

Preface

The Amtrak train arrived in Denver and I left the passenger car to buy the *Denver Post* and a cup of black coffee. The train was scheduled to arrive in Omaha around six the next morning. It had been a long and wearisome journey from California and I looked forward to much-needed sleep before arriving in Omaha. I nodded to the conductor on my way back into the car. I crossed the empty car, sat down, turned on an overhead reading light and focused on the paper's front page. I took two swallows of coffee and put the cup under my seat. *Why am I drinking coffee when I want to sleep?*

The conductor's voice rose as he helped a passenger board. He talked about an expected snowfall during the early morning hours and the passenger said, "I've seen that and been there. Just don't tell me to expect hurricanes and earthquakes in eastern Colorado and Nebraska."

The *thump-thump* of an aluminum walker preceded the new passenger as he searched for a seat. He chose one directly across the aisle from me. The conductor put the man's walker behind an empty seat and gave him a blanket and pillow. He looked over his shoulder as he walked toward the door, "Call if you need the walker or anything else, Mr. Steinman."

Inside lights dimmed as we left the Denver station. Mr. Steinman put the blanket over his legs, tilted back the seat, arranged the pillow behind his head and promptly fell asleep. The loud guttural snorts and wheezes of his snoring drowned out all other sounds,

including the *clickity-clacks* of train wheels against the tracks. I put a pillow behind my head and continued reading the newspaper.

The train stopped in Hastings, Nebraska around three in the morning. I glanced out the window. Swirling snowflakes nearly blanked out the lights on both ends of the station's platform. A man in a beige raincoat stood next to his suitcase while waiting for the conductor to open the door to another car. The collar of his coat was turned up to block the wind.

My fellow passenger stirred and asked, "Are we in Omaha?"

"No, we're in Hastings."

"Is that snow out there?"

"That it is. The conductor was right about a snow storm."

He rolled his head to one side and went back to sleep.

The train was about ten minutes out of Hastings when my neighbor sat upright and turned on an overhead light. I squinted against the intrusion. He pulled a black three-ring binder from a brown leather briefcase and opened it. The binder held at least two hundred pages of typed and hand-written pages. He turned to a page near the middle and began writing.

He noticed I was watching, smiled, and reached across the aisle to offer his hand. "I'm Paul Steinman from Colorado Springs. Sure hope my snoring didn't bother you."

I shook his hand, told him my name and said I was from California and traveling to Council Bluffs to visit my mother. I added, "No problem about your snoring."

He chuckled and said, "The old lady kicked me out of bed for snoring a long time ago. I think that saved our marriage."

Mr. Steinman scratched behind his left ear and stared out the window for a few seconds. The stark blackness of night contrasted with reflected whiteness of snowflakes as they streamed past his window. He looked at me and opened his mouth to speak, but turned and stared out the window again. He wrote a few more words on a page in the black binder, put down his pen and ruffled through a brown paper bag in his briefcase. He brought out a

boiled egg, plastic-wrapped sandwich, and bag of carrot sticks. He peeled and began eating the egg. A faint whiff of hydrogen sulfide from the boiled egg drifted into my nostrils. He continued leafing through the pages in his binder. A piece of egg yolk dropped on a page and he brushed it off.

I opened the *Denver Post*, read an editorial about water problems in Fort Collins, and worried through part of a crossword puzzle. The *clickity-clacks* of wheels against tracks lulled me and my head drooped over the newspaper.

Mr. Steinman cleared his throat. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but do you mind if we talk?"

I squinted at him, nodded and lied, "I'd much rather talk than sleep. What's on your mind?" I retrieved the cup of coffee and took a sip. The coffee was cold. I put it back under the seat.

My companion unwrapped the sandwich as he spoke, "I've been having similar dreams just about every night for the past few months, so my wife suggested that I go back to my boyhood home to see if I can get rid of them. I grew up in the small town of Hillview, Iowa, and haven't been there for nigh on to ten years, although I have three siblings and several cousins still living there and in Council Bluffs."

He hesitated for a few seconds and bit into the sandwich. The *clickity-clacks* of the wheels were loud and echoed through the car. Finally he continued, "And I'm also going back to bury a past that's been dogging me for years."

I reached into my carry-on bag and brought out a bottle of water. I unscrewed the cap and drank several swallows, all the while staring at my traveling companion. He was a short thin man about seventy years old. A small goatee gave him a Colonel Sanders appearance. Wrinkles clawed across his cheeks and forehead; his neck wasn't immune from wrinkles where they made irregular rhombic patterns. A thin growth of gray hair topped his head and I reasoned that it would all be gone in a few more years, should he live that long. Wire-rimmed frames held smudged bifocal lenses.

A pyramid-shaped Adam's apple moved up and down when he talked.

I asked, "Is the past you're burying the subject of those dreams?"

"Very much so, and the cause of those dreams affected not only my life but also the lives of my relatives."

I drank two more swallows of water and stared at my companion. "We all have pasts that bother us. Why have you and your relatives been so affected?"

He thought for a few seconds before answering. "I'm trying to write a memoir, but I have to learn a lot more about the Steinman family. I'll interview my siblings and look up a lot of material in 1918 and 1919 newspapers. Would you care to hear the story?"

I yawned and lied again, "Sure would. Tell me the story."

He lowered his voice, "My uncle Damien was a murderer. I've had a tough time living with that. To top it off he had a family, wife Annie and five children, and was sexually involved with a sixteen-year-old neighbor girl named Angela Hansen."

I put down the bottle of water. "A murderer you say? That's not a good skeleton to have in the family closet. Who did he murder?"

Instead of answering my question directly Paul began relating the story. "I have the same name as my grandfather. Just wish I had known him better. He could have told me a lot about my uncle. My father, Jack Steinman, didn't talk about his oldest brother and I never asked. My uncle, Damien Steinman, was born in 1887 and died in 1919. The murder he committed and the way he died became skeletons that still are locked in our family's closet."

"You have my complete interest." This time I didn't lie.

He stared out the window as the lights of a small town flashed past. He leaned toward me and continued talking in a low voice, "I'll start the story in late 1918 and take you through a few months of my uncle Damien's life, as I understand it, up to the time of his death in the summer of 1919. Let me put the time period in historical perspective: World War One ended in November of

1918, a world-wide flu epidemic killed millions that same year, and the prohibition amendment to our constitution was added in late January of 1919.”

I said, “A lot happened during that time period. I’d forgotten.”

He continued telling the story and his voice was barely audible above the noises of the train. It was the tale of an impoverished sharecropper and of infatuation, rape, incest, and murder that involved both the Steinman and Hansen families.

He finished the story as our train rolled into the Omaha train station. We shook hands before leaving the passenger car. I boarded a taxi to Council Bluffs and, as we travelled east on Broadway, I wrote some detailed notes in a yellow spiral notebook to help remember the story.