

One

A Christmas Story, 1956

The only heat in the boys bedroom came through a hole in the floor. A cast-iron grate above the centrally placed wood-burning stove downstairs allowed the heat to rise. I slept nearest the hole in the floor; I was the luckiest.

Cracks of all sizes and shapes veined the bedroom's plastered walls and ceiling. Facing east, the sole window contained four panes of century-old glass, each uniquely patterned of ripples and spotted with imperfections; the sash was stuck and couldn't be raised. The floor boards, worn smooth by years of footsteps, concealed nail-head hazards that would arise from the coarse grain of the wood. A simple, four-cornered convex shade of frosted glass, sharp at one of the edges where a shard had taken leave, covered one working light bulb that cast a yellowish hue to the ceiling from half of the fixture. A horizontal four-inch trim of cedar, embedded within the plaster and running about thirty inches from and parallel to the ceiling, encircling the room and painted the same pea flour color as the walls, anchored a series of double-loop wire hooks from which our clothes hung. An upright chest near the door held four drawers, one for each of the

boys who spent their nights there, sharing two double beds of unmatched frames acquired from either an auction or from a generous friend or relative over the course of a score or more, sleeping upon time-worn, tufted, and sagging mattresses atop open-wire springs that made a chorus of creaking notes with every turn of a body.

My three brothers spanned the teen years. At five, I was younger than they by twelve, ten, and seven years. Buddy, age seventeen and the eldest son of the clan of eleven children, displayed all the late-adolescent angst of James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and he looked a bit like him too, with dark, thick, and wavy hair, slicked-back with Brylcreem, that crowned a broadly masculine face and a quiet, typically benign but sometimes edgy temperament. He could, if incensed, wield a stubborn defiance, likely a result of pent-up resentment with dietary restrictions and required, daily, self-administered insulin shots into his thigh, a consequence of childhood-onset diabetes that, at one point, included a bout of peritonitis that landed him in hospital. Chronically fatigued of school, he was interested only in cars and motorcycles and had begun hanging out with a gang of young bikers who sought thrills by racing over railroad crossings just ahead of an oncoming train.

The second brother, Henry, was a mirror of Daddy. Affable and unflappable, he had an insatiable appetite for making things: a trellis to adorn the porch, a crescent moon-shaped bric-a-brac shelf that hung with prominence in the front room, a rocket-launching pad on the slanted tin roof of the outhouse; and entertaining others with jokes and stories that were so clever you might never know if he was pulling your leg. Henry was always doing something, at times singing while he worked as if wired for enjoying the one and only life that was given to him. Unlike his elder brother's, his dark hair was straight and fell forward over his brow from a widow's peak. Thin, nimble, and narrow shouldered, he had an occasional Friday-night job in the pin deck at the Oakfield bowling alley from where he would bring home for me a little white paper bag containing five pieces of penny candy, paid for out of his earnings. He slept in after working late, and mid-morning when he would appear in the kitchen where I sat coloring, I would watch him, nonplussed, as he made a thick-sliced headcheese sandwich glazed with brown mustard. "Delicious," he said.

Bobby, the third of the brothers, didn't do anything wrong with the notable exception of sleeping in the middle of the double bed we shared. He not only received Muma's nod as the best worker among the boys, he achieved the Walter family trifecta of being an accomplished athlete and a

good student too. His closely cropped hair, never out of place, suspiciously similar to that of Dwayne Hickman in *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* and was well-suited to the muscular frame that, in just a few years forward during the brief era when America was Camelot, would cast an indelible image in the high school letterman jacket that he earned, complete with gold-colored oakleaf medallions set within a large orange O chest badge. The Oakfield girls would go to the baseball games to watch him play. Sometimes, upon coming home from school, the only one of the brothers I ever saw carrying a book, Bobby would have a slide rule poking out of the inside pocket of his jacket and, by performing complex calculations at the swipe of his index finger, he captured my imagination.

The small dairy farm that the family worked as tenants sat on an undulating slope of lesser-choice land bounded on the east by a crest of woods that, in late September and early October, bejeweled the horizon with red, orange, and yellow sugar maples among the green of the basswood, oak, elm, other less-distinguished deciduous trees, and cedars. In all seasons, a dramatic outcrop of the Niagara Escarpment could be found there, deep among the trees, known as the Oakfield Ledge.

From the woods the farmland reached downward--through the upper fields that a contingent of younger Walters annually cleared of emerging rocks, plodding back and forth across the furrowed soil, picking and tossing stones that arose from the earth onto a flatbed wagon as we followed Bobby, our candidate poster boy for the Future Farmers of America, driving the family's wide-front-axle and sun-faded Persian orange Allis-Chalmers tractor while sporting a smile with all the poise worthy of a thumbnail photo on a *Greetings From Wisconsin* postcard; abutting a stoney lane where the rocks were deposited and dandelions grew; to a cluster of tool, machine and granary sheds that surrounded a gargantuan, eighteen-foot tall and wide-branched apple tree that Daddy said was a Dutchess of Oldenburg, but I suspect now it was a case of mistaken identity because it doesn't seem likely that any flora with a pedigree like that would hurl an apple to a deliberated hit on the top of my noggin while at play in the sand box beneath; across a sparsely graveled driveway to a siloed barn that badly needed paint with a west-facing milkhouse appended to its hip; alongside a northward-listing corncrib made of weathered cedarwood slats that, when filled in harvest season, swelled outward on all sides with near-bursting ribbons of bright yellow cobs and provided an annual reminder that horizontal stripes draw attention to a bulging midsection; then toward the

chicken coop and a pigsty, both with dirt or mud floors that supported a foundation made more than a hundred years earlier out of field stones and mortar; to the white, shingle-sided farmhouse with blue trim and an elevated L-shaped front porch that would leave any onlooker with the impression that the builder had probably run out of either wood, forethought, or ambition before a rail was to be added; across Fond du Lac County Road B that bisected the farm and whose shoulders graced the landscape with the understated beauty and uplifting waft of wild roses in June; past the best-producing soil, black and deep, found on the only two fields of level ground; into a rocky decline that supported two perennially bountiful shagbark hickory nut trees; leading toward an expanse of ankle-twisting peat bogs that formed the cow pasture and terminated at a grove of imposing Wisconsin weeping willows where the cows took shade in the heat of summer that fronted a barbed-wire fence and a soggy-bottomed, cattail-profuse ditch bordering the Wild Goose Road--as if longing for the embrace of the vast Horicon Marsh that commenced just a field or two away and swept southward for more than sixty miles.

The marsh was wildly alluring, particularly when viewed from atop the stone-strewn lane as the sun set in the west. My brothers went there to a place they called Smutz Point and brought back stories about fishing for

bass, bullhead, and catfish or hunting for pheasants and ducks, and the evidence of their exploits provided sustenance for the ever-hungry Walters. But the pathless woods were introverted, unassuming yet deeply wondrous to those who sought to contemplate and understand: majestic cliffs of limestone to capture the imagination; deep crevices in the ledge face where I was told, and believed then, that hermits lived; snails and salamanders to be found under rocks. In the spring there would be trillium, jack-in-the-pulpit, red columbine, and wood violets to search for and admire, and one day, under the broad leaves of a mayapple colony, I found a newborn fawn. Awestruck, I backed away to let life be, undisturbed. And in the long daylight of summer, a carefree joy of childhood would arrive there on the whisper of sweet alfalfa while riding bicycles to Breakneck Hill, abandoning them on a slope enveloped of chamomile flowers that meandered down to bursts of great blue lobelia, to pick and eat wild strawberries on a sunlit ridge, then lie prostrate, feeling its warmth while suckling water from an underground spring.

It was Saturday morning, December 22, 1956, when Henry first took me there. Winter had arrived, on-schedule and overnight, and offered a gift of several inches of snow. In a half-sleep, alone in the bedroom, thinking that I'd either heard or dreamt a voice saying my name, I roused and came

downstairs to find Henry in the kitchen frying bacon. “Where’s Muma,” I asked, confused by his presence there, and then almost immediately caught sight of her silhouette through the kitchen’s southward-facing window, the reflection of sunrise at her back as she walked through the new-fallen snow, up the knoll toward the house, carrying an apron full of eggs from the chicken coop.

“She’s getting more eggs,” Henry said, fork in hand moving pieces of bacon from the hot frying pan to a platter at the back of the stove. A pan full of potatoes, that either he or Muma had already fried in yesterday’s bacon grease, was being kept warm there. “Do you want to come with me and get a Christmas tree from the woods?”

My eyes opened atop the widest of smiles, thrilled to be asked, “Ja!” I enthused, just as Muma came through the door with the eggs. She assumed command over the stove from Henry, frying freshly laid eggs for us as we sat down at the kitchen table facing the handpump over the sink where, with a little effort, we got our water from a well that was drilled near the kitchen’s eastward window. On a large cutting board set on the table, three loaves of bread that she had baked the previous afternoon lay sideways. She took a long, serrated knife and sliced pieces of bread for Henry and me,

which we buttered, dipped into the yolk, and ate with delight, and then we cut into pieces what remained of the eggs and mixed the bits together with the potatoes placed beside the bacon on our plates. From the General Electric refrigerator that was purchased at great expense from Irv Pea's Appliances on Main Street in Oakfield to properly house Buddy's insulin and which sat at an angle in the corner proudly displaying its egg-shell white marshmallow-puffed top and door, she ladled a glass of raw milk for each of us, so thick and rich with cream that it gave Henry a white mustache on the little hairs that were beginning to grow on his upper lip as he intentionally tilted the glass back for maximum effect; I imitated him.

After our breakfast and an obligatory visit to the outhouse and as we bundled and mittened for our venture through the open fields and into the woods, Muma called out, "put your rubbers on!" which is what she called the tall, buckled black overboots that had deep outsoles on the bottom. We did; these were askew in an entryway that led to the kitchen, a buffer from the outside cold where the winter coats and jackets hung. Out the door, we were on our way.

Henry took a handsaw and as we breached the snow-covered field behind the toolshed, he walked backward, dragging the saw in a repeating

S-shaped motion, creating a pattern that stitched our two sets of footprints into one array, then he turned about and we trod in earnest. Afield, elevated, and far from the warmth of the wood-burning stove in the house now, the land lay quiet as if in a deep sleep. Henry glanced backward over his shoulder, turned and stopped; I wondered what had caught his attention and did an about-face too. Down and across the fields to the west, toward and beyond the house and farm buildings below, reflecting the rays of the morning sun, the earth glistened with a mother-of-pearl sheen under a baby blue canopy of cloudless sky.

At the edge of the woods, flanked on either side by a flourish of sumac undergrowth, sat a miniature log cabin that Henry and one of his friends had built as a clubhouse a few years earlier. Constructed entirely of felled cedar trunks or hand-honed limbs of sprawling basswood, maple, and elm trees; notched and stacked at the corners of the cabin because there were no nails to spare, complete with a framed doorway, makeshift beams supporting a peaked roof, and a window on the north side; impressively stable, it stood both as a monument to the imagination of youth and a testament to the possibility of creating something out of nothing at all. A male cardinal sat on the end of a branch of birch overhanging the cabin, drawing the eye to a contrast of bright red against the snow that lay on the

roof; he was gone in a moment. We passed the cabin without comment as if its existence there was as natural as the trees that sheltered it, then a blue jay called out and flew into the deep as if announcing our arrival to another world.

Into that world we plunged, where the tread of our boots exposed fall foliage beneath the snow cover; twigs snapped and pieces of brown oak leaves pulled up on our heels. I cast my eyes about for a suitable Christmas tree, but Henry was uninterested in the trees there and undeterred, pursuing the chatter of the blue jay that was now deep into the thick. Down a slope, using stepping stones provided either by nature or arranged by past generations, we crossed an ice-cold crick that had watercress growing under ripples of clear water on its journey to the marsh--verdant green at winter's ebb.

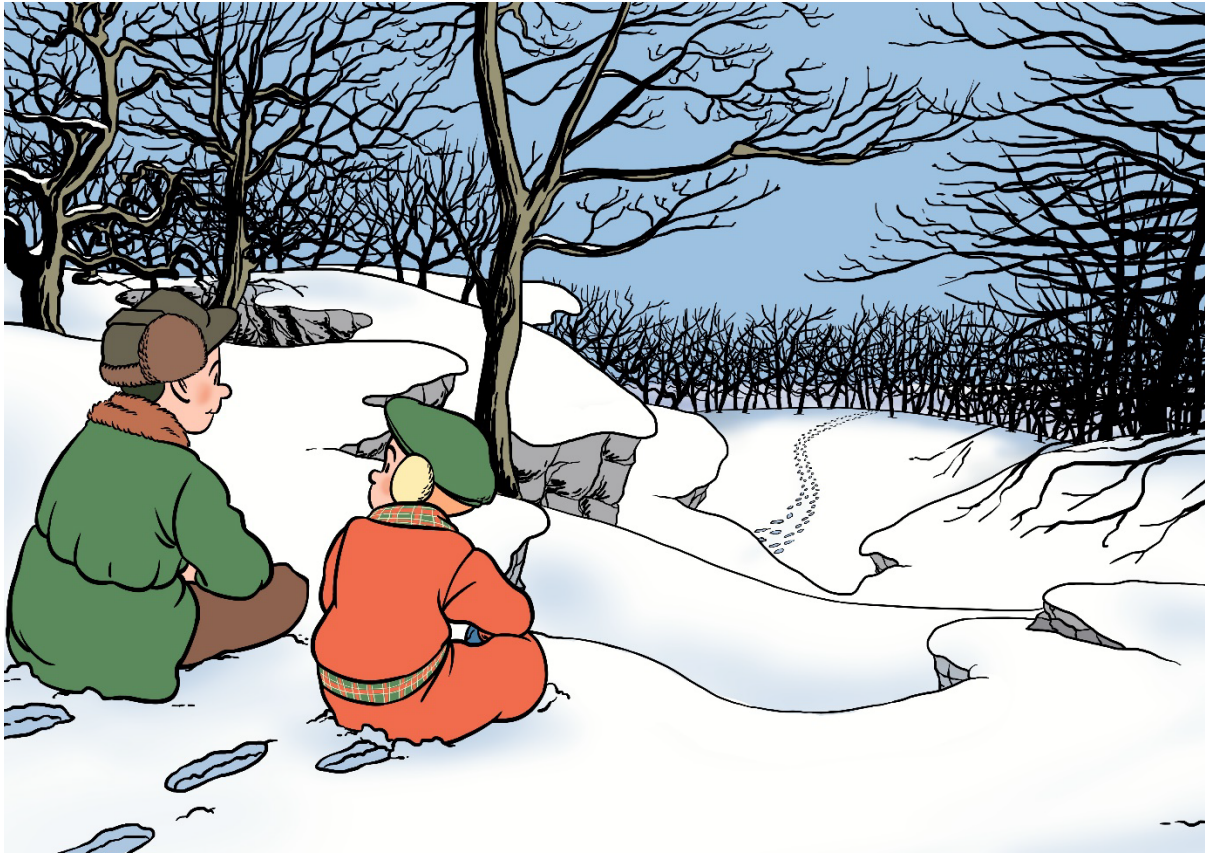
Having traversed the crick, the undergrowth thinned and gave way to Canada Yew; rocks and boulders appeared as if they'd erupted through the snow. Then before us, spied between the trunks and branches of trees, I saw, for the first time, the cliffs of limestone and shale, rising upright, stacked and jagged, some as high as forty feet from where we stood. The blue jay cackled noisily and then disappeared.

“Come on, Ricky,” Henry called to me as he dropped the handsaw into the snow, “let’s climb to the top.” My countenance fell. “But,” I began, yet before I said any more Henry continued, “I know the way the Indians used to go.”

And he did know. Through a narrow cleft a natural stairwell of dolomite rock that was protected from the snowfall led upward, the distance or height between some slabs being greater than others, uneven and difficult for a five-year old to manage, but upward nonetheless. I followed Henry up the rocks as best I could as he held back and waited, telling me about the native people that once lived in the area. “This is where they used to hunt,” he said, because he had found “a couple-two-three” arrowheads nearby, and that they rubbed sticks together to make fire and probably slept in the small caves up here after a big party when they cooked a deer and had it with corn and squash and after supper, they danced so much that somebody fell in the crick. Henry was fun to listen to.

Nearing the crest, the dolostone steps were no more. Henry scaled the last few feet of the ascent with little effort, placing his feet against the adjacent wall of rock and then hoisting himself upward at the narrow apex of the cleft. The last step was taller than I was and my legs couldn’t span the

width of the upper crevice like Henry's did. I wouldn't look behind me, out of fear, and instead fixed my eyes on his, his arms extending downward. I raised mine and we grasped, hands locked to forearms, and he lifted me upward as I pushed my boots in a bicycling motion, one after the other, against the wall beneath him. One, two, then three pushes of the feet, along with a scrape of shale and snow, over the crest I came, exhausted but elated, as if on top of the world.



We sat then, cross-legged, looking outward atop the bare-branched woodland canopy, across snow-white land and toward the golden

marshland beyond. A red-tailed hawk glided gracefully near the edge of a silent woods, over the little log cabin, and then upswept into the air above the sleeping field that would bring renewal and alfalfa in the spring. Henry pointed to the flight of the hawk and said, “that’s good luck.” I thought about what that might mean as I studied Henry sidelong. He had fixed his gaze on the long view to the west, out over the marsh, saying nothing. I think I understand things better now. This was the view of the land that he loved; and regardless of whether he chose to share it with me or Muma had asked him to take me along, it was our best day together; and side-by-side atop a limestone cliff that had waited four hundred million years for us to be there, a place that will remain until the end of time, Henry and I were part of an eternity.



We did, later that morning, find our Christmas tree. Henry knew of a clearing below the ledge and near the crick where the deer sometimes gathered in the gloaming of an August evening and he had been with Daddy to harvest cedars for fenceposts. We found a tree that Henry said was just about as old as I was. He cut it down with the saw and we pulled it home, retracing our steps through the woods and the fields. With its drooping,

fan-like branches, it was so unlike the kind of tree that people decorate for Christmas now, and we adorned it with an electric string of candle lights that bubbled in different colors and became hot to the touch, affixed a star at the top, and then hung, one by one, threads of tinsel that reflected the colors of the bubble candles and had been used and reused year after year for as long as any of the Walters could remember. Simple and unpretentious, it filled the farmhouse with the fragrance of cedar and remains in my memory as the prettiest of all Christmas trees.

Like the rustic cedar Christmas tree and the old farmhouse of more than six decades ago, much from this story is no more, a time and some gone by, reconstructed here from the interplay of memory and meaning. Moments of childhood, frozen as if a photograph or recurring dream from the pages of the past, when our hearts were blown open by the world within footsteps of home and those who shared it with us, cast a face of heaven, and if one is truly lucky, freckled with a million stars.

End Notes, *A Christmas Story* 1956



The **Oakfield Ledge** is a significant exposure of the Niagara Escarpment, a geological shift in the earth that was formed 400,000,000 years ago. Part of the oldest forest ecosystem in eastern North America, some Northern White-Cedar trees growing out of the limestone cliffs at the Oakfield Ledge have lived as many as 1,200 years. A nature-lovers retreat and a botanist's walk-about, it is protected now by designation as a State of Wisconsin Natural Area and can be accessed at Breakneck Hill, just east of Fond du Lac County Road B on Breakneck Road.



The **Horicon Marsh** is the largest freshwater marsh in the United States and one of the largest in the world. Its 32,000-acre basin was formed by a glacier during the Ice Age. The Horicon Marsh has been recognized by the United Nations as a Wetland of International Importance and is well-known as a bi-annual rest stop for the world's largest flock of migratory Canada Geese, as many as two hundred thousand, whose flight in peak season can be viewed by driving through the north end of the marsh on Highway 49 between Waupun and the Wild Goose Road.