

CHAPTER III

MATT'S HOUSE

by

Rosina Burkart Raymond

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Matt's house, barn and silo

As the place came into view I slowed my 1962 Plymouth, came to a near stop, passed it, then went on for a quarter mile to County Trunk T and highway 54. I pulled over, turned off the ignition, and slipped a little deeper into the car seat. I put my hand to my throat in an effort to loosen the tightness.

Could I bear to really see it? Could I relive that long ago for even a little while? The decision came quickly. I had to go back. I straightened up in my seat, pulled onto the road and made a turn-around at the nearest farmer's driveway.

It was late afternoon and the July sun was in my eyes. I put down bathe visor, still it came into view quickly, too quickly.

There it stood, lonely, appealing, threatening. I again slowed the car and pulled over on the right shoulder. No, I wouldn't drive in. I would walk along the gravel driveway to it. Taking my purse and camera, I went to the mailbox on its five-foot-high post near the driveway. Stood and looked. Yes, it was there. The house with its ugly artificial red brick siding. (Maybe it was an improvement over that tin stuff Matt had put on when he built the place, I thought.) He'd said it would keep that Wisconsin cold out. But it never did. And how I hated the grumpy look of it!

But it was home. The farm house where I was born and spent my childhood and teens. And wove my dreams. The big barn, silo, out buildings--all designed and built by Matt...

I walked slowly up the driveway, my feet feeling the more than forty years of earth and stone as they took me past the spot where the winesap apple tree had stood. A wave of nostalgia engulfed me, causing my jaws to ache and nose burn, as I tasted again in memory the crisp, tangy apples I would pick up from under the tree after the mile and a half hike home from school.

I remembered the year Pitt decided to make cedar out of those luscious apples and how it all turned into vinegar. And what, in heaven's name, would we do with all that vinegar...

Within seconds after I arrived at the back door of the house a young woman responded to my knock with, "Yes?" as she looked at me questioningly.

"Hello, I'm here from Michigan and this was my home, my father built it and...well I'd like to look--around, if I may," I nervously strung the words together.

"Why sure, come on in an' help yourself." she said, extending her hand, "I'm Delia Schultz, an' we're just renters here, so don't know much about the place, except that it was remodeled inside and it's different now than in the early days. Leastwise that's what I heard from the neighbors. Just take your time. Hope you don't mind if I go back to my sewing though. I'm making a dress for my little girl's first communion next Sunday."

"Oh, not at all—gee thanks a lot. I don't want to keep you from your sewing." I remembered fleetingly my aunt Katie (my godmother) making my little white dress and veil when I was seven.

As I stepped into what had been our kitchen all that was familiar was the built-in china cabinet. The cabinet with the glass doors that had displayed the remains of Matt's and Lizzie's china and wedding gifts ...which I so loved to handle and shine.

While the wainscoting around the lower part of the walls was still there, it was painted a glossy ivory instead of the dark brown I remembered. And the beige upper walls and ceiling (instead of dark green) gave the room an airier appearance.

The sink, (that we called 'zinc') with its hand pump that brought rain water from the cistern in the cellar, and held the agate wash basin with a roller towel above it, was gone. A modern sink with hot and cold running water stood in its place.

No going to the well near the barn and lugging back buckets of water when the cistern was low because of little or no rain, for these folks, I thought. No filling the reservoir in a big cast iron cook stove.

No getting up on an icy, below zero winter morning and building a fire with kindling wood and a little kerosene, while noting a thin sheet of ice had formed on water you'd left in the wash basin the night before. Now, these folks merely turned a knob on the well-used, white chipped enamel four-burner electric stove that occupied the old cast iron cook stove's space.

The stove that held the grey agate pot you moved to the front burners in the morning after the fire got going, added water, a handful of coffee you'd ground earlier, and let brew. By Saturday when you started the process over the coffee was strong enough to remove paint. And bitter.

You shined up the old stove on Saturday with a little lard or kerosene on a cloth. Then polished it with the "Wisconsin Agriculturist" that came to us weekly in the roadside mail box.

The next day would be Sunday and company might drop in. With its warming oven (high above the burners), that not only kept food warm but was a place to put stuck-on pans you didn't feel like cleaning, the old stove was a kind of refuge.

The old stove, with its 'kaput' temperature gage and large oven that produced countless loaves of bread, cakes, cookies and reams of pies---all coming out just right though hand-heat-gaged, gone...

Adjacent to the kitchen, what had formerly been the pantry with its small work table, now was part of the kitchen with built-in cupboards and refrigerator. The pantry, where we'd kept home canned goods, flour, sugar, crocks of lard, wedges of cheese, vanilla, and condiments: Watkins lineament for aching muscles, and Peroxide for 'boiling out' festering animal wounds. And, Matt's whiskey bottle.

As I walked into the sitting room, where the lady who had so graciously invited me in was sewing, a kaleidoscope of memories flashed through my mind: The hard coal burner we'd sat around on a cold winter night, roasting apples, reading, or playing our favorite card game of Schafkopf. Matt, Clarence and I. Playing for points or long kitchen matches (not for pennies as did adult relatives and friends).

I saw again Matt in the reed rocker he fit so amply he could raise it without getting out of it. And thought great fun to do. Matt, singing "O Tannenbaum" at twilight as Christmas neared, rocking gently, his blackened corn cob pipe in his hand, or on his lap when it had gone out unnoticed, while I puttered in the kitchen. Matt, sometimes just sitting, thinking and remembering, with only the ticking and gonging of the high mantle clock (which he wound every eight days and had been a wedding present), impinging on his reverie...

What had been my bedroom (off the sitting room and back to back with the kitchen) was now a bathroom. My bedroom, where I was born and later slept. Slept, in a three quarter, straw-tickled, patch-work-quilt covered bed. Slept, with a picture of the Virgin Mary with her innocent holy eyes, hanging on the wall directly over the oak carved headboard. With a box-like, glass covered enclosure that held Lizzie's wedding wreath and veil dominating the side wall and a sheaf of blessed, braided palm stuck behind it.

Here Matt and Lizzie had slept earlier. Here I was conceived and born. Here Lizzie had been locked into her cell-like space, presumably for her own protection and that of her children when life locked the doors of her mind and she became a prisoner within herself...The beautiful, quiet spoken Lizzie, a raving, raging maniac---tearing at herself or alternately laughing and singing loudly.

Matt had put a screen door leading to the bedroom (now walled over) to allow his beloved Lizzie more air. And nailed heavy wooden slats crosswise to help keep her from breaking out.

The screening did not, however, keep her from throwing a cup of coffee in the face of a well-meaning (or curious) visitor...

Gentle, apple-blossom-scented breezes had wafted through the east window through the years of my sleeping there. And I liked to think they'd kept Lizzie reasonably comfortable during her forced imprisonment that late May of 1914, when they'd brought her home from St. Vincent hospital after her appendectomy...

I could only see the room in memory and hearsay. It was completely unrecognizable as a bathroom, with the usual fixtures and an electric hot water tank in the corner. And I thought: No heating water on a black cast iron stove for a bath for these folks. No going down that much-used path to the little house with the halfmoon. No higher seats for the 'big ones' and lower seats for 'the little' ones. No Sears Roebuck catalogue for convenience and edification. No joking about saving the shiny pages for Sundays.

How can so much pain and pleasure intermingle, I asked myself, reentering the sitting room, and remembering: The thrilling, aching excitement of the "gang" coming to our house on a Sunday afternoon or Saturday evening, in our teen years.

Cousins Angeline, Sylvia, and Regina, who lived on our road. The Liebergen cousins (Maryleen and Cecilia) from two miles away. All close in age. Cousins Joe and Jack, the Van Laanen boys a few years older than us from five-mile-away Bay Settlement.

How our hearts would pound as we giggled nervously at the chug-chug of the fellows' model T turning into our driveway!

"They're here, they're here!" we'd say as we watched them get out of the car, from the kitchen window.

Seated in the sparsely furnished sitting room they would 'warm up' by telling the latest dirty joke or story. Little Johnny stories like: "One day Johnny was taking a short-cut to school when he climbed through a barbed wire fence and ripped the seat of his pants. 'I see you're a little behind this morning, the teacher said as Johnny came puffing into the room. 'You wouldn't see it if I had another safety pin, Johnny answered and laughed.

Sometimes the stories would progress to more erotic, arousing themes. And sometimes, after we'd danced awkwardly to the scratchy music on our small Victrola, we'd take to singing. From, "The Little Brown Church in the Wildwood", "The Old Wooden Cross", and similar 'classics' we'd progress to such romantic songs as "There's a New Star in Heaven Tonight, (eulogizing Rudolph Valentino)" and "I'll be Loving You Always, Always---"

The ultimate would be reached when (encouraged by some of Matt's home brew we'd served) the fellows would lead off with songs like "Bye bye Blackbird", a homesick kind of love song, art transform the last two lines, make the bed and put out the light, I'll arrive late tonight, bye, bye, blackbird' into 'make the bed and put out the light, I'll hop on her late tonight, bye, bye, blackbird'.

While we'd long known the meaning of the parodied words our strong anti-sex indoctrination deterred us, to some degree, from applying any real significance to them. Also, the framed picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus looking down at us from the wall helped control our thoughts.

That same picture (and the one of the Virgin Mary) had also looked down on then we'd played kissing games, notably 'spin the bottle'. Seated on the floor in a circle we'd take turns at spinning. When the bottle stopped, whoever it pointed to could choose a companion to go into the bedroom with for a minute or two. Anything much longer brought a tap at the door.

And then there was Matt. Subtle suggestions that maybe he'd like to go up the road and visit one of his sisters met with, "No, I stay home." And stay at home he would. After greeting everyone heartily, he'd seat himself with his Sunday cigar, or corn cob, in the kitchen or the other bedroom with the open square archway that was also an extension of the sitting room. Smiling indolently, he would have occasion periodically to get a drink of water or stoke the fire.

"Lots of changes, ain't there?", Mrs. Schultz's blue eyes reflected empathy as I walked past her to the 'front' room.

"Yes...yes, there certainly are."

The 'front room', typically a parlor that later had become Matt's bedroom, was now furnished in the usual living room style with chairs, lamps, end tables and so on. I was suddenly brought up with a start at the sight of a blue velour couch at the end of the northwest wall. A couch, that stood in the same place Lizzie had come home toxin death, after seven and a half long years at the institution.

I swallowed hard as I walked past the door that exited to the porch-like landing fronting highway 54. The door that had held the crepe so many years ago, signaling to the neighbors someone in the house had died.

"May I go upstairs, please?" I asked Mrs. Schultz, who looked up from her sewing, rolled her shoulders to relieve the tautness, answered "Oh sure — you know how get. up here?"

"I guess from this door in the sitting room, right?" "That's right," and she opened the door to a small landing, "please excuse the mess up there, I didn't get time to do nothing upstairs with being so busy working on my girl's communion dress."

"I understand," I said as I walked toward the staircase.

Matt seemed to have had a compulsion about that staircase. I recalled his moving it at least twice. Maybe he had a purpose--maybe he was simply bored--anyway, the last time he'd made an entrance from the front bedroom with a small landing, separating it from the kitchen door. Now those entrances were walled over.

Few changes had been made upstairs. I observed poignantly the long room that extended the full wide with two bedrooms fronting southward toward the driveway.

The long room, that I'd always wished, as a teenager, to have as party-dance area. But never could.

As I stood at the east windows and looked over the countryside the years rolled away and I remembered: The many times I'd run upstairs to watch for the mailman to bring our Sears Roebuck order for a much-wanted dress or shoes. Or, the weekly Wisconsin Agriculturist with its continued story. Or, if it was getting late in the afternoon and Matt, who'd left earlier with

old Dan pulling the buggy, still wasn't home. He'd be coming from that direction if he'd gone to Frick's or Deterville's saloon in Walhain for company and fellowship. Or, maybe just to forget, for a while.

I remembered how we'd search his pockets for the candy bars I'd taken in lieu of another round of drinks and brought home to Clarence and me. And I felt again the soul-wrenching anxiety and loneliness whenever he was late coming home.

I turned away, and tried to shake off the strong emotional impact as I walked slowly down the stairs.

"Thank you-thank you so very much for letting me look around - I have to go now," I said to Mrs. Schultz, who got up from her sewing and answered, "That's all right, you just come again whenever you feel like it. Goodbye and good luck now."

"Goodbye, and thanks again," I answered weakly.

In the open air I walked around the yard. Matt's hands had build this house, barn, and old tool shed where he'd hammered red hot steel into tools. There was the silo with 1911 and two horse shoes cut in the cement while it was wet. For good luck, he'd said. What luck? I wondered. I took a few pictures for remembering. Folded back the pages where part of me, so ingrained, so rooted was exposed. I looked back once more as I walked toward the car. My throat tightened, eyes glistened and I knew this was gone. I knew too, this would ever be Matt's house.