the river, nose first. It flipped end over end, catapulting the boys into the air. Time slowed. The boys seemed to hover midair before plunging into the frigid water, among the uneven rocks.

“I’ll radio for help,” shouted one of the guards, turning to scramble up the bank toward the bus.

No one else moved. They waited a lifetime, breathless, until the boys' heads finally broke the water's surface.

"Are you going in after them?" Maakade shouted to the remaining guards as the boys were whisked down the river toward them.

"I can't swim," Ogren said. The others shrugged their shoulders, pushed their palms upward in evasion.

Maakade crouched down to tear at his boot laces. He looked in the direction of his fellow inmates. "Get further downstream."

He stood and kicked off his boots, shed his jumpsuit and ran toward the river's edge in his undershirt and shorts. The glacial air stung his sweaty skin. He knew the water would be far worse. He pushed the fact from his mind. Little John - an inmate seven-foot-tall, if he was a foot - bounded along the riverbank like a giraffe. The foreman shouted after them both, telling them not to be getting any ideas about running off, thumping his baton against his palm.

Maakade's feet hit the icy water. For a fraction of a second, he hesitated. He took two more running strides and dove slanting into the rushing river. Every muscle in his body seized with the shock of cold. The current pulled him like a stone to the inky depths of the water. It squeezed the air from his lungs - giant bubbles of oxygen blasting from his nose and mouth, escaping to the surface. His body was yanked downstream, submerged, paralyzed.

He must not panic, he knew. *This is my river. The river of my people*, Maakade reminded himself. The Anishinaabe and the Rainy River had served one another since the dawn of time. He had swum and fished and washed in the river since he was strong enough to stand. *Omagakiins*, his mother had called him. Little Frog.

Maakade extended his body underwater, pushed his feet out in front of him, let the current carry him downstream and up until he felt the sun on his face again. He rolled to his stomach and swam perpendicular to the current until he reached a fallen trunk

wedged in the rocks. With his arm looped around a thick branch, he scanned the water upstream.

The boys had managed to find one another in the foamy water and clung together as they tumbled through the rushing torrents. Maakade timed their approach and lunged back out toward the center of the river, crossing the current, just in time to grab hold of the boys.

“Hold on!” Maakade shouted, catching a mouthful of water. He spat and shouted again. “Lay flat!”

They clung to his body as he powered across the current toward the shore. The larger of the boys kicked his legs to help propel their tangle of bodies and limbs. Maakade spotted another fallen tree jutting from the shore and grasped for it as the current pulled them toward the next tier of rapids. The rough bark tore the skin of his palm, but the frigid water had numbed all pain. The boys scrambled along his lanky frame like climbing a rope-bridge, through the water and up onto the trunk. They collapsed, hugging the branches, holding each other, faces pressed against the jagged bark. They gasped for air. Their bodies shook violently in the cold.

Blood oozed from Maakade’s palm, spiraled down his forearm into the river. The muscles in his shoulders began to tremble. His frozen fingers lost their grip on the branch. The current ripped his body from safety and propelled him toward the white water, where he disappeared into the mist and rocks.

LIFE IN THE 1990s

PHOENIX, June 26, 1990

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

/National Newswire/ -- The temperature in Phoenix soared to a record-high 122 degrees today. Sky Harbor International Airport was forced to shut down for several hours, as a result. Aircraft manufacturers do not have performance data above 122 degrees, therefore all aircraft were grounded until the temperature dropped below that threshold. Phoenix ranks first among the hottest cities in the United States.

(Source: National Weather Service)

August 1990

Phoenix, Arizona

April tips the syrup bottle and drowns the blueberry toaster-waffles on her plate. When was the last time she had a free morning to eat breakfast at the kitchen table, sip coffee, read the newspaper? Her summer classes at the community college had concluded, and April miraculously had the day off work. No textbooks to study. No research papers to write. No patty melts and iced teas to serve up to fussy old people who tip a quarter and a dime.

She stuffs a drippy forkful of waffle into her mouth, unfolds the *USA Today*, and sighs.

Frank shatters her serenity. He lumbers into the kitchen, rubber flip-flops thumping along the linoleum. April rolls her eyes.

“You’re not at work,” he says.

“Nope,” she says.

“How come?”

“And a lovely good morning to you, too, Daddy Dearest.”

“Dial it down, April,” Frank says. “I’m just surprised. You’re never home.”

She folds the newspaper backwards and in half, sets it down on the table to read.

Frank pours a cup of coffee. He looks out the kitchen window to the backyard. It’s late August, eight in the morning, and the giant thermometer dial on the patio reads 97 degrees.

“Hot.”

His daughter looks over at him. Does he mean the coffee or the weather? Does it matter? She returns to the article she had been reading about a 1955 cold case.

“Hey, Dad, where in Minnesota are you from again?”

“Why?”

“I’m reading this article about a body they found wrapped in a quilt along some river in Minnesota, like thirty-five years ago. That’s about when you and Gram moved, right?”

Frank opens the freezer door. “Where’s the waffles?”

“Just polished them off,” she says.

He stares into the open freezer, lets the cold air pour out and chill his face. He touches the buildup of crusty ice on the interior walls.

“It says they never identified the body,” April takes another stab at conversation. “Some gung-ho cop up there decided to take another look at the file after all this time. Probably hoping to solve a big case, get a promotion, and get his butt out of Podunkville.”

She pauses a moment, reads another line or two.

“It’s a little town called Bitter Rapids, near the Canadian border. Ever heard of it? Is it near where you lived?” she asks.

Frank slams the freezer door shut. “What am I supposed to eat?”

“Have some toast,” his daughter suggests. “And fruit. That’s healthier than syrup-coated waffles anyway.”

“If it’s so healthy, why didn’t you eat that and save me the waffles?”

“Because I’m a strong young woman in the prime of her life, and you’re an old chubby guy who should be watching what he eats.”

Frank belts out a slow, fake laugh. He rummages through the pantry cupboard and finds the remains of a loaf of bread – two moldy heels in the bottom of the bag. He holds it up, shakes it in April’s direction. He waits for her to turn and look, but she doesn’t take the bait. She’s transfixed by the newspaper. Frank tosses the bag across the kitchen toward the open trash can. It bounces off the edge and lands on the floor.

“They printed a color picture of the quilt in the paper,” April says. “The police chief is hoping someone, somewhere will recognize it and be able to tell them who it belonged to. Isn’t that wild?”

She holds the paper up to show him. Frank doesn’t respond.

“Maybe it’s my imagination, but the quilt kind of seems familiar.” April studies the photo a little longer. She stands and carries the paper over to her father, holds it out for him again. “What do you think?”

He glances at it and turns back to the half-empty pantry shelves. “I think it’s a quilt, April. All quilts look alike.”

The telephone rings. Father and daughter stare each other down as the 1970s-era harvest-yellow phone on the wall ding-a-lings a second time, and a third.

“Why don’t you make yourself useful and answer that, while I see if there’s any food left in the house at all,” Frank says.

April tosses the paper on the table with a huff and strides across the kitchen to answer the phone.

“Hello? Yes. She what? You’ve got to be kidding me,” April rakes her fingers across her forehead. “Well, what do you want us to do? Fine. Whatever. We’re on our way.”

Frank is already dumping his coffee into the sink. “Let me guess. That was the nursing home.”

“Does anybody else ever call us? Gram’s freaking out about who-knows-what. Pulled the oxygen tube out of her nose and got out of bed. Fell down, then took a swing at the nurse who tried to get her back up.”

They stand for a moment, surveying the kitchen, mourning the loss of yet another potentially carefree Saturday. Frank opens the dishwasher and places his empty cup on the top rack. April clears her dishes from the table and hands them to her dad.

“Go get dressed,” she says. “I’ll cut some fruit. You can eat while I drive.”

Franks rubs the back of his neck. April closes the dishwasher door and opens the fridge. He turns and walks to his room without responding.

“Gee, thanks, April. You’re such a good daughter,” April mutters sardonically as she centers a cantaloupe on the cutting board. “Aw heck, don’t thank me, Dad. I’m delighted to spend my first day off after summer school to drive your grumpy ass to the old folks’ home.”

She raises a chef’s knife into the air and brings it down in a punishing blow. The ripe melon splits in two, its tender guts exposed.

* * * *

Frank and April hear the chatter of the nursing staff when the elevator doors open. As they turn the corner to the nursing station, a hush falls. All eyes are on them as they walk down the hall toward Evelyn Parson’s room. The door is propped open.

“It would be different if you had dementia, Mrs. Parson. The nurses would understand outbursts like this.” The doctor stands at the foot of her bed, arms folded across his chest. He shakes his head. “But under these circumstances, you’re just being difficult and mean. I don’t want to sedate you, but this behavior can’t continue. You need to be respectful to the staff. You need to do as you’re told.”

Evelyn crosses her arms right back at him. “Bite me.”

April erupts in laughter and leans against the door frame. Frank dashes in the room. “Mom! What the heck?”

The doctor asks to speak with Frank outside the room. Frank shoots his mother a hard look and follows the white coat into the hall. April sits down on the bed and adjusts the oxygen tube in Evelyn’s nose, tucks the thin hose back behind her ears.

“So, what’s got your panties in a wad today, Gram?” she asks.

Evelyn pulls the newspaper from the bedside table and drops it onto April’s lap. She points a spotted finger at the front page.

Her long, tobacco-yellowed nail taps the photo. April's eyebrows shoot up, her mouth drops open.

"I knew it," she says, her gaze fixed on the colorful quilt. She looks up at her grandmother. "You guys know who this quilt belongs to. You know who the dead guy is."

Evelyn peers into her granddaughter's eyes. She draws in some oxygen through the tube in her nose. "I need to get home," she wheezes, "to Bitter Rapids."

The men re-enter the room. Evelyn repeats herself. "I need to get home, Frank."

"No, you don't, Mom."

"I need to get home to Minnesota." Evelyn addresses the doctor now.

Out of the question, he tells her. She can't take her oxygen tank on an airplane. I'll take the bus then, Evelyn says. No. Travel is too risky for someone with emphysema and chronic bronchitis, he says. Sitting in one position for extended periods of time would cut off circulation, make blood settle in the extremities, create clots, cause a stroke. He shakes his head at her, in a silent gesture that says you can't travel, and shame on you for smoking all your life.

"Then I'll drive myself," Evelyn says, swallowing down a few choice words she wants to add. She pushes back the blanket and slides her legs to the side of the bed. "I'll just take lots of breaks to walk and stretch."

"Cripes, Mom. You can barely go to the toilet on your own. You're not driving across the country."

April watches her grandmother pause and blink hard. She shoots her dad a dagger-filled glance. *Wow*, she mouths at him. The doctor drops his chin, stares at the floor. Frank exhales and rubs his temples. He eases toward the bed.

"Look, Mom, I'm sorry." He rubs her back for a moment. "Okay? I really am. But you can't fly and you can't drive."

Evelyn turns her head to look at her son. His eyes plead with her. *Let it go.* The pump on the oxygen tank expands and contracts rhythmically. *Hiss, click, shoop. Hiss, click, shoop.*

“There’s nothing there for us,” he lowers his voice to a whisper. “Isn’t that what you’ve always told me? Nothing but pain, and memories best forgotten.”

“I was wrong, Frankie,” she says. “I need to go back. I need to face it, to set the record straight before I die.”

“Come on now,” Frank says, stepping away. “Don’t talk like that.” April reaches for Evelyn’s hand. It’s icy cold.

Hiss, click, shoop. Hiss, click, shoop.

“I’ll drive you, Gram.”

Frank turns toward the window. He releases a frustrated sigh, puts his hands on his hips, shakes his head slowly.

The doctor looks from Frank to April to Evelyn. He moves toward the door, pauses a moment for one more look. “I’ll have a nurse type up the discharge paperwork.”

* * * *

Frank and April set up Gram and her oxygen tank in her old bedroom at the house, and for two weeks, they argue.

He tells his daughter it’s dangerous for two women to travel alone – peeing at filthy truck stops, sleeping in cramped motels, driving for hundreds of middle-of-nowhere miles. She tells him she can take care of herself. Okay, but can she take care of a sick old lady? Frank wants to know. April is less sure of that part. Come with us, if you’re so damn worried about it, she fires back at him. Going back to Bitter Rapids is a bad idea, he says, and storms out.

Father and daughter continue to bob and weave, and paw and parry, until finally, during breakfast, April decides to go for the body shot.

“You know who that quilt belongs to,” she accuses. “You know the dead guy.”

Frank pounds the table with his fists. He stands and goes to his room. April draws her finger around the syrup pooled on her empty plate, stuffs the sticky sweet digit in her mouth, sucks it clean. Frank returns a moment later and hands April a framed snapshot. She recognizes it. It has been on his bedroom dresser forever, though she'd never paid it much attention. Now, April sees it with fresh eyes. A black and white photo of her Gram as a young woman, kneeling on the ground with a picnic basket beside a four-door Oldsmobile. A little boy sits beside her. Spread beneath them is a quilt. *The quilt.*

April stares at the photo. The hands on the plastic wall-clock tick off the seconds. She touches the glass of the small frame with her index finger, traces the edge of the quilt.

After a moment, Frank tosses a triangular scrap of fabric onto the table. It's hemmed along two sides. The third side is jagged, frayed. April sets down the frame and picks up the fabric.

"Whoa," she says. The young woman turns the scrap over in her hands, rubs her thumb across embroidered words.

*The best kind of sleep beneath heaven above,
is under a quilt handmade with love.
For Frank and Evelyn, married June 15, 1938*

"Gram told me to cut the corner off with my pocketknife," Frank says, "so no one would know who it belonged to."

"Holy shit," April says under her breath, laying the quilt fragment on the table and looking up at her dad. Her eyes flicker with new comprehension, and with a thousand questions. She glances down the hall, toward her grandmother's bedroom. She whispers, "Oh my God, Dad. Did Gram murder somebody?"

"No. Of course not. But," he says and pauses. He breathes in a slow, deliberate lungful of air and releases it. "Now you can see why she can't go back to Bitter Rapids."

April strokes the tattered fabric. "Now I see why she *has* to go."

September 1990

Phoenix, Arizona

Arrangements are made, excuses are given, and plans are drawn for the “Great Parson Road Trip of 1990.” Frank will take a leave of absence from work. April will take off the fall semester from school. Upon their return to Phoenix, she’ll work full-time until the spring semester to help offset the cost of their insane excursion.

Now, in mid-September, Frank and April stare at the assortment of suitcases, sleeping bags and folding lawn chairs piled in the driveway. Eight oxygen tanks stand in a row like soldiers. They decide April’s ten-year-old Toyota Corolla hatchback has a better chance of making the cross-country haul than Frank’s 1973 Pontiac station wagon. But now they question the feasibility of fitting in everything they need for the trip.

“We can put the tanks and the ice chest in the back,” Frank suggests, “and tie the rest on the roof.”

April laughs at the image that springs into her mind - a mountain of baggage teetering atop her small car. She shakes her head no, but says, “Let’s do it.”

They set about piling items and securing the heap with bungee cords, moving this here and that there, until they find the right combination. The overnight temperatures have finally dipped below ninety degrees, and the air almost feels cool when they begin. As they work, the heat radiates up from the cement. The sun glints off the car windows. Islands of sweat take shape in the underarms and down the back of Frank’s Eagles T-shirt. It’s faded, a little threadbare around the collar, a bit snug in his midriff. Evelyn says it’s ratty. Frank says it’s comfortable. It

reminds him of a happy time in his life. He needs all the reminders he can get.

April pauses from their work to sweep her long, flaxen hair back and up into a ponytail. She twists the mass of strands into a bun high on her head and secures it with the elastic band she wears around her wrist. She thinks about the adventure ahead of them, about the first time she will cross the Arizona border into another state. The sweat at the nape of her neck begins to evaporate. The cool sensation makes her wonder if it will be cold when they get to Minnesota.

Frank's mind is stuck on how long the trip will take. He regrets the lie he told his boss - that he needed a leave of absence to drive his ailing mother to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. The man hadn't questioned why the new Mayo facility in nearby Scottsdale wasn't good enough, though Frank had a lie prepared for that, too. Just in case. He hopes he'll still have a job when he returns. *How many lies have I told in my lifetime? How many secrets have I kept?* Too many to count. Frank pushes on the baggage heap to test its stability. He unhooks one of the bungee cords, pulls it tighter and secures it further around the pile. He tests the stability again. He silently asks God not to let everything come crashing down on the highway, and promises not to tell any more lies if He brings them all safely home from the trip.

"I'm ready," Gram calls from the front door. She pulls an oxygen tank on its wheelie-cart beside her with one hand. She lugs a hefty wood box under her other arm.

April eyes the box and smacks her forehead with the palm of her hand.

"We should have put everything in the back seat and strapped your Gram on the roof, instead," Frank mutters under his breath. "Beverly Hillbillies-style."

But Evelyn isn't as old as she looks, and her hearing is just fine.

"There'd be less crap to stow if you hadn't insisted on coming along," Evelyn says. She glances in the back seat. "There's room for my box on the floor back there."

Frank tucks the box behind the passenger seat, and April climbs into the rear. He needs the driver's seat pushed all the way back. Without any leg room, April sits lengthwise across the bench-style seat, her head leaned back against the triangular side-window. Gram settles into the front, and Frank tucks in the oxygen tank beside her legs.

He double-checks to make sure the house is locked. Then he climbs into the Corolla and starts the engine.

"I'm hungry," Gram announces.

"We'll get something when we make our first stop in Camp Verde," Frank says.

"I want breakfast at Smitty's one last time."

"It's not going to be your last time, Gram," April says, reaching forward to squeeze her grandmother's shoulder.

Frank backs out of the driveway onto the street.

"Doesn't matter," he concedes. "I'm hungry, too. Might as well eat now."

They settle in a booth in the restaurant's smoking section. The waitress, Laura, greets them by name. April works with Laura at the restaurant, and Frank always requests her section when he brings Evelyn to the all-you-can-eat fish fry on Friday nights. Laura balances a Diet Coke and two cups of coffee in one hand. She has an ashtray in the other, sets it down in front of Evelyn.

"Steak and eggs all around?" she asks.

They all nod.

"And rye toast for you, right Frank?" she asks.

"Yes, thanks," he says. "I'm always amazed that you can remember all your customers' orders."

"Only my best customers." She smiles, tucks a wisp of hair behind her ear.

Frank takes a drink of his coffee as the woman walks away. April watches him, notices the hint of pink in his cheeks.

"You should ask her out, Dad, when we get back."

Frank shrugs his shoulders, shakes his head a little from side to side.

“She likes you,” April continues. “I can tell. She talks to you differently than her other customers.”

“Pft,” Frank responds. “I’m old enough to be her dad.”

“Maybe if you had her when you were ten,” April laughs.

Evelyn taps a Lucky Strike from its pack.

“Leave the man alone, April,” she says, the cigarette bobbing between her lips as she speaks. She holds a lighter to it and takes a drag. “Maybe he doesn’t want the hassle of another woman in his life.”

Frank is mute, takes another drink of coffee, scratches at a gouge in the Formica table with his thumbnail. April watches Evelyn exhale smoke out her nose, past the oxygen tube in her nostrils.

“With all due respect, Gram, just because you married your soulmate and never wanted to be with anyone else doesn’t mean Dad feels that way. Maybe he doesn’t want to be alone the rest of his life.”

“Maybe the two of you should change the subject,” Frank interjects.

Laura approaches the table with their food. She serves Evelyn and April first, then sets Frank’s plate in front of him. She smiles, asks if he wants anything else. He coughs, says no thank you. She insists on at least freshening his coffee and returns quickly with a full pot. When Laura leaves them to their meals, Evelyn speaks up again.

“You know, April, sometimes it’s better to be alone.”

April shakes her head. She cuts her steak, stabs a piece with her fork, and dips it in her egg yolk.

“How can you say that, Gram, when you’ve never *not* been alone? You don’t even know the alternative.”

Evelyn hesitates a moment. She watches April chew a mouthful of food and take a long drink of soda through a bendy straw. She pushes the hash browns to the side of her plate with the butter knife. It’s all going to come out when they get to Bitter

Rapids anyway, might as well start telling the girl now. There was so much to tell, after all. So very much.

“I do know the alternative,” Evelyn says. “Because I had a second husband.”

“What?” April sputters. The bubbly cola burns in her sinuses, makes her eyes water.

“Arthur Specht,” Evelyn continues. “We married in 1946. That’s what women did in those days, April. It’s what we *had* to do. Your dad was only five years old when his daddy died in the war. And Denny was a baby. I needed a husband to provide for my sons, and Art was willing.”

April sets her knife and fork on her plate. She has no words, no idea whatsoever how to respond to this bombshell. She glances at Frank, who continues eating his breakfast without so much as a flinch. Her dad has a brother. Her grandmother had a second husband. How is it even possible this never came up before? Because Frank and Evelyn made sure it never came up, April realizes.

Before they’d embarked on this trip, the young woman would have thought this was a colossal secret. Only now does she begin to realize it’s just the tip of the iceberg. That’s why her dad was so dead-set against this trip. The feeling of exhilaration April felt about driving cross-country evaporates. It’s replaced by a stab of anxiety; she doesn’t know her family at all.

LIFE IN THE 1950S

Every Woman's Standard Medical Guide

The Graystone Press, 1948

PREFACE

From childhood to old age, every phase of a woman's physical development has its "mysteries" and its complications. Each girl, each mother, and each matron are subject to diseases and discomforts peculiar to the particular epoch of her life. In all of these, it is the aim of *Every Woman's Standard Medical Guide* to provide the woman with sound and authoritative counsel and give her helpful information on the care and cultivation of a healthy body and the conduct of a happy life.

1952

Bitter Rapids, Minnesota

Evelyn charged through the emergency room doors of the county hospital.

“Where are they? Where are my boys?”

The reception nurse rushed to the distraught woman, assured her that Frankie and Denny were okay. The women embraced. They’d known one another since they were schoolgirls. It was the way of small towns.

“Oh, thank God,” Evelyn breathed. “I need to see them, Ruth.”

Nurse Ruth ushered her down the hall toward the boys’ room. Sheriff Carrigan stood watch outside the door of another room. He patted Evelyn’s back as she passed by, and she nodded to him gratefully.

Little Denny lay in the hospital bed under a heap of blankets. Frankie sat in a chair, holding an icepack to his bruised knee. He wore borrowed scrubs too large for him, rolled up at the ankles. But they were dry. A blanket draped over his shoulders. Evelyn went to him first. She took his face in her hands, looked him over, kissed the top of his head.

“What on earth were you two doing on the river, Frankie?” She didn’t expect an answer, and she didn’t wait for one. She went to Denny, brushed a wisp of blonde hair away from his closed eyes.

“He’s just sleeping, Evie,” Ruth anticipated her question. “He’s had a hard day.”

“But he’s all right?” Evelyn asked, keeping her eyes on her younger son.

Ruth nodded, yes. She explained both boys came in with hypothermia. The nurses changed them into dry clothes, warmed them with heated blankets. They both had some bumps and scrapes here and there, but they should be just fine. No broken bones.

“The doctor will come talk with you in a little bit,” Ruth added and then left the mother to be alone with her sons.

Evelyn gazed at Denny, creases of worry etched in her face. She combed her fingers through his fine curls.

“What happened, Frankie?” she asked without looking at him. He knew she expected an answer this time.

“We just wanted to take the canoe out,” he said, staring down at the floor. “I guess we put in too far up river. I don’t know. The rapids were too much, and we capsized.”

He paused for a moment. Evelyn was silent. He knew she wanted more detail, that she’d remain silent until he provided it. He held out for another minute, but Mom always won this game.

“We were under water, and then we got pulled away by the current,” he continued. “I grabbed hold of Denny and held tight, but I couldn’t get us to the bank. I tried as hard as I could, Mom, honest I did.”

Evelyn nodded. She believed him. “It was an accident.”

“A Colored man swam out and grabbed hold of us,” Frankie said. “He got us to a tree along the shore. But then he got pulled away. I don’t know what happened to him. Some other big Colored in a prison jumpsuit carried us up the bank, and Sheriff Carrigan brought us here.”

Evelyn pulled Frankie in for a hug, planted a second kiss on his head.

“I’m just glad you’re both safe,” she said into his tangled mop of hair. “You rest now. I’m going to go find the doctor and ask when we can go home.”

Out in the hall, the doctor stood with Sheriff Carrigan and talked in a hushed voice. Evelyn approached them, grasping their hands one at a time and thanking for them taking care of her sons.

The doctor said she could take the boys home as soon as she was ready, but he explained that hypothermia was still a concern. She should be on the lookout for warning signs – shivering, mumbling, confusion, low energy. Keep them warm, he said, and let them drink all the hot cocoa they wanted. It'd be normal for the boys to be tired, after the day they'd had. But if they seemed overly drowsy or if Evelyn had trouble waking them, she was to call the hospital right away. Evelyn placed her fingertips to her mouth, making mental notes of everything the doctor told her.

“Is Art on the road?” the sheriff asked.

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “He’s due back tomorrow.”

Evelyn’s second husband sold neon signage, and his work took him all over Minnesota and Wisconsin.

“Frankie said the man who rescued them was swept down river,” Evelyn said. “What became of him?”

“They got him fished out. Cold and wet, but he’s just fine,” Carrigan said, tilting his head toward the closed hospital-room door behind him.

Evelyn placed her hand over heart. Relief washed over her.

“May I speak to him?” she asked. “I’d like to thank him.”

The men exchanged glances. Carrigan rubbed at his chin and wrinkled up his face.

“I don’t think that’d be best,” he said.

She leaned to the side, craned her neck to see through the small window in the door. The doctor took hold of Evelyn’s arm and steered her away from the room. He’d pass along her thanks, he assured. Her focus should be on the boys.

“I’d prefer to thank him myself,” she said. “I’ll only be a minute.”

“He’s a scoundrel, don’t-cha know,” Carrigan said. “Not the sort a lady should be in the same room with, Mrs. Specht.”

“But he saved their lives,” Evelyn asserted. “He can’t be all that bad.”

“That was a fluke.” Carrigan’s tone took on the timbre of a lawman. “The guards say he only did it hoping he could run off once he got down river. He’s going back under lock and key once the doctor discharges him.”

Evelyn tried to shake loose the discrepancy in her mind. She thought back to what Frankie had told her, compared it to what the sheriff said. The stories didn’t reconcile. She wanted to see this man herself. But the doctor had already led her back to her sons, said they could go home. Denny sat at the edge of the bed, disheveled and droopy-eyed.

“I wanna go home, Mommy.”

The doctor was right, she conceded. Her focus should be on the boys.

* * * *

Evelyn heated a can of tomato soup and made grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner. She warmed hot cocoa on the stove, brought it to the boys’ beds where she had tucked them in snug and warm. Then Evelyn sat and read aloud from *The Twenty-One Balloons* by William Pène du Bois.

“Half of this story is true and the other half might very well have happened,” she read from the book about a professor who flew across the Pacific Ocean in a tiny wicker house carried by hot-air balloon. Denny drifted off to sleep quickly. Frankie was rapt by the story of invention and exploration.

“It seems strange to me that mechanical progress always seems to leave the slower demands of elegance far behind,” Professor Sherman lamented in the story.

When Frankie finally succumbed to exhaustion, Evelyn clicked off the lamp and eased from the bed. She retrieved a chair from the kitchen and sat in the boys’ room as they slept. She knitted by the dim light from the hall to stay awake. She worked

the soft pink yarn expertly, row by row. It would be a blanket when she finished, for the little girl she hoped yet to have.

Every so often Evelyn dozed off, then woke with a start and rushed to the boys' bedsides. She pulled up their blankets, pressed her lips gently to their foreheads to make sure they were not cold or shivering. Then she took up her vigil again, knitting in hand.

She roused, late in the morning, with warm sun pouring through window glass and across her face. The click of the side door made her jump.

"Hi, Frankie. Where's your mom?" She heard Art's voice in the kitchen and saw that Frankie's bed was empty. Evelyn stood and tiptoed out of the bedroom.

"Oh, Art, I'm so glad you're home." The man of the house was removing his overcoat and placing his fedora on the hat rack. He leaned sideways a bit, so Evelyn could place a kiss on his cheek. Then he caught sight of her.

"You look like something the cat dragged in," he said. He noticed the untidy kitchen, and his voice rose in panic. "What's wrong? Is Denny sick?"

"Denny's okay," she responded. "Both boys are. But there was an accident, down at the river."

Evelyn gave her husband an abridged version of the events that had transpired in the past twenty-four hours or so. Art paced the kitchen, rubbed the back of his neck. Then he looked Evelyn square in the face.

"You have one job while I'm gone, Evelyn, and that's to keep the children safe. Jesus H. Christ. One job."

"It's not her fault," Frankie spoke up. "She told us we could play outside, but to stay close to home."

Art looked down at the twelve-year-old boy, who was still swimming in his oversized hospital scrubs.

"Dammit, Frankie, you're too old to be goofing off and disobeying your mom," he said. "And to make it worse, you put your brother in danger. What did you think you were doing?"

Frankie shrugged his shoulders.

“You didn’t think,” Art said. “You never think.”

“Art,” Evelyn placed her hand on the man’s arm. “He’s just a boy. It was an accident.”

Art shook his arm loose and stormed down the hall into Denny’s room.

“Holy God!”

The shriek of terror shot through to Evelyn’s very core. In a half-second, she and Frankie stood beside Art in the bedroom, watching Denny writhe and convulse beneath the covers. The boy had vomited, and he was drenched in sweat. Art threw back the covers and swept Denny up in his arms. Evelyn was already back in the kitchen, her purse and car keys in hand.

Art placed Denny in the back seat and climbed in beside him. Evelyn struggled to get the key into the ignition. She fumbled and dropped the keys to the floor. Frankie quickly scooped them up, handing them over. She enveloped the keys and his small hands in hers for a split-second, then started the car and sped to the hospital.

* * * *

The staff whisked Denny through the double doors into the nerve center of the emergency room. Nurse Ruth held the parents back when they tried to follow. All they could do was wait.

Evelyn sat slumped forward with her elbows on her knees, her forehead propped up by her fingertips. Frankie stood beside her and rubbed her back. Art paced – from the reception desk to the row of vending machines, from the double-doors to the grouping of vinyl-covered chairs. After an hour had passed, Art strode to the desk and demanded to know what was happening. Ruth explained they were running tests. These things take time, she said. The doctor will be out with an update as soon as he has information, she said. Art threw his hands up in frustration, resumed pacing.

Finally, the doctor emerged from the double doors. He approached the family, as they sprung forward to meet him.

“I’m afraid I don’t have good news,” he said. This was the worst part of his job. The man removed his glasses, folded them carefully and tucked them into the pocket of his white overcoat. Delaying only made it harder for the parents. He knew this. Still, he paused. Evelyn seized his hand. The doctor saw the desperation etched in her face and patted her hand.

Art put his arm around Evelyn’s shoulders.

“Denny is resting comfortably,” the doctor began. “An x-ray revealed intracranial pressure. He likely struck his head in the river yesterday, which caused swelling of the brain as well as hydrocephalus, or fluid build-up. There’s only a small amount of room for the brain inside the skull. Excessive swelling and fluid causes pressure, which can lead to brain damage. So we drilled a hole in Denny’s skull, to release the fluid and help reduce some of that pressure.”

Evelyn felt her throat constrict as she fought to take air into her lungs. A vision flashed through her mind of her little boy, lying motionless on a cold hospital table, doctors in white masks drilling into his precious little head. She pulled away from Art and stepped toward the doors.

“I need to see him.”

“You’ll get to see him soon, Mrs. Specht,” the doctor assured. “But first I must finish telling you what we know.”

Frankie’s eyes began to burn. *There’s more?* he thought. *More than drilling a hole in Denny’s head?* He shrank back toward the waiting room chairs, tried to swallow the lump forming in his throat.

“Denny wasn’t breathing when he arrived,” the doctor continued. “We intubated him, that is, we inserted a tube into his airway and placed him on a ventilator for breathing.”

The doctor paused again.

Evelyn pressed her hands together near her heart. She entwined her icy fingers, held her breath, waited for the doctor to continue.

“Once we had Denny stabilized, we ran an EEG, which is a test that measures brain activity. Unfortunately, we found almost no measurable activity.”

Evelyn squeezed her eyes shut tight.

“What does that mean, exactly?” Art asked.

“Denny is brain dead, Mr. Specht. If we remove him from the ventilator, he will die. I’m very sorry.”

“So, we’ll just keep him on the ventilator,” Evelyn said, staring at the doctor’s chest, drilling through to his heart, just like the man had drilled into her son. “Until he wakes up and starts breathing on his own.”

The doctor lowered his chin, looked at the floor. That was often the first response from a loved one. Denial. Desperation. The doctor shook his head, no. “Denny will never regain consciousness.”

Frankie couldn’t quite understand the rest of what the doctor said. It sounded as though the man was talking from under water.

Denny’s condition would never improve.

There was nothing more that could be done.

The most humane course of action would be to remove him from the ventilator.

Allow him to pass peacefully.

The light dimmed.

Frankie’s knees buckled.

The world turned black.