

# CANADA

A NOVEL BY THE WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

# RICHARD

# FORD

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# Canada

Richard Ford

**ecco**

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# Dedication

Kristina

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## Epigraph

*Canada* is a work of the imagination. Every character and event in it is fictitious. No resemblance to real people is intended or should be inferred. I've taken liberties with the townscape of Great Falls, Montana, and also with the prairie landscape and with some particulars of the small towns in the southwest of the Province of Saskatchewan. Highway 32, for instance, was unpaved in 1960, although as I've written about it, it is paved. Beyond that, all outright errors and omissions are my responsibility.

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# Part One

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## Chapter 1

**F**IRST, I'LL TELL ABOUT THE ROBBERY OUR PARENTS committed. Then about the murders, which happened later. The robbery is the more important part, since it served to set my and my sister's lives on the courses they eventually followed. Nothing would make complete sense without that being told first.

Our parents were the least likely two people in the world to rob a bank. They weren't strange people, not obviously criminals. No one would've thought they were destined to end up the way they did. They were just regular—although, of course, that kind of thinking became null and void the moment they did rob a bank.

**MY FATHER**, Bev Parsons, was a country boy born in Marengo County, Alabama, in 1923, and came out of high school in 1939, burning to be in the Army Air Corps—the branch that became the Air Force. He went in at Demopolis, trained at Randolph, near San Antonio, longed to be a fighter pilot, but lacked the aptitude and so learned bombardiering instead. He flew the B-25s, the light-medium Mitchells, that were seeing duty in the Philippines, and later over Osaka, where they rained destruction on the earth—both on the enemy and undeserving people alike. He was a tall, winningly smiling handsome six-footer (he barely fitted into his bombardier's compartment), with a big square expectant face and knobby cheekbones and sensuous lips and long, attractive feminine eyelashes. He had white shiny teeth and short black hair he was proud of—as he was of his name. Bev. Captain Bev Parsons. He never conceded that Beverly was a woman's name in most people's minds. It grew from Anglo-Saxon roots, he said. "It's a common name in England. Vivian, Gwen and Shirley are men's names there. No one confuses *them* with women." He was a nonstop talker, was open-minded for a southerner, had graceful obliging manners that should've taken him far in the Air Force, but didn't. His quick hazel eyes would search around any room he was in, finding someone to pay attention to him—my sister and me, ordinarily. He told corny jokes in a southern theatrical style, could do card tricks and magic tricks, could detach his thumb and replace it, make a handkerchief disappear and come back. He could play boogie-woogie piano, and sometimes would "talk Dixie" to us, and sometimes like Amos 'n' Andy. He had lost some of his hearing by flying the Mitchells, and was sensitive about it. But he looked sharp in his "honest" GI haircut and blue captain's tunic and generally conveyed a warmth that was genuine and made my twin sister and me love him. It was almost probably the reason my mother had been attracted to him (though they couldn't have been more unsuited and different) and unluckily gotten pregnant from their one hasty encounter after meeting at a party honoring returned airmen, near where he was re-training to learn supply-officer duties at Fort Lewis, in March 1945—when no one needed him to drop bombs anymore. They were married immediately when they found out. Her parents, who lived in Tacoma and were Jewish immigrants from Poland, didn't approve. They were educated mathematics teachers and semiprofessional musicians and popular concertizers in Poznan who'd escaped after 1918 and come to Washington State through Canada, and became—of all things—school custodians. Being Jews meant little to them by then, or to our mother—just an old, exacting, constricted conception of life they were happy to pass

behind them in a land where there apparently were no Jews.

But for their only daughter to marry a smiling, talkative only-son of Scotch-Irish Alabam backwoods timber estimators was never in their thinking, and they soon put it out of their thinking altogether. And while from a distance, it may seem that our parents were merely not made for one another, it was more true that when our mother married our father, it betokened a loss, and her life changed forever—and not in a good way—as she surely must've believed.

**MY MOTHER**, Neeva Kamper (short for Geneva), was a tiny, intense, bespectacled woman with unruly brown hair, downy vestiges of which ran down her jawline. She had thick eyebrows and a shiny, thin-skinned forehead under which her veins were visible, and a pale indoor complexion that made her appear fragile—which she wasn't. My father jokingly said people where he was from in Alabama called her hair "Jew hair" or "immigrant hair," but he liked it and loved her. (She never seemed to pay these words much attention.) She had small, delicate hands whose nails she kept manicured and shiny and was vain about and gestured with absently. She owned a skeptical frame of mind, was an intense listener when we talked to her, and had a wit that could turn biting. She wore frameless glasses, read French poetry, often used terms like "cauchemar" or "trou de cul," which my sister and I didn't understand. She wrote poems in brown ink bought through the mail, and kept a journal we weren't permitted to read, and normally had a slightly nose-elevated, astigmatized expression of perplexity—which became true of her, and may always have been true. Before she married my father and quickly had my sister and me, she'd graduated at eighteen from Whitman College in Walla Walla, had worked in a bookstore, featured herself possibly as a bohemian and a poet, and had hoped someday to land a job as a studious, small-college instructor, married to someone different from who she did marry—conceivably a college professor, which would've given her the life she believed she was intended for. She was only thirty-four in 1960, the year these events occurred. But she already had "serious lines" beside her nose, which was small and pinkish at its tip, and her large, penetrating gray-green eyes had dusky lids that made her seem foreign and slightly sad and dissatisfied—which she was. She possessed a pretty, thin neck, and a sudden, unexpected smile that showed off her small teeth and a girlish, heart-shaped mouth, though it was a smile she rarely practiced—except on my sister and me. We realized she was an unusual-looking person, dressed as she typically was in olive-color slacks and baggy-sleeved cotton blouses and hemp-and-cotton shoes she must've sent away to the West Coast for—since you couldn't buy such things in Great Falls. And she only seemed more unusual standing reluctantly beside our tall, handsome, outgoing father. Though it was rarely the case that we were "out" as a family, or ate in restaurants, so that we hardly noticed how they appeared in the world among strangers. To us, life in our house seemed normal.

My sister and I could easily see why my mother would've been attracted to Bev Parsons: big, plaid-shouldered, talkative, funny, forever wanting to please anybody who came in range. But it was never completely obvious why he would take an interest in her—tiny (barely five feet), inward and shy, alienated, artistic, pretty only when she smiled and witty only when she felt completely comfortable. He must've somehow just appreciated all that, sensed she had a subtler mind than his, but that he could please her, which made him happy. It was to his good credit that he looked beyond the physical differences to the heart of things human, which I admired even if it wasn't in our mother's notice.

Still, the odd union of their mismatched physical attributes always plays in my mind as part of the reason they ended up badly: they were no doubt simply wrong for each other and should never have married or done any of it, should've gone their separate ways after their first passionate encounter, and

matter its outcome. The longer they stayed on, and the better they knew each other, the better she least could see their mistake, and the more misguided their lives became—like a long proof in mathematics in which the first calculation is wrong, following which all other calculations move you further away from how things were when they made sense. A sociologist of those times—the beginning of the '60s—might say our parents were in the vanguard of an historical moment, we among the first who transgressed society's boundaries, embraced rebellion, believed in credo requiring ratification through self-destruction. But they weren't. They weren't reckless people in the vanguard of anything. They were, as I said, regular people tricked by circumstance and bad instinct along with bad luck, to venture outside of boundaries they knew to be right, and then found themselves unable to go back.

Though I'll say this about my father: when he returned from the theater of war and from being the agent of whistling death out of the skies—it was 1945, the year my sister and I were born, Michigan, at the Wurtsmith base in Oscoda—he may have been in the grip of some great, unspecified gravity, as many GIs were. He spent the rest of his life wrestling with that gravity, puzzling to stay positive and afloat, making bad decisions that truly seemed good for a moment, but ultimately misunderstanding the world he'd returned home to and having that misunderstanding become his life. Again it must've been that way for millions of boys, although he would never have known it about himself or admitted it was true.

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## Chapter 2

**O**UR FAMILY CAME TO A STOP IN GREAT FALLS, Montana, in 1956, the way many military families came to where they came to following the war. We'd lived on air bases in Mississippi and California and Texas. Our mother had her degree and did substitute teaching in all those places. Our father hadn't been deployed to Korea, but been assigned to desk jobs at home, in the supply and requisition force. He'd been allowed to stay in because he'd won combat ribbons, but hadn't advanced beyond captain. And at a certain point—which happened when we were in Great Falls and he was thirty-seven—he decided the Air Force was no longer offering him much of a future and, having put in twenty years, he thought to take his pension and muster out. He felt our mother's lack of social interests and her unwillingness to invite anyone from the base to our house for dinner may have held him back—and possibly he was right. In truth, I think if there'd been someone she admired, she might've liked it. But she never thought there would be. "It's just cows and wheat out here," she said. "There's no real organized society." In any case, I think our father was tired of the Air Force and liked Great Falls as a place where he thought he could get ahead—even without a social life. He said he hoped to join the Masons.

It was by then the spring of 1960. My sister, Berner, and I were fifteen. We were enrolled in the Lewis (for Meriwether Lewis) Junior High, which was near enough to the Missouri River that from the tall school windows I could see the shining river surface and the ducks and birds congregated there and could glimpse the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul depot, where passenger trains no longer stopped, and up to the Municipal Airport on Gore Hill, where there were two flights a day, and down the river to the smelter stack and the oil refinery above the falls the city took its name from. I could even, on clear days, see the hazy snowy peaks of the eastern front, sixty miles away, running south toward Idaho and north up to Canada. My sister and I had no idea about "the west," except what we saw on TV, or even for that matter about America itself, which we took for granted as the best place to be. Our real life was the family, and we were part of its loose baggage. And because of our mother's growing alienation, her reclusiveness, her feeling of superiority, and her desire that Berner and I not assimilate into the "market-town mentality," which she believed stifled life in Great Falls, we didn't have a life like most children, which might've involved friends to visit, a paper route, Scouts and dances. If we fit in, our mother felt, it would only increase the chance we'd end up right where we were. It was also true that if your father was at the base—no matter where you lived—you always had a few friends and rarely met your neighbors. We did everything at the base—visited the doctor, the dentist, got haircuts, shopped for groceries. People knew that. They knew you wouldn't be where you were for long, so why bother taking the trouble to know you. The base carried a stigma, as if things that went on there were what proper people didn't need to know about or be associated with—plus, my mother being Jewish and having an immigrant look, and being in some ways bohemian. It was something we all talked about, as if protecting America from its enemies wasn't decent.

Still, at least in the beginning, I liked Great Falls. It was called "The Electric City" because the falls produced power. It seemed rough-edged and upright and remote—yet still was a part of the limited country we'd already lived in. I didn't much like it that the streets only had numbers for names—

which was confusing and, my mother said, meant it was a town laid out by pinchpenny bankers. And of course, ~~the winters were frozen and tireless, and the wind hurtled down out of the north like freight train, and the loss of light would've made anybody demoralized, even the most optimistic souls.~~

In truth, though, Berner and I never thought of ourselves as being from anywhere in particular. Each time our family moved to a new place—any of the far-flung locales—and settled ourselves into a rented house, and our father put on his pressed blue uniform and drove off to work at some air base and my mother commenced a new teaching position, Berner and I would try to think that this was where we'd say we were from if anyone asked. We practiced saying the words to each other on our way to whatever our new school was each time. "Hello. We're from Biloxi, Mississippi." "Hello. I'm from Oscoda. It's way up in Michigan." "Hello. I live in Victorville." I tried to learn the basic things the other boys knew and to talk the way they talked, pick up the slang expressions, walk around in a way though I felt confident being there and couldn't be surprised. Berner did the same. Then we'd move away to some other place, and Berner and I would try to get situated all over again. This kind of growing up, I know, can leave you either cast out and adrift, or else it can encourage you to be malleable and dedicated to adjusting—the thing my mother disapproved of, since she didn't do it, and she held out for herself some notion of a different future, more like the one she'd imagined before she married our father. We—my sister and I—were small players in a drama she saw to be relentlessly unfolding.

As a result, what I began to care greatly about was *school*, which was the continual thread in life besides my parents and my sister. I never wanted school to be over. I'd spend as much time inside school as I could, poring over books we were given, being around the teachers, breathing in the school odors, which were the same everywhere and like no other. Knowing things became important to me no matter what they were. Our mother knew things and appreciated them. I wanted to be like her that way, since I could keep the things I knew, and they would characterize me as being well-rounded and promising—characteristics that were important to me. No matter if I didn't belong in any of those places, I did belong in their schools. I was good at English and history and science and math—subjects my mother was also good at. Each time we picked up and moved, the only fact of life that made moving frightening was that for some reason I wouldn't be allowed to return to school, or I would miss crucial knowledge that could assure my future and was obtainable nowhere else. Or that we'd go to some new place where there would be no school for me *at all*. (Guam was once discussed.) I feared I'd end up knowing nothing, have nothing to rely on that could distinguish me. I'm sure it was all an inheritance from my mother's feelings of an unrewarded life. Though it may also have been that our parents, aswirl in the thickening confusion of their own young lives—not being made for each other, probably not physically desiring each other as they briefly had, becoming gradually only satellites orbiting each other, and coming eventually to resent one another without completely realizing it—didn't offend my sister and me enough to hold on to, which is what parents are supposed to do. However, blaming your parents for your life's difficulties finally leads nowhere.

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## Chapter 3

**W**HEN OUR FATHER TOOK HIS DISCHARGE IN the early spring, we were all of us interested in the presidential campaign then going on. They agreed about the Democrats and Kennedy, who'd soon be nominated. My mother said my father liked Kennedy because he imagined a resemblance. My father profoundly disliked Eisenhower for reasons having to do with American bombers being sacrificed to "softening up Jerry" behind the lines on D-Day, and due to Eisenhower's traitorous silence about MacArthur, who my father revered, and because Ike's wife was known to be "a tippler."

He disliked Nixon as well. He was a "cold fish," "looked Italian," and was a "war Quaker," which made him a hypocrite. He also disliked the UN, which he thought was too expensive and allowed Commies like Castro (who he called a "two-bit actor") to have a voice in the world. He kept a framed photograph of Franklin Roosevelt in our living room on the wall above the Kimball spinet and the mahogany and brass metronome that didn't work but came with the house. He praised Roosevelt for not letting polio defeat him, for killing himself with work to save the country, for bringing the Alabama backwoods out of the dark ages with the REA, and for putting up with Mrs. Roosevelt whom he called "The First Prune."

My father maintained a strong ambivalence about being from Alabama. On the one hand, he pictured himself as a "modern man" and not a "hill-William," as he said. He held modern views about many things—such as race, from having worked alongside Negroes in the Air Force. He felt Martin Luther King was a man of principle and Eisenhower's civil rights act was badly needed. He felt the rights of women needed a fairer shake, and that war was a tragedy and a waste he knew about intimately.

On the other hand, when our mother said something slighting about the South—which she often did—he grew broody and declared Lee and Jeff Davis to be "men of substance," even though their cause had misled them. Many good things had come from the South, he said, including more than the cotton gin and water skis. "Perhaps you could name me one," my mother would say, "naturally excluding yourself, of course."

The instant he quit putting on his Air Force blues and going to the base, our father found a job selling new Oldsmobile cars. He felt he'd be a natural at selling. His warm personality—happy, welcoming, congenial, confident, talk-a-blue-streak—would attract strangers and make what other people found difficult easy for him. Customers would trust him because he was a southerner, and southerners were known to be more down to earth than silent westerners. Money would start coming in once the model year ended and the big sales discounts kicked up the values. For his job, he was given a pink-and-gray Oldsmobile Super-88 to use as a demonstrator, which he parked in front of our house on First Avenue SW, where it would serve as good advertising. He took all of us for drives out to Fairfield, toward the mountains, and east toward Lewistown and south in the direction of Helen. "Orientation-explanatory-performance checks," he called these day trips—though he knew little of the country in any direction and actually knew very little about cars except how to drive them, which he loved doing. He felt it was easy for an Air Force officer to land a good job and that he should've left the service when the war was over. He would be way ahead now.

With our father out of the Air Force and working, my sister and I believed our life might finally achieve a permanent footing. We'd been in Great Falls four years. My mother caught a ride each school day out to the little town of Fort Shaw, where she taught the fifth grade. She never talked about teaching, but she seemed to like it and sometimes spoke about the other teachers and remarked that they were dedicated people (though she seemed to have little other use for them and would never want them visiting our house any more than people from the base). At the end of the summer I could foresee starting Great Falls High School, where I'd found out there was a chess club and a debating society, and where I could also learn Latin, since I was too small and light to play sports and had no interest in any case. My mother said she expected Berner and me both to go to college, but we would have to go on our wits because there would never be enough money. Though, she said, Berner already had a personality too much like hers to make a good enough impression to get in and should probably just try to marry a college graduate instead. In a pawn shop on Central Avenue she found several college pennants and tacked these to our walls. They were articles other kids had outgrown. Furman, Holy Cross and Baylor were my three. Rutgers, Lehigh and Duquesne were my sister's. We knew nothing about these schools, of course, including where they were located—though I had pictures in my mind of what they looked like. Old brick buildings with heavy shade trees and a river and a bell tower.

Berner, by this time, had begun not to be so easy to get along with. We had not been in the same classes since grade school because it was considered unhealthy for twins to be together all the time—though we'd always helped each other with our schoolwork and done well. She stayed in her room much of the time now, read movie magazines she bought at the Rexall, and *Peyton Place* and *Bonjour Tristesse*, which she smuggled home and would not say from where. She watched her fish in her aquarium, and listened to music on the radio and had no friends—which was true of me also. I didn't mind being away from her and having a separate life with my own interests and thoughts about the future. Berner and I were fraternal twins—she was six minutes older—and looked nothing alike. She was tall, bony, awkward, freckled all over—left-handed where I was right-handed—with warts on her fingers, pale gray-green eyes like our mother's and mine, and pimples, and a flat face and a soft chin that wasn't pretty. She had wiry brown hair parted in the middle and a sensuous mouth like our father's, though she had little hair anywhere else—on her legs or arms—and had no chest to speak of, which was true of our mother as well. She usually wore pants and a jumper dress over them that made her look larger than she was. She sometimes wore white lace gloves to cover up her hands. She also had allergies for which she carried a Vicks torpedo inhaler in her pocket, and her room always smelled like Vicks when you came near her door. To me, she resembled a combination of our parents: my father's height and my mother's looks. I sometimes found myself thinking of Berner as an older brother. Other times I wished she looked more like me so she'd be nicer to me, and we could be closer. Though I never wanted to look like her.

I, on the other hand, was smaller and trim with straight brown hair parted wide on the side, and smooth skin with very few pimples—"pretty" features more like our father's, but delicate like our mother. Which I liked, as I liked the way our mother dressed me—in khaki pants and clean, ironed shirts and oxford shoes from the Sears catalog. Our parents made jokes about Berner and me coming from the postman or the milkman and being "oddments." Though they only, I felt, meant Berner. In recent months, Berner had become sensitive about how she looked, and acted more and more disaffected—as if something had gone wrong in her life in a short amount of time. At one moment in my memory, she'd been an ordinary, freckle-faced, cute, happy little girl who had a wonderful smile and could make funny faces that had made us all laugh. But she now acted skeptical about life, which



made her sarcastic and skillful at spotting my defects, but mostly made her seem angry. She didn't even like her name—which I did like and thought it made her unique.

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**AFTER MY FATHER** had sold Oldsmobiles for a month, he was involved in a minor rear-end traffic accident while he was driving too fast in his demonstrator, and was also back on the base where he had no business being. After that, he began to sell Dodges and brought home a beautiful two-tone brown-and-white Coronet hardtop with what was called push-button drive and electric windows and swivel seats, and also stylish fins, gaudy red tail-lights and a long whipping antenna. This car likewise sat in front of our house for a period of three weeks. Berner and I got in it and played the radio, and my father took us on more drives and we let the air rush in with all four windows down. On several occasions he drove out the Bootlegger Trail and let us drive and taught us to back up and how to turn the wheels correctly for skidding on ice. Unfortunately he didn't sell any Dodges and came to the conclusion that in a place like Great Falls—a rough country town of only fifty thousand, brimming with frugal Swedes and suspicious Germans, and only a small percentage of moneyed people who might be willing to spend their money on fancy cars—he was in the wrong business. He quit that trade and took a job selling and trading used cars on a lot out near the base. Airmen were always in money scrapes and getting divorced and being sued and married again and put in jail and needing cash. They bought and traded automobiles as a form of currency. You could make money being the middle man—a position he liked. Plus the airmen would be apt to do business with a former officer, who understood their special problems and didn't look down on them the way other townspeople did.

**IN THE END**, he didn't stay long at that job either. Though on two or three occasions he took Berner and me out to the car lot to show us around. There was nothing for us to do there but wander among the rows of cars, in the shattering, hot breeze, under the flapping pennants and the silver flashers-on-wires, gazing at the passing base traffic from between the car hoods baking in the Montana sun. "Great Falls is a used car town, not a new car town," our father said, standing hands on hips on the steps of the little wooden office where the salesmen waited for customers. "New cars put everybody in the poorhouse. A thousand dollars is gone the second you drive off the lot." At about this time—late June—he said he was thinking of taking a driving trip down to Dixie, to see how things looked there among the "left backs." My mother told him this was a trip he'd make on his own and without her children, which annoyed him. She said she didn't want to get close to Alabama. Mississippi had been enough. The Jewish situation was worse than for coloreds, who at least belonged there. In her view Montana was better because no one even knew what a Jewish person was—which ended the discussion. Our mother's attitude toward being Jewish was that sometimes it was a burden, and other times it distinguished her in a way she accepted. But it was never good in all ways. Berner and I didn't know what a Jewish person was, except our mother was one, which by ancient rules made us official Jews, which was better than being from Alabama. We should consider ourselves "non-observant," or "deracinated," she said. This meant we celebrated Christmas and Thanksgiving and Easter and the Fourth of July all the same, and didn't attend a church, which was fine because there wasn't a Jewish one in Great Falls anyway. Someday it might mean something, but it didn't have to be now.

When our father had tried to sell used cars for a month, he came home one day with a used car that he'd bought for himself, and had traded away our '52 Mercury for—a white-and-red '55 Bel Air Chevrolet, bought off the lot where he'd been working. "A good deal." He said he'd arranged to begin a new job selling farms and ranch land—something he admitted he knew nothing about but was signed

up to take a course on in the basement of the YMCA. The other men in the company would help him. His father had been a timber estimator, so he was confident he had a good feel for things “out in the wilds”—better than he did for things in town. Plus, when Kennedy was elected in November, a period of buoyancy would dawn, and the first thing people would want to do was buy land. They weren't making more of it, he said, even though there seemed to be a lot of it around there. The percentages on selling used cars, he'd learned, were stacked against anybody but the dealer. He didn't know why he had to be the last person to find these things out. Our mother agreed.

We, of course, didn't know it then, my sister and I, but the two of them must've realized that they'd begun to draw away from each other during this time—after he'd left the Air Force and was supposedly finding himself in the world—and to recognize they saw each other differently, possibly begun to understand that the differences between them weren't going away but were getting larger. As the congested, preoccupying, tumultuous, moving around base after base and raising two children on the fly, years of it, had allowed them to put off noticing what they should've noticed at the beginning—and it was probably more her than him: that what had seemed small had become something she, at least, didn't like now. His optimism, her alienated skepticism. His southernness, her immigrant Jewishness. His lack of education, her preoccupation with it and sense of unfulfillment. When they realized it (or when she did)—again, this was after my father accepted his discharge and forward motion changed—they each began to experience a tension and foreboding peculiar to each of them and not shared by the other. (This was recorded in various things my mother wrote, and in her chronicle.) If things had been allowed to follow the path thousands of other lives follow—the everyday path toward ordinary splitting up—she could've just packed Berner and me up, put us on the train out of Great Falls and headed us to Tacoma, where she was from, or to New York or Los Angeles. If that had happened, each of them would've had a chance at a good life out in the wide world. My father might've gone back to the Air Force, since leaving it had been hard for him. He could've married someone else. She could've returned to school once Berner and I had gone to college. She could've written poems, followed her early aspirations. Fate would've dealt them improved hands.

And yet if they were telling this story, it would naturally be a different one, in which they were the principals in the events that were coming, and my sister and I the spectators—which is one thing children are to their parents. The world doesn't usually think about bank robbers as having children—though plenty must. But the children's story—which mine and my sister's is—is ours to weigh and apportion and judge as we see it. Years later in college, I read that the great critic Ruskin wrote that composition is the arrangement of unequal things. Which means it's for the composer to determine what's equal to what, and what matters more and what can be set to the side of life's hurtling passage onward.

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## Chapter 4

**M**OST OF WHAT I KNOW THAT WENT ON NEXT—from the middle of the summer, 1960—I know mostly from various unreliable sources: from what I read in the *Great Falls Tribune*, which carried stories about our parents that made it seem that there was something fantastic and hilarious about what they did. I know other things from the chronicle my mother wrote while she was in the Golden Valley County jail, in North Dakota, awaiting trial, and later in the North Dakota State Penitentiary in Bismarck. I know a few things from what people told me at the time. And, of course, I know some particulars because we were there in the house with them and observed them—as children do—things changed from ordinary, peaceful and good, to bad, then worse, and then to as bad as could be (though no one got killed until later).

**FOR ALMOST THE WHOLE TIME** my father had been stationed at the base in Great Falls—four years—he'd been involved (though we didn't know it) in a scheme to provide stolen beef to the officers' club for which he received money and fresh steaks we ate at home twice a week. The scheme was well established at the base, handed down from supply officer to supply officer as they passed through the assignments and out. The scheme involved doing illegal business with certain members of the Crow Indian tribe, who lived south of Havre, Montana, on reservation land and were experts at stealing Hereford cows from local ranchers' herds, butchering the cows in secret, then transporting the beef sides down to the base all in a night's work. The meat was stored away by the officers' club manager in the club's cold box and served to the majors and colonels and the base commander and their wives who knew nothing about where it came from and didn't care as long as no one got caught and the beef was good quality—which it was.

Obviously this was a small, penny-ante scheme, which was why it had easily gone on for years and everyone expected it to go on permanently. Only, a misunderstanding arose on the base, and parts of the scheme that involved billing practices in the supply and requisition office came embarrassingly to light, and several Air Force people were disciplined, and my father lost his rank of captain (of which he was proud) and became a first lieutenant again. He may have been one of the parties who caused the swindle to come to light, but that was never stated. The whole episode—which no one in our house ever discussed and Berner and I didn't know about—almost certainly contributed to his decision to leave the Air Force. It's possible he was forced to retire, although he received an honorable discharge certificate, which he framed and hung up in our living room above the piano, beside his FD-302 photograph. The picture was there after our parents were arrested, when my sister and I were alone in the house and no one came to see about us. In several moments during that time, I stood and perused it (“Honorably discharged from the United States Air Force . . . a testimonial of Honest and Faithful Service . . .”) and thought that what it said wasn't true. I considered taking it with me when I left. But in the end I forgot about it, hanging in our abandoned house for somebody else to make fun of and eventually throw in the trash.

What my father did—and this is in my mother's chronicle (“A Chronicle of a Crime Committed by a Weak Person” was her title; she may have intended her story to be published someday)—what m

father did, while he was unsuccessfully trying to sell Oldsmobiles, then Dodges, and then trading used cars and motorcycles to airmen, was again seek out the Indians south of Havre and try to establish new business in beef sides. He believed the Indians had lost a profitable outlet for their line of work. And if he could find someone or someplace new to supply meat to, everything could start up again and even be better than before, because the Air Force wouldn't be involved, and he'd have no one to split his proceeds with. Once again, it was such a third-rate, badly considered connivance that it could've been comical had it not been life altering: our father and our tiny, stern Jewish mother in their modest rented house in Great Falls, these hapless Indians and the rustled cows slaughtered in the middle of the night in an old semi-trailer. Common sense should've dictated none of this ever take place. But no one had access to common sense.

After realizing he wouldn't make enough money to support our family while he learned the farmland and ranch business—even with his two-hundred-eighty-dollar Air Force pension and my mother's salary from the Fort Shaw school—my father set out to find someone who could be a new customer for stolen beef, someone he would be the middle man for. There wouldn't be many such possibilities in Great Falls, he knew. Columbus Hospital. The Rainbow Hotel—where he knew no one. One or two steakhouse clubs he might've known about, but which were watched by the police because of illegal gambling. What his eye fell on was the Great Northern Railway, which ran the Western Star passenger train through Great Falls on its way to Seattle, then back in two days to Chicago, and that had a steady need to supply the dining cars with first-class food, coming and going. Our father believed the provider of prime beef could be him, again in association with the Indians near Havre. He knew about an airman who'd sold ducks and wild geese and venison (all illegal) to a Negro who worked for the railroad and was a head waiter in the dining car service. It was to this black man our father paid a visit (went to his house in Black Eagle) and proposed to sell him beef that he (our father) would supply from the Indians he said were his associates.

This Negro man—his name was Spencer Digby—was positive to the proposal. He'd been involved in other such schemes over the years and wasn't afraid of them. The railroad, it seemed, wasn't that different from the Air Force. I remember my father came home one afternoon and was in a rising jocular humor. He told my mother he'd formed an "independent business partnership" with "people on the railroad," which was going to supplement our income while he learned the ins and outs of the farmland and ranch game. It wouldn't change everybody's life and fortunes forever, but it would put things on a surer ground than they'd been on since he'd left the base.

I don't remember what our mother said. What she wrote in her chronicle was that she'd been thinking about leaving my father for some time and taking my sister and me to Washington State. When he'd described to her the arrangement for selling stolen meat to the Great Northern (which I apparently wasn't embarrassed about), she wrote that she'd opposed it, and had right away begun feeling a "terrible tension," and decided—because everything seemed to be going very wrong—that she should leave with us very soon. Only she didn't do that.

Of course, I don't know what she actually thought. It was certainly true that our mother—a young, educated woman with good values (she was thirty-four)—didn't think of herself as having anything in common with small-time criminals. It's possible she didn't know about the previous Air Force connivance, since our father went off to the base every morning like it was any other job, only you wore a blue uniform. He may not have talked to her about what went on there, since she would probably have opposed it then, too, and he might've known she was more and more disenchanted while still finding herself an Air Force wife.

She may have thought she was near the end of that particular life by then, and that better thing

would be possible once Berner and I were old enough, and divorce was finally thinkable. She could've left him the minute he told her about the Great Northern scheme. But again she didn't. Therefore, all that might've happened if she'd never met Bev at a Christmas party, the poems she'd have written and published, the small-college teaching possibilities, the marriage to a young professor, the different children from Berner and me—all that which might've happened to her in a revised life, didn't happen. Instead, she lived in Great Falls, a town she'd never before heard of (so confusable with Sioux Falls, Sioux City, Cedar Falls), lived in one world taken up with us, feeling isolated, not wanting to assimilate, and thinking only frustratedly, complicatedly of the future. And all the while our father existed in another world—his easy scheming nature, his optimism about the future, his charm. The two seemed the same world because the two of them shared it, and they had us. But they weren't the same. It's also possible that she loved him, since he unquestionably loved her. And given her generally unoptimistic frame of mind, given that she might've loved him, and that they had us, she conceivably couldn't face the shock of going away and being just alone with us forever. This is not an unheard-of story in the world.

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## Chapter 5

**F**OR A WHILE, MY FATHER'S DEALINGS WITH THE Indians and the Great Northern must've gone smoothly. Although my mother wrote in her chronicle that at this time—it was mid-July—she began to experience “physical ennui,” and for the first time in years began to talk to her parents on the telephone when my father was out learning about selling ranches and overseeing the delivery of stolen beef. Our grandparents had never taken any part in our family life. My sister and I had never even met them, which we knew was unusual, since we were aware of people in our school who saw the grandparents all the time and went on trips with them, received cards and gifts and money on their birthdays. Our Tacoma grandparents had opposed their intelligent daughter with a decent college degree marrying a slick, smiling Alabama ex-fly boy, who set off alarms in their insular immigrant world in Tacoma. They had offended my father by letting their disapproval be known. He was insulted by being undervalued, and as a result he never encouraged us to visit them or them to visit us, though I don't think he ever specifically forbid it—not that they would've come to any of the places we lived in Texas or Mississippi. Dayton, Ohio. They had the idea our mother should've entered “the professions,” should've lived in a sophisticated city and married a CPA or a surgeon. Which my mother told Berner she never would've, since she always wanted—being the rare person as she knew herself to be—a more adventurous life. But her parents were pessimistic and fearful and inflexible—though they'd been in America since 1919. And they found it permissible to turn their backs on the daughter and her family and let us all disappear off into the interior of the country. “It would still be nice for you to know your grandparents before they die,” she said to us a few times. She kept a framed black-and-white photograph, taken at Niagara Falls—three bespectacled, miniature people who looked alike, each wearing a rubber raincoat, looking miserable and mystified, posing on the gangplank of a boat (the *Maid of the Mists*, I now know, having since ridden it myself) that made tours right into the roaring downspout of the falls. It was her parents' return trip across the continent on their twentieth wedding anniversary, in 1938. Our mother was twelve. Woitek and Renata were their names. Vincent and Renny, their American names. Kamper wasn't their name either. Kampycznski. My mother's name, Neeva Kampycznski, was a name that fit her better than Kamper, or even Parsons—the second one not fitting her at all. “*There's a real cataract, there, kids,*” she said, staring at the cracked photograph, which she'd fetched out of her closet for us to see. “*You'll both see that someday.*” “*It makes these puny falls here look like a joke. They're not great falls—unless they're all you know, like these hicks who live here.*”

I believe our mother expressed to her parents her dissatisfactions and possibly talked about leaving our father and taking Berner and me with her to Tacoma. Before that, I didn't know Seattle and Tacoma were so close. I had known about the Space Needle from our weekly school newspaper, and that it would soon be built. I wanted to see it. The World's Fair seemed brilliant and dazzling, contemplated from Great Falls, Montana. I have no idea if our grandparents were sympathetic to our mother's complaints or would've welcomed us home with her. It had been fifteen years that she had been gone, without their blessing. They were old—rigid, conservative, intellectual people who'd saved their own lives at a bad time and wanted life to be predictable. They merely *could've* been receptive

Though neither, as I've said, do I believe leaving would've been a simple matter for her—even as out of place as she was. In that way she may have been less unconventional and more conservative than I give her credit for being. More like her parents than she knew.

I WAS BY THEN extremely interested in beginning Great Falls High School and wished it could start long before September, so I would be out of the house more. I'd found out the chess club met once a week through the summer in a dusty, airless room in the school's south tower. I rode my bicycle over the old, arched river bridge, all the way up to Second Avenue South, to be an "observer" of the old boys who played against each other and talked cryptically about chess and about their personal strategies and power sacrifices and tossed around famous players' names I didn't yet know—Gligorish, Ray Lopez, even Bobby Fischer who was already a master and admired by the club members. (He was known to be Jewish, which I took some unreasonable, silent pride in.) I had no idea about how to play. But I liked the orderliness of the board and the antiquated appearance of the pieces and how they felt in my hand. I knew a person needed to be logical to play and be able to plan moves far in advance and have a good memory—at least the other boys said as much. The members didn't mind my presence, and were arrogant but friendly, and informed me about books I should read and about the monthly *Chess Master* magazine I could subscribe to if I was serious. There were only five of them. No girls were members. They were the sons of lawyers, and doctors at the hospital, and talked pretentiously about all sorts of things I knew nothing of but was fiercely interested in. The spy plane incident, Francis Gary Powers, the "Winds of Change," the revolution in Cuba, Kennedy being Catholic, Patrice Lumumba, whether the executed murderer Caryl Chessman had played chess instead of having his last supper, and whether it was right or wrong for baseball players to have their names on their jerseys—conversations that made me realize I didn't know much that was going on in the world, but needed to.

My mother encouraged my playing. She told me her father used to play in a park in Tacoma against other immigrants, sometimes competing in several games at once. She thought chess would sharpen my wits and make me more at ease with how complex the world was, and make confusion not be something to fear—since it was everywhere. With what I'd saved of my dollar-a-week "bat-hid" allowance, I'd bought a set of Staunton plastic chess pieces at the hobby shop on Central, along with a roll-up vinyl board, which I kept permanently set up on my dresser top, and also bought an illustrated book the club members recommended to teach myself the rules. This I kept with my Rick Bragg science mysteries and the Charles Atlas muscleman books that had been left in the house and I'd read. I specifically liked it that all the chess men looked different, slightly mysterious and had complicated responsibilities that required them to move only in predetermined ways for specific strategic missions, which my book described as representing how real war went on at the time when chess was invented in India.

My mother didn't play. She preferred pinochle, which she said was a Jewish game—although she had no one to play it with. My father didn't like chess because, he said, Lenin had been a chess player. He preferred checkers, which he claimed was a more natural game that required subtle, deceptive skills. This made my mother sneer and say it was only subtle if you were from Alabama and couldn't think straight. When I got my set, I laid it out and showed her how the men moved. She tried to execute some of these, but grew uninterested and finally said her father had ruined it for her by being too demanding. I found out from my book that players all played chess against themselves for practice and would spend hours studying how to beat themselves so that when they played against a real opponent in a tournament, the game became just something you played in your head—which appealed

to me, though I couldn't figure out how to do it and made rash, uninformed moves the club members would've hooted at. Several times I tried to convince Berner to sit on the opposite side of the board on my bed, and let me perform moves that I read straight out of the *Chess Fundamentals* book, and which I would then instruct her how to answer. She did this twice, then also got bored and quit before the game had barely begun. When she was disgusted with me, she would stare hard at me and not speak, then breathe through her nose in a way that was meant for me to hear. "If you ever were any good at this, what difference would it make?" She said this as she was leaving. I, of course, thought this wasn't the point. Everything didn't have to have a practical outcome. Some things you only do because you liked doing them—which was not her way of thinking about life by then.

**BERNER WAS**, of course, my only real friend. We never endured the rivalries and bitter disagreements and belligerence brothers and sisters can suffer. This was because we were twins and seemed often to know what the other was thinking and cared about, and could easily agree. We also knew the life with our parents was very different from other children's lives—the children we went to school with, who we fantasized as being regular people with friends, and parents who acted normal together. (This, of course, was wrong.) We also agreed that our life was "a situation," and waiting was the hard part. At some point it would all become something else, and it was easier if we simply were patient and made the most of things together.

As I've said, Berner had lately come to advertise a more severe temperament and didn't talk to anyone much and was often sarcastic even to me. I could see my mother's grave features living in her flat, freckled face—her rounded nose, large, pupil-less eyes with thick eyebrows, large pores in her pimply skin and dark, wiry, heavy hair that started near her forehead. She didn't smile any more than my mother did, and I once heard my mother say to her, "You don't want to grow up to be a tall gangly girl with a dissatisfied look on her face." But I don't think Berner cared who she would grow up to be. She seemed to live entirely in the present moment, and thoughts about what would happen to her later didn't displace the feeling that she didn't like how things were now. She was physically stronger than I was and would sometimes take hold of my wrist with her large hands and rub my skin in opposite directions and make the "Chinese burn," while she told me that because she was older than I was, I had to do what she said—which I did almost all the time anyway. I was very much unlike her. I mused and fantasized about what would happen later—in high school, about chess victories, and college. It might not have appeared to be true, but Berner was probably more realistic in her skepticism than I was in my own views. It might've been better for her, given how her life turned out, to have stayed in Great Falls and married some good-hearted farmer and had a lot of children who she could've taught things to, which would've rendered her happy and taken the sour look off her young face—which was, after all, just her defense against being innocent. She and my mother kept a silent closeness between them that had nothing to do with me. I accepted and appreciated this closeness for Berner's sake. I felt she needed it more than I did, since I thought I was better adjusted at the time. I was supposedly close with my father—which was what boys were expected to be, even in our family. But it wasn't possible to be very close to him. He was away from the house much of the time—first, at the base; and then when that fell away, being cast off in the world, selling then not selling cars, then learning to sell farms and ranches, and eventually middle manning stolen beeves to be trucked by larcenous Indians down to the Great Northern depot, a plan that would be his undoing. All our undoing, finally. In truth, we were never very close, although I loved him as if we were.



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