

# The Vermilion Cliffs

*“Beautifully written” - Sylvia Anderson*

These are the memories of Mitchell McGlinn, from his earliest recollections to when his childhood ends at the age of eleven. From when his mother walks out one night and never returns, to when he finally learns the truth of that night.

It is the story of a boyhood spent with his younger sister Cassie and their father Nathan who, assisted by Dorothy, runs a diner in a remote area of Arizona in the 1920s. Business is never good. Isolated from the rest of Arizona by the towering Vermilion Cliffs to the north and the depths of mighty Colorado to the south, the only crossing is by an old ferry some miles up river. Then finally a bridge is built nearby which spans the Marble Canyon and promises a new lease of life for the area. But the Great Depression is looming.

A chance meeting with a Navajo Indian when the bridge is dedicated leads inexorably to the end of Mitch's childhood. And when Mitch does finally learn the truth about his mother, the only source of that truth is his father. It is a dilemma which has never stopped bothering him - neither has his father's demise for which he has always been uncertain of his own responsibility.

He is a man haunted by these events. They begin where his childhood begins ...

# **THE VERMILION CLIFFS**

**Stephen Sykes**

**Foxfell**

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# **Prelude**

## A Soporific Gloom

In my dream I know that I am dreaming. I have dreamed it many times.

My car pulls off the road and stops near the door. It is hard to say whether the diner is open or closed. I sit mesmerized, peering through the cloud of dust which now drifts lazily across my vision. A dilapidated looking shack with no outward sign of life. No lights, no other cars, nothing to indicate what is going on inside, if anything *is* going on inside. Just a tired old building on a lonesome road.

*The building was always tired, the road always lonesome.*

There is recognition, yet things look different. Memories fail in their detail. All that remains certain are the cliffs stretching from horizon to horizon and which dwarf everything about. They are of a scale by which everything human shrinks to insignificance. That is the one memory which remains secure. Nothing can ever diminish that sight of the Vermilion Cliffs.

I climb from the car, my face instantly confronted with the fierce temperature of the Arizona afternoon. My eyes wander over the old clapboard building, taking in every detail, matching reality with recollection; such long-ago recollections now dimmed by time. I step into the shade of the verandah and breathe deeply the evocative scent of its wooden structure roasting in the heat of the day. The dry heat and the sounds of the chirruping insects, like electric wires resonating in the breeze. The sights and smells and sounds of a childhood long ago but never, never forgotten.

*And if I close my eyes ...*

My hand reaches out to pull back the mesh screen and push open the inner door. I feel intrusive and if, for a moment, I hope that the door will be locked the thought instantly vanishes as it swings back with a groan of discontent to reveal the dining room beyond. I move inside and the screen rattles shut behind me. There is a soporific gloom which verges on oppression.

"I'll be right with you." It is a woman's voice which calls from the back room.

I remain standing, looking around, testing the minutiae of my memories. It isn't easy, not after so long. Not inside. Things have changed, but what do I expect after so many years?

"Pick any table you want, they're all free."

I am startled as she bursts through the swing door and I know it must show in my face.

"Jesus, feller, you OK?" She doesn't advance any further and as my eyes grow accustomed I can see she is young, attractive.

"I guess I must look kind of a mess."

"I've seen better," she says, and smiles. "And I've seen worse."

I try and return the smile. "I've been traveling a long time."

"Not many folks use this road any more."

I want to tell her that not many folks ever did use the road, but I let it go.

The woman's confidence grows and she moves forward. "Get you a coffee?"

I already know what to say. "I don't have any money on me."

"My, my," she says and digs into her pocket. "Here."

I catch the dime as it spins in the air and she doesn't wait for a reply before adding, "On the house."

"That's very kind of you."

"Don't I know it. A diner with no customers and when one does turn up he's got no money."

I seat myself at a table by a small window where a wooden shutter keeps the sun at bay.

Once upon a time there were no shutters. Once upon a time.

"You wanna eat?"

She sees me hesitate.

"Pay me next time."

"Thank you," I say, but I know I never will because to me this *is* the next time and to her there is

*never* a next time.

"Coffee's still free."

"You have a menu?"

She points behind her and above the counter. "Right up there on the board."

I peer across the room though I do not have to read it. "What's the Special?"

"Whatever we got cookin'."

"And what've you got cooking?"

"The Special."

"Then I guess I'll have the Special, if it's not too much trouble."

"It'd only be trouble if you didn't choose the Special," she confirms with a half-smile. "I'll be right back with your coffee."

Then she stops and turns and says to me, "You live here." It is not a question.

"Do I?"

"You live here with Cassandra ..."

"Cassie," I correct.

"... and your Pa ..."

I remember now. "And there's Goldie, our dog."

"The dog's Cassie's." How does she know? "A golden Labrador."

"Retriever."

"What?"

"He's a golden Labrador retriever."

She gestures indifference. "And there's Miss Stanton and Doc Mansfield ..."

"And Uncle Sam ..."

"You never call him Uncle Sam." She is now correcting me. "It's always Mr Steinmetz."

"And Maureen."

"Mrs Steinmetz."

"Excuse me?"

"You never call her Maureen. It's always Mrs Steinmetz."

I consider for a moment and then announce triumphantly, "And Ulysses!"

"Who the hell's Ulysses?"

Who's Ulysses!

"Your horse! Your horse is called Ulysses!"

She looks at me quizzically. "I don't have any damned horse!"

"Dorothy has a horse called Ulysses," I insist.

"But I'm not Dorothy!"

"You're not?"

"Do I look like a Dorothy?"

"I'm not talking about *a* Dorothy, I'm talking about *the* Dorothy. Dorothy Gale."

"Dorothy Gale!" And she laughs right out loud.

"And Ma. You haven't mentioned Ma." She never mentions Ma.

She stops laughing. "Why should I mention her?"

Why?

"Because she lives here too."

"Oh?" There is a scathing tone to her voice which I do not like.

"Of course she lives here!" Now I am correcting her again. "She lives here with me and Cassandra ..."

"Cassie."

"... and Pa and Goldie."

"Goldie's dead."

"Dead?"

"Shot dead."

"Me and Cassie and Pa and Ma ..."

"But your Ma's dead too."

"She can't be."

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't been born yet and if I'm not born yet that means Ma's still alive."

She shrugs and turns. "I'll get that coffee now."

This is my dream of childhood.

It begins where my childhood began and it ends where my childhood ended.

*This is where my childhood began ...*

## The Guns Fell Silent

Cassie was born two years after me.

I came into this world on the day that the Great War in Europe ceased. November eleventh 1918. Pa always told me that with Doc Mansfield's help I came out screaming and hollering early that cold morning as the guns fell silent in those God-forsaken battlefields where it was just one hour before noon.

Later that day a special dispatch rider arrived. Ma's heart sank as she looked through the window and saw the motorbike pull up outside. She knew the inevitability of the visit. It was what all parents dreaded. No ceremony, no way to make it easy. Just the official notification printed with due solemnity and delivered with minimal formality.

It was with deep regret, our parents were informed, that our brother had been killed; stricken by gas in those blood-drenched fields in Flanders.

"He was only fifteen," Pa had said as he crushed the letter in his hand until his knuckles blanched and his mighty fists shook uncontrollably with unrelieved rage. "Why, oh Lord, did he have to lie about his age an' sign up? What a shameful waste ...," was all he could utter as his face contorted in anger at his short-lived joy of birth. He couldn't find the courage for tears and Ma wept for both of them.

Never thought they'd have any more children 'til I came along so I guess I was quite a surprise after so many years.

Now it may be imagination, but I swear my earliest memory is watching Pa take a record and place it on our old wind-up phonograph. In my mind I can still hear the music ringing out.

Times for relaxing were few, but maybe late at night he'd sit down in our small parlor by the dim light of an oil lamp.

"You know, Jenny," Pa would say, "one day we're gonna take a trip east."

"An' just where do you suppose we'll ever find the money, Nathan?" The fret of resources would always be uppermost in Ma's considerations.

"If you want somethin' real bad, you'll achieve it," Pa would always respond with exemplary optimism. "We'll go to New York an' buy ourselves tickets for the Metropolitan Opera."

"It's a fine ambition, Nathan," acknowledged Ma, partly in humor and partly in hope. "I'd like that."

"We'll sit there in our Sunday-best clothes an' wait for Enrico Caruso an' Titta Ruffo to walk out onto that vast stage."

He'd seen pictures and his mind's eye would visualize every detail. Sometimes they'd sit in the stalls and sometimes in the Diamond Horseshoe, which was odd as their pecuniary circumstances were in no shape to provide even a single ticket in even the farthest, highest, most distant seat from that stage. But I guess if you can't afford any seat in the first place, you may as well take the best when it's free for the picking.

"'Til then you'll just have to make do with sittin' in your own parlor listenin' to your records. Least you can do that with your shoes off an' your suspenders down."

"Suits me sure enough for now." He was happy with that thought.

His records were Pa's proudest possession. I can see him now go over to our polished walnut cabinet, its veneer hostage to the climate of the high desert. He'd turn the key and pull at the single door which folded down and he'd search through his records 'til he found the one that suited his mood. I'd watch as his hands would slip the fragile disc from its paper sleeve and he'd carefully locate it on the green baize-covered turntable. He'd crank the handle 'til it wouldn't crank any further and he'd lower the needle with all the delicacy, all the dedication of a surgeon ... gently ... gently ... until the tip hissingly caressed the shellac.

And the glorious voices of Caruso and Ruffo in storming duet from Verdi's *Otello* would ring

out into the still night air. Tenor and baritone singing with a vengeance of epic proportions.

*Si, pel ciel marmoreo giuro!*

*Per le attorte folgori!*

*Per la Morte e per l'oscuro mar sterminator!*

It was the only record that those two singers ever made together ...

*Yes, I swear by the marble heaven!*

*By the jagged lightning!*

*By death and by the dark destroying sea!*

... and Pa said it would never be surpassed. "Neither the music nor the singing."

These years later, I know he was right.

\* \* \*

Just after Christmas 1920 Sam Steinmetz and his wife Maureen called by to offer their congratulations on Cassie's birth. My little sister never did like to be called *Cassandra*, but *Cass* and *Cassie* were just fine.

Though he may never have had much in the way of what you might call formal education, Pa was pretty well read and there were always books crowding about the house, some we owned and some we borrowed. Pa had come across the name Cassandra when he was reading about ancient Troy in a book about legends and such. He read that King Priam had a daughter called Cassandra and Homer said she was the most beautiful of all the king's daughters. And if that wasn't sufficient for one person, she had a special talent for prophesy, a gift given to her by no less a Greek god than Apollo himself. Well, that was good enough for Pa and he liked the sound of Cassandra. *Cassandra*. It had a special sort of feel about it. *Cassandra*. A real nice satisfying feel. Never mind that Apollo cursed her when she refused to love him and her prophesies were doomed to disbelief. If anybody told Pa that, he'd delight in saying, "T'weren't her fault. The fools were the ones who didn't heed what she told 'em. Just like there're experts who say that one day a damned great earthquake's gonna flatten Frisco again like in 1906, but it don't stop fools from buildin' there!"

The Steinmetz's owned a spread over near Jacob Lake, some miles distant, and whenever they visited, Sam and Pa would talk and listen to opera with a passion while Ma and Sam's wife would gossip about whatever women gossip about; mostly kids, I guess. Mrs Steinmetz knew Ma had a hard time giving birth to Cass and she wanted her to take a Hopi Indian brooch which Ma had long admired. There was no money for that kind of luxury and I know that hurt Pa.

"Oh, Maureen, I couldn't possibly," Ma protested.

Mrs Steinmetz would hear none of it. "Sure you can. In any case, turquoise looks better on a younger, prettier woman such as yourself."

"Maureen, you know that ain't true ..." But it was true alright. "An' besides, we could never afford such a lovely thing. It's real gold."

"No need to afford it when I'm givin' it to you."

"But, Maureen, I'll never find occasion ..."

Sam drew the matter to a decisive conclusion. "Not another word, Jenny. It's yours."

And Pa said, "It'll sure be somethin' when I finally get to take you to the Met. Why, you'll look as fine sittin' in the audience as Rosa does singin' on stage."

To Pa, Rosa Ponselle was always just *Rosa*. She had a special place in his affections since he'd read in a magazine how she was discovered by Caruso himself and made her spectacular debut at the Metropolitan Opera singing with that great tenor only four days after I was born. But it wasn't just any opera and it wasn't just any performance. That Friday evening, November 15, 1918, also marked the premiere at the Met of Verdi's *La forza del destino*. And to cap it all, Rosa and Ma shared the same birthday. January 22. Pa wasn't especially superstitious but he felt there was some significance. It was an omen of some sort, though he didn't know exactly what sort. "If Rosa could

benefit from the force o' destiny," Pa would say, "then I guess we all stand a chance when it comes to bein' dealt a hand by fate." Pa thought that was pretty cute.

The humor seemed to drain from Sam's face. "I take it you ain't heard the news then, Nathan."

"What news is that?"

"Caruso was taken ill durin' a performance at the Met on Christmas Eve. They tried to keep it quiet but it's been in the papers. Seems he ain't been well for some time."

Pa was pretty upset on hearing this and it was only a short while after that he started to act a little strange. Nothing much for anyone to notice, not at first. But Ma said he'd sit a little longer listening to his records. Just listening and rocking. His lanky figure draped in his favorite chair. Just a little longer than normal. *Listening and rocking*. And then a little longer.

*Listening ...*

And a little longer.

*Rocking ...*

And longer ...

*Listening and rocking ... listening and rocking ...*

Until eventually he'd stay up listening all night. And sometimes when a record had finished he'd leave it spinning and hissing ...

*spinning and hissing ... spinning and hissing ...*

... until the clockwork motor ran down.

She'd wake up in the night and find him still in his chair, just staring, his eyes red-rimmed.

"We ain't ever gonna see him, Jenny. You know that, don't you?" Pa would say.

"Who ain't we gonna see, Nathan?"

"We ain't ever gonna see Caruso at the Met."

**1921**

## One Sweltering Day

A great deep red escarpment as far as the eye can see until it melts into the haze shimmering over the desert. Soaring over a thousand feet from their chaotic base, they bewilder the senses and haunt the imagination with their scale and beauty and color.

These are the Vermilion Cliffs of the Arizona Strip, a land wedged between Utah to the north and the chasms of the Colorado to the south, where that mighty river slices the earth and cuts down into the depths of the land, from Marble Canyon to the Grand Canyon itself. A part of the US which is barely more accessible today than it was in 1913 when the *Arizona Good Roads Tour Book* failed even to mention this northwestern corner of the newly admitted 48th state. An arid place where the only crossing in those days was by Lee's Ferry, little more than a small flat-bottomed barge connected to a track cable that guided it from shore to shore. And if that seems pretty inconsequential to the casual eye, then you have to remember that this was the only place where the Colorado was accessible by road for the next two hundred forty miles down that river. That made it pretty important to those of us who lived out there and this was the part of the United States of America where my mother and father tried to make whatever living they could serving drink and food to whatever passing trade there was. Never seemed it amounted to much.

The diner never had a name. Not when Pa bought it and certainly not from then on. It was always just the diner. Not even *The Diner*. Just the diner.

Whereas others with more flair for such things might have considered calling it *Desert Café*, or *Middle O' Nowhere* or *Cliff View Restaurant*, Pa couldn't see the necessity.

"You really should have a name for it," Sam Steinmetz advised more than once. "You gotta give it some impact."

"Why's that?"

"So folks'll really remember it."

"Folks don't seem to have no trouble rememberin' it."

"Well ... so's folks don't go mixin' it up with no other diner then."

"Sam, there *are* no other diners. That's why they don't have no difficulty rememberin' it!"

That was true, at least insofar as there were no other diners within fifty miles, maybe even a hundred. Actually Pa had no idea, but no one had ever disputed his belief, not even Sam, and that was good enough. As far as he was concerned, he may have been running the only diner in the United States of America, east or west of the Continental Divide, let alone Arizona. Competition was zero. Which was just as well as more often than not the number of customers didn't greatly exceed that same value.

It had originally been just a house until someone at some time thought about turning it into a roadside business. They added a room for serving meals and that was just about it. Exactly when this was no one was ever sure, but it had been a diner for as long as anyone around those parts could recall. Anyone that was except Beatrice.

Bea was an old woman, a very old woman of uncertain age and even less certain parentage. She claimed she was descended from William Bradford who arrived on the good ship *Mayflower* and became Governor of the Colony of New Plymouth, Massachusetts. Pa always told us that half of all Americans claimed descent from one or other of those pilgrim colonists who sailed with William Bradford. The other half would claim lineage from at least one president. "And the other half," Sam would add, "had Pocahontas on their mothers' side!"

No one really believed Beatrice, but on the other hand no one had any reason to disbelieve her. And no matter that Sam was joking, she did have a look about her which spoke of native America. Anyhow, she said she could remember the house being built by some guy from Virginia, though why someone from that far away chose this particular place to live even she couldn't say. Maybe he just liked the view as much as we did.

\* \* \*

One sweltering day in August Pa said it was time that Ma had some new clothes and we'd go off to Flagstaff for a few days.

"I don't need no new clothes, Nathan," Ma protested, and Maureen Steinmetz later told us that Ma was pretty enough in herself to look good in anything, old or new. "Besides, we ain't got the money."

"I got a little put by an' we can visit Aunt Ida. She'd sure like to see you an' the kids."

I guess so," Ma conceded.

"She ain't seen Cassie more'n the once."

"But what about the diner? Who's gonna look after that?"

"You really think the whole world's gonna to turn up an' hammer on our door the minute we take our leave?" Pa found the idea more than amusing. "Jenny, if that happens, then we should make plans more often. We can hide around the bend an' just wait for 'em to arrive. Why, we'll soon be able to open up a whole string o' diners across the country!"

I guess he was there with the germ of an idea a good three decades or more before Ray Kroc bought the rights to Mac and Dick McDonald's hamburgers in San Bernardino, California, if only he'd realized it. Looking back, I'm pleased he never knew.

"Ain't no need for sarcasm," Ma rebuked.

But she knew he was right. Can't doubt what Pa and Ma sold would hold its own against anybody else's. They just didn't have the location. And I guess no one would ever have called Pa an *entrepreneur*. He just ran an old diner that he bought with a bank mortgage in a wilder moment of fancy. The only thing more impenetrable than why Pa ever bought it was why the bank ever loaned money on it.

Ma knew there'd be no sudden surge of business when their back was turned. Fine thing if there was. That would be the day they'd go fetch Reverend Mathison and ask forgiveness for seldom turning up to church. To say without reservation they truly believed there was a Good Lord after all because nothing else in their existence indicated that to be so. But until they witnessed such a miracle they'd retain their small degree of skepticism.

"It ain't that we don't believe, Reverend," Pa would explain when Ma wasn't around to hear. "It's just that we ain't seen no actual *proof*."

"Exactly what kind of proof, Mr McGlinn?"

"Proof that the good Lord's even heard o' this shit hole, 'cause sure as hell no one else has!"

I guess a real businessman would have faced facts and closed up and moved to some other place where there was an expanding population, or compared to where we were, *any* population. A constant stream of hungry people with money in their pockets eager to drop in for breakfast, lunch and supper. A business needs a reliable supply of customers. All we had were mainly itinerants. Pa used to say that when more than two people turned up at the same time the place seemed full. And that was a good day. He was exaggerating, of course, but then Pa liked to enhance his stories some.

If Ma ever wondered how Pa had set a little money by, she never asked. If Pa said it was so, then it was so. Pa always took care of the figures. Still, she wasn't too happy at the thought of taking baby Cass and me, not yet three, across the river on that old ferry. But Pa said, "Everythin'll be fine. Ain't nothin' to worry about."

Of course, Pa was only lying to reassure her. Ma knew it was really just an excuse to call into the record store and see what had arrived in since his last visit. Pa was always careful with the money they'd managed to earn, but only he and the Lord knew how he'd scraped enough together as a down-payment on his Ford. Ma must've wondered about that too.

The roads in those days were no better than dirt tracks and it was no easy ride, those one hundred forty miles or more south to Flagstaff. The ferry was the least of anyone's worries. But

despite the primitive state of the roads and the age of the old man-handled ferry we never experienced anything more than a flat tire all the times we made the journey.

"How the suspension don't get bust to pieces, I'll never know," Pa would say as we bumped and bounced our way along, "but that's American engineering for you. The roads may be a heap o' shit but those guys in Detroit sure can build an automobile."

"Nathan! Watch your mouth!" Ma would reply, gripping onto baby Cass and wedging herself into her seat. "What would Reverend Mathison say if he heard such language?"

"I really can't imagine, Jenny," Pa said with inviolable innocence. "I really can't imagine." But he didn't pay her any mind. Pa would mouth off and Ma would sound offended. She knew it wouldn't stop him, preacher or no preacher.

## Another Time

Apart from visiting Aunt Ida and the record store, there was one other thing which drew Pa to Flagstaff - Mars Hill. I later had the impression that Aunt Ida didn't exactly have the same attraction, but Pa felt it was his duty to see her now and again, considering as how she was our only living relative.

Now Mars Hill was where astronomer and Bostonian Percival Lowell built his observatory back in the 1890s, the great wooden dome housing the mighty Clark refracting telescope, its main lens no less than 24 inches in diameter. With the clear skies of Arizona and an altitude of around seven thousand feet above sea level, Flagstaff was about as perfect a location as anyone could imagine for observing the planets and just about anything else in the heavens. Perhaps no one outside of Flagstaff would have paid much mind to Mr Lowell, but he was convinced that he could see dark streaks criss-crossing the surface of the planet Mars. Maybe that in itself wouldn't have immortalized his name, but he was equally convinced that these streaks were in fact canals built by Martians to carry water from one part of their parched and dying planet to another part. Nowadays every school kid knows the error in this, but back then old Percival was convinced he saw them and was equally convinced of their purpose. Most folks reckoned he only saw them because he *wanted* to see them. But why he believed they were canals was harder to understand from a man of science.

Of course, Pa's view was, *"If you wanna see somethin' real bad, sure enough you'll see it."*

I guess it's the same with belief. Believe in something strong enough and it becomes fact, at least to the believer.

Pa would walk by the observatory at the edge of town and look up at the great dome among the towering pines. He didn't say anything, but Ma knew he longed to see inside. She knew he hoped that Mr Lowell himself would stride on out and invite Pa in. The newspapers had run stories about how Lowell was searching for a planet beyond Neptune. For years he'd been scanning the heavens, convinced that our Solar System was composed of nine, not eight major planets. The orbits of the Uranus and Neptune weren't exactly as theory predicted and it looked like there might be still another planet even farther from the Sun, pulling at these giants. There was a planet yet to be discovered out there in the icy depths of space and someone was searching for it right here in Arizona.

Rumors had it that Lowell hired five Harvard mathematicians who spent seven years or more calculating and computing the orbit of what he called his Planet X.

Ma once saw Mr Lowell. It was 1916 and Pa was inside the record store combing through the latest stock when Ma noticed Mr Lowell walk right on by outside. She told Pa but he reckoned she was just fooling. Only she wasn't. She knew right off it was him having once seen his picture in the newspaper.

"I'll see him again," said Pa, consoling himself. "There'll be another time."

But Lowell died later that year, his Planet X still undiscovered. He was buried in a tomb they built in the shape of a miniature observatory dome atop Mars Hill amongst the trees and Pa would go walk around and think and never say a word.

Pa believed that Lowell got the idea for his canals from seeing the mighty Colorado River cutting through the Arizona desert. Maybe he had something there.

\* \* \*

Much to Ma's relief, we eventually arrived at the Flagstaff city limits and Pa made a point of driving real slowly past Mr Lowell's observatory, just to satisfy his initial curiosity.

"Hurry on up, Nathan, the kids are tired."

"Take 'em on down for a soda, Jenny, an' wash away the dust. I'll join you shortly."

"But we said we'd go straight to Ida's," Ma reminded as Pa pulled up by the stores.

"For what time?" asked Pa.

"This afternoon."

"Did you give her an exact time?"

"You know I wouldn't do that."

Arriving on a particular day seemed about as much as anyone could hope for.

"Then she'll be none the wiser." Pa threw us his most winning wink, grabbing a hold of the door handle. "An' you kids won't be lettin' on will you?"

Ma knew what Pa had in mind as he stepped down and slammed his door shut. She didn't have to watch. She knew he'd be heading straight for the record store and I was frantic to down ice cream and soda pop. (Pa hadn't mentioned ice cream, but I knew that's what he meant, having parked right outside Walt's Ice Cream Parlor.) I guess Cass would've been frantic too if only she'd known what they were. Being less than a year old left her with a lot of learning to do. But then I'd only rarely experienced their delights myself on account of the fact that the only place I knew it existed for sure was right there in Flagstaff. Mrs Steinmetz said she knew how to make ice cream and she promised she'd make some for us one time we were over, though I can't recall ever tasting any. She even said she'd show Ma so we could sell it in the diner. But Ma reckoned it was a whole load of effort to go through when no one might order any. "*I'd order some!*" I can remember eagerly saying.

Ma pulled her sun hat from the rear seat next to where I was sitting and managed somehow to position it perfectly on her head while still cradling Cassie. "*Pretty as a picture,*" Pa would always say.

"Come on kids," she said, pushing on her door until it yielded. "Let's hurry on inside an' get outa this heat."

I didn't need any more encouragement as I slid across the seat and scrambled down, heading straight on into the splendid cool of Walt's. I scooted right on over to the counter which was manned by a tall youth wearing a white apron and little white cap and who I naturally assumed was Walt himself. Leastwise it seemed pretty natural to me.

"Well, little feller," said the youth, leaning precipitously above me, his red bow tie seemingly too big for his scrawny neck, "what can I get for you?"

"You got ice cream?" I asked.

"Sure do! What flavor would you like?"

"Whatcha got?" I asked, craning my neck up to an almost impossible angle.

"Well, now, let's see, we got whisky flavor an' gin flavor an' beer flavor. Anythin' there tickle your fancy?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. "Ain't you got nothin' else?"

"Well, if you don't fancy any o' those *exotic* ices we got the more regular common-or-garden plain-and-simple cherry, banana, maple, maple with walnut, coffee, almond fudge, coffee with almond fudge, peanut butter, ..." I watched in fascination as his Adam's apple leapt up and down in an excited sort of state as he went through his list. It would disappear now and again under his chin before plummeting earthward and I had the feeling the purpose of that bow tie of his was to stop his Adam's apple from working its way any farther down his neck. "... orange, pistachio, orange an' pistachio, pistachio an' orange, raspberry, black raspberry, mint, pineapple, ginger ..."

I felt this could go on some time and I'd already lost concentration so I cut in with, "Ain't you got no ice cream flavor?"

"He means vanilla," said Ma, struggling into a seat with Cass on her lap. "Make it two, please."

"What about you, Ma?" I said, half-turning around. "Ain't you havin' none?"

"The two are for you an' me."

"What about Cassie?"

"She can have a little o' mine if she likes it."

As I was briefly considering the notion that someone would have to be *crazy* not to like ice

cream, the would-be Walt leaned even further over and asked me in a confidential across-the-counter sort of way, "You care for chocolate flavor?"

"Sure!"

"How about half-an'-half?"

I pondered on this for a moment or more before replying with absolute certainty, "I'd like one all to myself," thinking he meant we'd split one between the two of us.

Ma looked at Walt and shook her head, smiling. "He'll have half-an'-half."

"Ma!"

Walt grinned back.

I still reckoned I was being short-changed.

\* \* \*

After an hour or more Pa hadn't shown up and Ma became fidgety.

"Once he gets talkin' to Mr Robson about records and the likes he loses all track o' time," Ma said, irritation forcing a harsh edge to her voice which kids can take to mean it's somehow their fault. They can't figure out why, but that's the way it sounds. "I guess we better go find him."

Ma paid Walt and we headed for the door.

"Bye, Walt!" I yelled.

"I ain't Walt," came the reply.

I stopped in my tracks. "You ain't?"

"There ain't no Walt. Not now at least ... I think there used to be, but it was before my time."

While I reckoned this was an interesting line of conversation certainly worth pursuing, Ma grabbed my arm and yanked me through the door.

"Bye now," Ma said to the youth-who-wasn't-Walt, exiting all three of us into the heat of the late afternoon, and we traipsed off down the street.

When Mr Robson in the record store said he hadn't seen Pa, Ma became real concerned. We walked around and around, looking down this street and that; this store and that store; me complaining about being tired and little Cassie just screaming her head off for no discernible reason, like babies do, until eventually we found him sat on a bench seat, his head clenched in his hands.

"Nathan! Where've you been? I've been so worried," said Ma, initial relief now tinged with annoyance as we hurried towards him. "We couldn't find you nowhere." Then her tone mellowed some, "Nathan?"

But there was no response from Pa.

"What is it, Nathan?" asked Ma, sitting down next to him, little Cass still held close to her as I stood watching. "Mr Robson said you'd not called by the store. I was worried."

But Pa didn't still say anything. He just stared at the ground.

"Whatever's the matter?" She reached out and put her arm across Pa's shoulders.

Then he slowly lifted his head from his hands and looked around and Ma could see the anguish creasing deep furrows in his forehead.

"I saw Mr Jackson." His voice was almost inaudible, stifled by pent-up emotion that wanted to flood right on out but was held back by a man who had never been shown how to let go.

"Mr Jackson?"

"From the bank."

Ma seemed surprised at that. "I didn't know you'd gone there."

"I ... I bumped into him as he was leavin'."

Ma could see the tears welling at the rims of Pa's eyes as they reddened. "What's the matter, Nathan?"

"He's dead!" was all he could choke out between stifled sobs. "Mr Jackson told me."

"Who's dead, dear?" Ma asked, increasingly concerned at his state. But Pa seemed unable to

answer. "Who's dead, Nathan?"

"Caruso ... Caruso died in Italy two days ago ... in Naples."

It was the first time I could recall my father crying.

## Into the Darkness

Pa didn't say anything on the long drive home next day. Aunt Ida must have wondered why we didn't stay like we normally did, but she never asked. She just accepted that Pa wanted to get back and open up the diner. He told Ida that things had been looking a little better recently and he didn't want word to get around that the diner had closed down.

"Stories like that are easy to start an' difficult to stop," Pa said. "Gotta take advantage o' the business while it's there."

Ma listened to all this and didn't say a word other than to assure Ida we'd be back before long, when things were a might quieter.

Some years later, Ida recalled this and said she hadn't believed a word of what Pa had said that day, but she could see there was no point making an issue of it.

After we'd arrived home, Ma prepared supper but Pa didn't eat a thing. He just pushed the food around on his plate saying nothing, eyes glazed just pushing the food around and around.

"Can I get you somethin' else instead, Nathan?"

"I ain't hungry."

"You gotta eat somethin'."

"I said I don't want nothin'," and he threw down his fork and stormed from the room, slamming the door behind him hard enough to start Cassie off crying.

Ma didn't eat anything either.

Late that evening Pa pulled out his entire collection of discs and put all his precious recordings in a neat stack on the parlor floor. He selected one and placed it on the turntable. He cranked the handle and carefully lowered the needle until the familiar sound of Caruso resonated hissingly from the horn.

*Una furtiva lagrima* was the last aria which the Vermilion Cliffs would echo.

Pa picked up the entire stack of records and walked towards the door. As he reached for the handle the top disc slipped from its protective cover and crashed to floor, smashing itself to pieces, irrevocably unplayable. And then another ... and another ...

"Nathan?" It was Ma's voice from my bedroom where she was reading to me. When there was no reply she left me and went through to the parlor. She saw Pa standing there, surrounded by the shattered remains of a half dozen records. "Nathan, where're you going with those?"

"Open the door, will you?"

"What're you gonna do with all those records?"

"Just open the door," Pa ordered quietly and two more of the fragile shellac discs slipped to the floor. Two more recordings would never be played again.

Ma hurried over to pick up the pieces. "Nathan, watch what you're doin'!"

"Leave 'em," Pa said quietly.

She looked up at Pa and then carried on.

"I said leave 'em." This time Pa's order seethed threateningly from his throat.

"Nathan, what's wrong?"

"Open the goddam door!"

She did as he asked.

Pa walked outside and down the steps into the yard beyond, the soft glow of the oil lamp in the parlor casting his long shadow into the night until he slipped into the darkness and there was only the receding sound of his footsteps on the gravel.

The voice of Caruso had stopped singing and for a few moments all that could be heard was a hissing from the phonograph and the shrill beat of the crickets' chirruping.

Then there was the sound of discs being smashed, one by one by one, and momentarily the crickets ceased their unison nighttime call. Ma didn't try to stop him. She knew it was impossible.

She knew it was his way of venting his frustration at the loss of their son in a futile war. And now the loss of his beloved singer.

"Ma?"

Jenny turned around. "Mitch, what're you doin' outa bed?"

"What's Pa doin'?"

"He's mighty upset."

"He's smashing all those records o' his ... Ain't you gonna stop him?"

"I ... I guess he needs to do it, Mitch." Though she tried to hide it, I knew Ma was also real upset.

"What for?"

"For all sorts o' reasons."

"Like what?"

"Go on back to bed, Mitch."

"Will you come kiss me g'night?"

"Sure, honey."

"Promise?"

"I promise," she said in a whisper, giving me a hug. "Now off you go."

I turned towards my room, but something in her voice made me turn back and kiss my mother.

"Don't be long."

And before she could answer I ran off into my bedroom and jumped into bed, pulling the sheets tightly around me. I heard Ma walk over and rewind the phonograph and gently place the needle on the disc once more.

I could hear the distant crunch of gravel as Pa retraced his way back towards the house. I heard him mount the steps but this wasn't Pa. Not my Pa. Not the father whom I knew. This was a different man, someone I no longer recognized. Even the familiar sound of his rocking chair didn't ease my concern.

Ma walked outside and I crept out of bed and watched through the crack in the just-open door to my room, afraid to go any further. I watched my mother as she knelt down besides Pa and reached out for his hand.

"Ain't nothin' you can do to set things back to rights, Nathan."

But all Pa could say was, "It ain't fair, Jenny."

"Shhh ..." Ma consoled.

"It ain't fair."

She pulled his head towards her and kissed him. "We ain't the only ones to lose a son in the war."

"It just ain't fair."

"You're right, Nathan ... It just ain't fair."

"He was only fifteen, for Christ's sake, Jenny. Just a boy o' fifteen!"

Ma pulled away from Pa at that. She couldn't keep it to herself any longer. It had been hard enough all this while and now she could no longer contain the knowledge privately. "Nathan, there's somethin' I gotta get off my chest."

Pa's eyes went from staring into the night to looking at Ma. A real hard penetrating look like he was trying to read her mind. "You knew, didn't you?"

Ma didn't seem surprised and she couldn't bear to look at him. "Yes." Her voice was barely audible.

It was like they'd had an unspoken understanding. Somehow Pa had known all along but couldn't bring himself to ask.

"You knew he was going to enlist an' you never stopped him."

"Yes."

"You coulda stopped him an' you didn't."

"He'd made up his mind," Ma pleaded in mitigation of her sin. "There was nothing I could do."

"An' I never had the chance."

"He knew if he spoke with you about it you'd never let him go. He'd have to defy you an' he didn't want to do that. He wanted you to be proud o' him, Nathan, can't you see that?"

"A corpse ain't nothin' to be proud of. You coulda stopped him an' you didn't ... Why in God's name didn't you stop him?"

"Don't, Nathan!" Ma implored. "Please don't say that."

"You shoulda told me, Jenny." There was terrible bitter anguish in Pa's voice. "You shoulda told me!"

He kept repeating it over and over and she tried to comfort his grief as he sat slumped in the old rocking chair on the verandah. And when she couldn't take any more she just kissed him gently on his forehead before going inside, leaving him there on his own. I didn't understand it and I ran back into my bed expecting her to come kiss me goodnight too like she'd promised.

But if she ever did come into my room I never knew as I quickly fell fast asleep, exhausted by the long journey home.

I never saw my mother again. She walked off that night without a single word.

This is just as Pa would tell the story, enhancing vague recollections which flickered tantalizingly at the furthestmost edges of my childhood memory.

She just walked out on Pa and Cassie and me. And if we ever asked why, then Pa would say "I guess she thought I'd never forgive her." And sometimes I'd notice a tear, glistening in the corner of his distant eyes that he'd try to blink away before it began its journey down his face.

Pa used to play that record which he'd saved until it plain wore out.

A secret tear was all that Pa would ever shed.

*Una furtiva lagrima* was all that we would hear Caruso sing again.

**1926**

## The Tenuous Grasp of Memory

The passing months stretched into years and recollections of our dear mother became ever hazier in my young mind. There were photographs, of course, but not many and the tenuous grasp of memory slowly released its fragile clutches.

Cassie couldn't recall. Sometimes she said she could, but I reckon that was just the photographs and wishful thinking. I suppose you get to the point where you can't distinguish real memories from the craving for them. I figured she'd be better off with no memories at all, that way she'd never know what she was missing, but I knew she wanted to remember. I was certain of that.

Pa looked after us and we'd do our share for Pa. If he found it difficult coping without a wife he never let it show, not so we'd notice anyhow. But Maureen Steinmetz said he missed her real bad. She said that little Cassie had a look of our mother which no one could mistake. Pa didn't mention it, but I could see from the photographs that Mrs Steinmetz was right.

The Steinmetz's were like an Aunt and Uncle to me and Cass but we always called them Mr and Mrs Steinmetz. If it sounded kind of formal, then it was what the Steinmetz's wanted, or so Pa would tell us. The Steinmetz's didn't have any kids of their own and Pa reckoned Mrs Steinmetz wouldn't have minded one little bit being called *Aunt Maureen*, but Mr Steinmetz drew the line at being called *Uncle Sam* and there was no persuading him otherwise. And as first names alone wouldn't have been the done thing for Cass and me to call our elders, we stuck to Mr and Mrs Steinmetz.

After Ma left, the Steinmetz's remained Pa's closest friends, even though they were a good twenty years older, but that didn't matter. Pa liked to call on their greater experience and he knew the Steinmetz's liked the energy which youngsters brought.

We had help with the diner in the shape of Dorothy, a woman in her twenties who lived about five miles distant and who rode that ten mile round-trip every day on horseback. She just turned up one day and seated herself. Dorothy and horse had stopped by for lunch and business must've been good that day because she could see Pa trying to run things single-handed. Pa told us that until that time someone would now and again wait tables or would help out with the washing up, but no one ever stayed for long, not until Dorothy. Bacon was burning, eggs were solidifying, coffee was running out, dishes were piling up and customers were getting rattled. *Fast food* hadn't entered the dictionary yet.

"How about some more coffee, Nathan?"

"Is that order o' mine ready yet?"

"I asked for hash with this."

"You got my check, Nathan?"

Pa had a way of ignoring such questions and queries and he went over to Dorothy and asked, "You want the Special?"

He always asked "*You want the Special?*" No one ever queried it, not until Dorothy came along.

"What's the Special?" she asked.

"Whatever I got time to cook."

"An' just what is it you got time to cook?"

"The Special." Pa said this with a deadpan expression.

A kind of curiously pleased look spread across the face of the young woman. "You do the cookin' *and* attend tables?"

"And wash up an' clean the floors an' ..."

In my mind this wasn't entirely true as I helped out with such chores, but I let it pass. Being so young I guess it didn't count, leastwise not to adults.

"OK, OK," she cut in, "I get the picture."

"Nathan, you got my check or ain't you chargin' today?"

"You mind?" said Dorothy commandingly, turning indignantly to the voice. "The gentleman's takin' my order."

"Sorry," the voice meekly replied. "Didn't mean to interrupt."

"How'd you like to expand your menu?" she asked.

Pa looked puzzled. "You mean you wanna cook?"

"I don't wanna do anythin' but if I don't find myself a job soon I'm gonna have to get rid o' Ulysses."

"Who the Sam Hill's Ulysses?"

She nodded through the window. "That palomino waitin' out there."

Pa followed the line of her gaze and was impressed enough to say, "Fine lookin' horse."

"An' it looks to me like I ain't gonna get fed this side o' tomorrow 'less I cook it myself."

"I don't know ..." Pa replied doubtfully. But everyone knew he needed the help and if Dorothy's sweet features would look good around the place, well that was an added bonus.

"Sure you do, Nathan," another voice shouted. "Then we might get some food around here."

Pa didn't take any more convincing. "How do I know you can cook?"

"How do I know you can pay?"

Pa wasn't used to taking that from a woman but initial annoyance turned to respect, especially seeing that smoldering smile of hers. "Tell you what then," said Pa. "You can eat for free if you cook for the rest of the day an' we'll see how things go."

The woman seemed pleased at the prospect. "Sounds fair to me an' Ulysses."

"Ulysses?"

"He'll need feedin' too."

"Course he will," said the voice again.

Pa looked exasperated but he found the will to ignore the intrusion. "OK. Ulysses gets included. You wanna start now?"

"When I've had the Special."

The room echoed to a communal groan.

"The lady's gotta eat, for Christ's sake," Pa rounded on his customers, justifiably in his opinion. "Oh, excuse me," he quickly apologized to the young woman.

"Don't mind me."

"Well, I know your horse's name an' I guess you've figured out mine."

"You can call me Dorothy."

"You got a second name?"

"He's just Ulysses and I'm just Dorothy. You don't need no second name to cook." There was a ripple of laughter from those who were listening, and everyone was listening. "That don't bother you does it?"

"Not if it don't bother you."

"It don't bother me," she confirmed.

And that's how Dorothy ended up cooking for us for the next few years. Her culinary skills were everything they promised to be. Food prepared by Dorothy tasted as good as she looked and I doubt whether anyone would've complained even if it hadn't.

"She's a real asset to the business," Pa told me later. "A woman like that don't need to know how to cook."

"But her cookin's terrific, Pa," I remember saying.

"Even better!" Pa exclaimed and laughed and laughed. "She looks better'n me and cooks better'n me! What a woman, eh, Mitch?"

I was no expert on such things. Life until then just flowed by and around me and I was too young to have hormones. But I had to agree she had an elegance about her which I noticed kept Pa's language under control. She even had that effect on the roughnecks that called in and Pa liked that. So did Cass and me. Especially Cass. From the minute they laid eyes on each other they hit it right

off.

"Gee, you're so pretty," were Cassie's first words to her and Dorothy blushed like I've never seen anyone blush, right out there in front of those hungry diners with even hungrier eyes.

"And what about me?" said one of the men eating. "Ain't I pretty enough for you?"

"You're a man," retorted Cass, "an' men ain't pretty."

"He sure enough ain't!" roared his companion, thumping the table 'til we thought the legs would give way.

The other men all laughed with a collectively self-conscious raucousness.

"Kids always speak the truth," said Pa and I guess that was his way of paying a compliment because there was no other way about it, Dorothy was pretty alright.

When it was time for Dorothy to leave, Cass asked, "Can I go see your horse?"

"Sure you can, honey. And Mitch."

We trooped outside as the sun was beginning to set behind the cliffs.

"I ain't forgot Ulysses," Pa said.

"Never took you for the sort that wouldn't honor his word, Mr McGlinn."

"Does he like carrots?" Pa asked.

"Sure does."

After arguing with Cass over who should feed Ulysses a carrot, Pa gave each of us a fist full.

"Are you comin' back tomorrow, Dorothy?" I asked.

"That's up to your Pa."

Cass looked up at Pa, towering over her. "Is she comin' back tomorrow?"

"Can you be here for eight?"

Dorothy climbed up into the saddle. "Just you try stop me."

"An' it's Nathan."

She gave us all the most wonderful smile I reckon any of us had ever seen. "See y'all tomorrow, Nathan McGlinn."

We watched as she kicked her heels and Ulysses took her off in a great cloud of dust rising into the still air of the early evening.

I can't exactly explain it, but we all seemed to feel better for having met Dorothy.