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Buck & Raynor druggist Sta 028	149 N Clark	Payne, D law Cen	401
Callahan & Callahan law Cen	207	Pirelli & Donato law	316
City Tax Service Bureau tax agents Can3029	810	Polk R L & Co directory pubs Was0486	815
Commercial Exchange of Illinois contra	Can 3020 822	Prout Hedley mag Har6076	210
Gliblen, M S Fra 1860	501	Quest Mfg Cotypewriter supply Wab 333	308
Gualano A N law Ran 2349	818	Rand McNally & Co printers Wab 0363	802
Hargrave Edward J secret Service (The) Cen1500		Seybold, Machine Co (The)	522
Hargrave Edward J principal Cen	303	Stevens, Chas N pres Wab	420
Hargrave, Geo E gen mnggr Cen 1500	302	Stevens Chas N Co printers supls	112
Hargrave Patrol & watch Service Cen 1500	300	Trudell, A E artist Har2202	804
Horwitz, Jack theatre tickets Dea	145 N Clark	Western Druggist (The)	600
Keegan Wm Fra 1860	504	Wetzel, A E enge Wab6811	704
Keystone Chocolate Co Sta 8074	706	Woodruff M Pl labels and tags	612
Marks, A law Ma 3860	407	Wray Co (The) portable elevators	100
McChesney & Brown (Inc) dentists Cen	203	Youngma T S & Co paper	102
		Zeh-Rex Engraving Co wood engravers	603

**CHICAGO CENTRAL BUSINESS AND OFFICE
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Chapter 1 — Missing Pieces

Chicago, IL — The Hargrave Secret Service Agency — October 19, 1948

It was a gray, blustery afternoon in Chicago, when I found myself pulling into 145 Clark Street for a visit with Detective George Hargrave. I parked in front of an eight-story brick building, conveniently situated right across from the Cook County Courthouse. The nameplates and mailboxes just inside the entryway indicated that The Hargrave Secret Service Agency was on the third floor.

After trudging up three flights in the echoey, concrete stairwell, I emerged in the carpeted hallway and found the dark

wooden door bearing the name of Detective George Hargrave. I knocked firmly and soon heard the sound of heavy footsteps coming my way. The detective opened the door, nodded, gave me a closed-mouth smile, and gestured for me to enter. “You’re a man of your word, Mr. Morgan, right on time. In my line of work I’m not used to people keeping their word,” he said with a smirk. “Come right in.”

“Thank you, Detective Hargrave.” He offered his hand and I shook it. His was a large and powerful hand, swallowing mine almost entirely. “It’s kind of you to meet with me,” I added as we entered his large, cluttered office. There was an unpleasant mix of odors inside: coffee, stale cigarettes, and a hint of maple doughnuts. Behind his desk hung an unorganized cluster of framed photographs of Hargrave posing with several local Chicago legends throughout the years, none hanging even close to evenly. I recognized one of Hargrave posing with Big Bill Thompson, Chicago’s Mayor from back in the 30s. Hargrave’s desk had two towering stacks of file folders on it, one at each of its front corners with a phone in between them. Crowded over in the corner, to his left, was a bunch of wooden chairs, as if he kept them there for those rare occasions when he hosted a meeting.

“Please, have a seat.” The 50-year-old detective pointed to a hard-backed leather chair on the opposite side of his desk. He sat, and I followed his lead. He ran a hand through his thick graying hair and removed his glasses, as he glanced out the window at the softening fall colors. Detective Hargrave was a thick-set man. He had the build of a former athlete, with the emphasis on “former.” His large hands grew out of long, still-toned arms and broad, swimmer’s shoulders. His face, while it showed the wear and tear of years in the trenches of detective work, was still handsome. There was a fatigue in his eyes, and his posture suggested it wouldn’t be long before he called it quits.

Over the past 10 years, Detective Hargrave and I had a half-dozen conversations on the phone, all about this singular case. All these years, I had kept picking away at the matter I’d come to discuss like an itchy scab, and I did it because, deep down, I believed that if I got somebody in law enforcement to ask the right questions, to reexamine the critical facts, maybe they’d reopen the case and uncover what they’d clearly missed in the fall of 1928. From everything I knew about this case—and I reckoned I knew more than just about anybody—I’d always figured that if anybody was going to reopen this case, it would be George Hargrave.

“Tell me what you’re after here, Mr. Morgan,” the detective said in a voice that suggested decades of cigarettes and cold coffee.

I took a long, slow breath and decided to dive right in. “Look, you and I both know, Detective Hargrave, that there are a lot of things about this case that can really eat at you. But without question, the biggest one is trying to figure out how in the world a jury could have possibly rendered the verdict they did, when they looked at all the evidence in this case. And it’s not just you and I, Detective, for just about everyone who has ever taken a serious look at the facts of this case—the raw, medical, physiological facts—knows that all these findings were simply not consistent with the verdict that was returned. We’re talking about a 30-year-old woman with severe burns on both feet up to her shins, on both hands halfway up to her elbows, over half her face and head. She’s found barely alive, propped up next to a furnace that has a single twelve and three-quarter inches by nine and three-quarter inches opening, an opening that happens to be nearly three feet off the ground. How in the world was this woman supposed to get each arm, each leg, and her head into this small opening—each one at a time, mind you—and then have the pain tolerance to keep each of these extremities in the furnace, while they burned for a few minutes? It’s ludicrous.”

The detective shook his head and picked up a pencil, drumming it lightly on the edge of his desk. “I know. I know. It’s the darndest thing. But, you’ve got to admit that, at the same time, it is the perfect case, right?” He dropped the pencil and looked up at me. “It’s got everything: a beautiful, innocent victim, a washed-up silent movie actor, an idyllic North Shore suburb, it was done in the police station, and it was never solved.”

“You mean not yet, Detective. Not yet,” I said. “But I’m really hoping you can tell me how in the world this case became the three-ring circus that it did back then.”

Hargrave dived back in. “I knew those bumlbers on the Lake Bluff force didn’t know their asses from their elbows. Chief Rosenhagen fouled up the crime scene the moment he and that public works gardener Chris Louis discovered the woman. They threw the ashes away, for Christ’s sake, the only tangible evidence that might have led us somewhere!” He cleared his throat, and I flinched, fearing some of the phlegm he was coughing up might make it across the desk onto my shirt or pinstriped tie. “When that jury’s decision came down, I knew that poor Knaak family, that had already been

through so much, was not going to be anything close to satisfied. Those two brothers—Otto and Alvin—called me within an hour after the verdict was announced,” he said sipping his coffee. “I’d be working for them officially just over a week later.” Recognizing his lapse in manners, he added, “You want some coffee?” gesturing at his thoroughly stained cup.

“No, thank you,” I said. From the smell of his and the lack of anything resembling steam coming from his cup or the pot over on the sideboard, I was sure I’d be better off declining.

Looking at the enormous file the detective had pulled from the pile to his right, I thought of my own. Even twenty years after the crime, neither of our files on this case had made it into our file cabinets. Instead they stayed right out on our desks, ready and available. I’ve never stopped pouring over my file on the Elfrieda Knaak case. It never failed; every year, right around Halloween—the anniversary of this gruesome affair—the memories would rise up inside me like a tidal wave and come crashing down upon the shores of my mind. I’d dig back through the hundreds of articles, photos, and reports I’d accumulated about the case and try, once again, to figure out how in the heck that jury ever could have missed what should have been so obvious. Of course, I readily admit that I had a huge advantage over that confounded jury of men—and over Detective Hargrave—having been in Lake Bluff on the night of October 29, 1928. There were things I witnessed and heard in the weeks surrounding this crime that the detective and the jury wouldn’t have had quite the same access to. But even if I hadn’t been in Lake Bluff at the time, seen what I’d seen, and heard what I’d heard, I can guarantee that I’d have looked into a number of angles that were completely glossed over or, worse yet, totally ignored in the weeks and months following the discovery of Miss Knaak’s badly burned body.

All the work I did on this case in the first ten years after it happened had been done either in secret or under false pretenses. I was barely a teenager when I started poking around in this town scandal that was way out of my league. At least when I got my first job as a reporter for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in 1937, I finally had a more legitimate reason to be asking so many questions.

I knew that Hargrave’s involvement in the case originated when he was brought in to assist the State’s Attorney and the County Sheriff in the overall investigation. But ten days later, Hargrave was

hired by the Knaak family to get to the bottom of what all the Knaaks were convinced was foul play. I couldn't wait to dive into the details of this case with this detective, now that we were finally face to face.

"So what do you think happened, Detective? After all these years, I have to imagine you've combed through your file on this case a hundred times. You must have a theory."

The detective leaned back in his chair, pulled a cigarette out of his breast pocket, and struck a match to light it. With the cigarette firmly between his lips, he reached both his hands behind his head, interlocking his fingers. "I still think Hitchcock did it," he said. He was referring to Mr. Charles Hitchcock, Lake Bluff's most famous citizen. He'd had a good run in silent movies in the early 1900's. He'd even played opposite Charlie Chaplin a few times and starred in a few reels made by Essanay Films in Chicago. But by 1910, all the great filmmakers and actors had gone west to L.A., and Charles Hitchcock was left behind. He spent the next 20 years piecing together a living, doing odd jobs: teaching night classes at the Waukegan YMCA, serving as the night dispatch deputy at the Lake Bluff Village Hall, and picking up the occasional booking at small theaters in Illinois and Indiana.

"They ruled Hitchcock out," Hargrave continued, "all because of that broken ankle he had and because two members of his own family—plus his loyal buddy Oscar Kloer—testified that he was home that night." The detective started rustling through some of the papers in his Knaak file as he paused. He was squinting rather than putting on the glasses that hung around his neck. "But you can't tell me that scum-sucker didn't have something untoward going on with Elfrieda Knaak! He was her teacher at the YMCA in Waukegan, but somehow saw fit to 'tutor' her on the side—in the Lake Bluff Village Hall, late at night, when nobody else was around, when he was supposed to be on duty!" The detective's face reddened, and two veins on his neck protruded. I took a slow, audible breath, in hopes of calming him down.

"Me, I still like Charles Hitchcock for the crime," Hargrave concluded. "And if Rosenhagen and Spaid hadn't have looked at him as one of their own up there in that half-wit Lake Bluff Police force, Hitchcock would have gotten a much harder look as a suspect—broken leg or not."

"Maybe nobody wanted to finger a former famous movie star like him," I said.

“The law is the law, Mr. Morgan. It doesn’t play favorites,” he said. “Ex-big shot movie star or not, this Hitchcock had regular, unsupervised access to the crime scene, not to mention a personal relationship with the victim, despite claiming he had no idea she was in love with him.”

“But did he have a motive,” I asked, “not simply to do away with Miss Knaak, but to torture her in such...such a barbaric way?”

Hargrave expelled a long, raspy breath. “I can’t figure it. What could possibly possess a person—any person—to do that? Naw, I just can’t figure it. But love, sex, jealousy...I’ve seen it do crazy things to people over the years, Mr. Morgan.”

“What about Hitchcock’s wife, Estelle? You ever think that she might have suspected something going on between her husband and Miss Knaak? If she did, maybe she tried to do away with her in some sort of jealous rage?” I speculated.

Hargrave looked at the floor and then out the window. “She clearly suspected something was going on between the two of them. But you’ve done your homework, Mr. Morgan, so I’m sure you are aware that Mrs. Hitchcock had an even better alibi than her husband; she was at work on the night in question.”

I nodded, for I was, indeed, aware of this fact. Estelle Hitchcock was all the way down in Highland Park, working at a friend’s music store. So I tried another tack.

“There was another woman though, Detective, someone I read about who testified at the inquest. Her name was Marie Mueller. It said in the papers she was Miss Knaak’s best friend. Did you ever find out anything about her? You think she could’ve somehow been involved with all this?” I asked.

“That’s an interesting angle, Mr. Morgan. The only questions anybody ever asked this Mueller dame, both before and during the inquest, were whether she felt her friend could do such a thing to herself, you know, light herself on fire.” He shook his head, took a long, deep pull on his cigarette, and exhaled a frustrated breath. “I don’t believe anybody—including yours truly—ever asked Miss Mueller where she was on that night.” He took another drag on his cigarette. “But I’ll tell you this: six years later, your Miss Mueller runs off and marries Hitchcock, right after Estelle divorces the scumbucket. Seems awfully peculiar, if you ask me, like some kind of love triangle or whatnot was going on between Hitchcock, Knaak, and Mueller.”

”Seems to me like Hitchcock had a lot of women who were willing to protect him. And for what?” I asked.

“You’re right about that. Heck, if you want to consider Mrs. Hitchcock or Marie Mueller, then you might as well look at some of the other cockamamie people who turned up as this case unfolded. Back in November of 1928, it seemed like every day some new person of interest surfaced out of nowhere. There was an army deserter who contacted the authorities from all the way down in Texas. He claimed he was a chauffeur for a family in Lake Forest and was contacting the police to confess to the crime. But once they got him extradited back to Illinois, they found out he had been in an asylum for years and was making the whole thing up.” Hargrave took a sloppy sip of coffee. “Then there was a strange letter A.V. Smith, the State’s Attorney, received from someone down in Chicago, claiming he had put Miss Knaak into a hypnotic trance and assisted her as she burned herself. But unless this guy had studied with Houdini himself, there’s not much chance he could have pulled that off.”

“I read somewhere that Hitchcock had an association with Houdini. Might he have been able to put Miss Knaak under a spell?” I asked.

“We looked into that. Another dead end,” the detective said, shaking his head.

“What about the notion that the victim was burned elsewhere and dragged into the Village Hall?” I asked. “Did you ever think that was a possibility?” He was shaking his head before I finished my sentence.

“Naw. Too many facts against that.” He paused and scratched the top of his head. “There was the so-called ‘Electrocution hypothesis’ somebody brought to us, that Miss Knaak was electrocuted elsewhere and dragged over here to die. But if you’ve seen the pictures, the burns on her hands and feet, missing fingers and toes...” Hargrave closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Electrocution doesn’t cause that. Plus the dragging-her-in-already-injured theory wouldn’t account for the bloody footprints we found on the stairs.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” I said.

“The footprints we found were completely distorted. You almost couldn’t tell they were footprints because of how badly damaged the victim’s feet were. So the blood and prints were

definitely Mrs. Knaak's, and there were two sets of them—the first set going up the stairs and the second set going down—but both hers. They originated by the furnace.”

Piecing it together in my mind, I said, “So Miss Knaak tried to get out a couple times?”

“Exactly. And don't forget, Mr. Morgan, one of her ramblings at the hospital spoke of a ‘mystery hand’ that must have locked the door. That's the door on the north side of the Village Hall.”

“So whoever did this locked her in?”

“Yep,” the detective said as he exhaled.

Detective Hargrave shook his head and let out an exasperated sigh. “There were even some stories that never even made the papers,” Hargrave continued.

“Like what?” I asked

“Well, one that circulated around town with all the locals was about this wealthy couple who operated the dairy farm up there in Lake Bluff. Some thought they were even involved.”

“Are you talking about the owners of Crab Tree Farm—Scott and Grace Durand?” I asked. I couldn't wait to learn how the Durands figured into Hargrave's theory of the case.

“Now, how in the heck would you know those names, Mr. Morgan? You know more about Lake Bluff in 1928 than you're letting on.” Hargrave crushed out his cigarette and picked up an old notepad from his file, flipping through the pages until he came to the information he was looking for. “Appears Mrs. Durand and Miss Knaak had some sort of unusual spiritual connection. Says here that they both believed in communicating with the dead. In fact, that old loon Mrs. Durand even wrote a book, long before all this happened, claiming that she'd communicated with the likes of Abraham Lincoln and Joan of Arc.” Hargrave rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Yep, it seems our Miss Knaak spent at least a handful of evenings over at Crab Tree Farm, involved in her spiritual pursuits.”

“So did this connection between Mrs Durand and Crab Tree ever come out as relevant to the case?” I asked.

“Nope. We pursued that lead, but it never led anywhere. Plus, you've got to remember that once I started working for the Knaak family, the last thing they wanted me doing was looking into anything that would fuel this spiritual purification theory. We did establish a possible link between the victim and Crab Tree Farm from

something Miss Knaak said of her attacker when she was in the hospital.”

“What was that?” I asked.

“Miss Knaak said, more than once, that, ‘Frank threw me down.’” Hargrave replied. “The Knaak boys were adamant that whoever this ‘Frank’ was had to be found. In fact, they paid me overtime to track down each and every Frank their sister might have been referring to. The first Frank I came across was a kid who worked over at Crab Tree Farm. So I stopped by there to have a talk with this young man.”

“And what did you find?”

“Not much. The kid was a little slow in the head. Both Mr. and Mrs. Durand didn’t even want me talking to him. I think Mr. Durand’s words were, ‘Stay away from that boy!’ Said he’d been through enough. Their Frank was a charity case, plain and simple. He’d done a little time down at Joliet, but Mrs. Durand hired him anyway as a favor to this Frank’s mother. The Durands did a lot of favors for people, Mr. Morgan. They were not your typical farm folk though.” The detective paused and lit up another cigarette

“What do you mean?” I asked. Hargrave took a while to formulate his answer.

“They had a ton of money, these two. Scott Durand was a big time sugar broker, and neither he nor his wife put up with anybody telling them what they could and couldn’t do on their farm, or anywhere else, for that matter. The farm was both Grace Durand’s idea and her domain. She ran the place. She wanted it to be the most beautiful dairy operation in the entire midwest. But once those federal indictments came down on Mr. Durand’s sugar company, people started getting suspicious about the goings on at the farm as well.”

Hargrave got up from his chair and poured himself another cup of coffee. Carrying the stained, white cup over to the window, he looked over toward the courthouse. “There were a couple of shady characters who’d been seen around Lake Bluff and Lake Forest in September and October of ‘28. They drove around in fancy cars, smoking big cigars, and dropping enormous tips in local eateries and whatnot. We got some unconfirmed reports of them being around Crab Tree Farm.” He set his coffee down to light up a cigarette. “About all we ever got on them were their names—Pirelli and

Donato, I think. Some speculated that these guys were part of Capone's operation, the big fella himself."

"But anyway," Hargrave continued, "the Durands eventually let me talk to their long-time foreman, the fella who ran their farm operation." Hargrave thumbed through the sheets of paper in his file, looking for the name. "Here it is...Alex...Alex Reddington, that's who ran the farm in '28. My notes here say he went by just 'Redd.' He sure was a nervous character, as I recall. Got all fidgety and clammed up the moment I started asking him questions. That guy seemed to be hiding something. Could never get a straight answer out of him. He did let it slip, eventually, that this Frank was in the workers' quarters sleeping the night of the 29th."

"So were there any other Franks that you found?" I asked.

"I beat the bushes on it, I tell you. I went through the Lake Bluff and Lake Forest phone books. I went through every file we had at the Waukegan office with a first initial of 'F.' The only other Franks I could find in connection to Miss Knaak were dead ends. One was a queer music teacher, a violin instructor, a real fruitcake. Frank Mandy was his name. He had a studio adjacent to Hitchcock's room at the YMCA in Waukegan. This guy was about as incapable of violence as any man I've ever known. I mean, Frank Mandy couldn't have thrown down a two-year-old, much less Elfrieda Knaak. Only reason we pursued him was his connection to Hitchcock in Waukegan, where they both taught and where Miss Knaak took classes."

As Hargrave shook his head yet again and scratched the back of his neck, I realized how much the unsolved nature of this crime still ate at him. He was picking the same scab I was, and I needed him to keep doing so.

"The only other Frank we tracked down," the Detective continued, "was the owner of Compton Publishing, where Miss Knaak worked selling Encyclopedias. F.T. Compton was his name. The F was for Frank, but that guy said he didn't even know Elfrieda Knaak, nor anyone else on his sales staff, for that matter. He was what they call a 'hands-off' owner, hardly ever around the Chicago office. But then again, Miss Knaak was one of Compton's top sales agents, and the other salesmen I interviewed at the company all said Miss Knaak always seemed to be getting fed the good leads." He took a thoughtful drag on his cigarette and squinted from the smoke. "I mean, how in the heck can a woman be the top seller in an office

over a bunch of experienced salesmen? Miss Knaak was a former teacher with no sales experience, and yet she outsells a group of veteran salesmen? Who knows? Maybe this Frank T. Compton was taking care of her, feeding her leads. Maybe Compton and Miss Knaak had some sort of special relationship nobody knew about, despite his claiming not to know his own top sales staff.”

“Let me ask you something else, Detective, about another strange character in this case.” I rifled through my notes to the page labeled “Luella Roeh, aka B. Lock.” I looked at a wrinkled, yellowing photo of a middle-aged, stout woman. “I’m sure you’re familiar with this other strange relationship Miss Knaak had with a Luella Roeh. Seems she also went by the pen name of B. Lock.”

“Ah, yes. I remember her, all right,” Hargrave chuckled. “You have done your homework, Mr. Morgan. You sure you’re a reporter and not a detective?”

I laughed in response, adding, “Sometimes I don’t think our two lines of work are all that different. But, Detective, I could never understand why the police didn’t pursue this woman and her obvious influence on Miss Knaak. They missed it altogether at first, for B. Lock was not even mentioned in either the inquest or in the original police investigation.”

“That’s because the letters between Miss Knaak and B. Lock didn’t even surface until almost two weeks after the jury had ruled,” Hargrave replied. “In fact, B. Lock might never have surfaced at all, if it hadn’t have been for one of the Knaak brothers—Alvin, I think—coming across Elfrieda’s journal and all these letters from a mysterious woman who wanted to keep her real name a secret.” The detective paused again, shuffling through his huge pile of papers. “Alvin brought a small box of their correspondence to my office less than ten days after the jury had made its ridiculous ruling,” he said.

“What did you do with them?” I asked.

“I rushed them straight over to Waukegan, to the State’s Attorney’s office. A.V. Smith looked them over, with their various references to ‘the refining fire’ and ‘self-purification,’ and the two of us immediately hopped in his car, drove to 413 E. Park Avenue in Libertyville, and brought B. Lock in for questioning.”

“And...?” I said, feeling on the verge of something important.

“Well, State’s Attorney Smith allowed me to sit in on the questioning,” Hargrave said, “but the entire interrogation lasted less than ten minutes. Smith released her, because, as A.V. put it, ‘all this

little old lady did was talk to Miss Knaak about the concept of self-purification, and there is certainly no crime in that.' In addition," Hargrave continued, "Smith had established with his second or third question that this B. Lock had an airtight alibi on the night of Miss Knaak's misfortune, and so that was that." Then Mr. Hargrave let something slip that I jumped on like an attorney in a cross-examination. He said, "The State's Attorney then handed me that small stack of letters and called it a day."

"Wait a minute...He gave you those letters? You still have them? In your possession?" I asked.

"Sure, I've got 'em," he said. "They were never used as evidence, so they're right here in my file."

I hesitated, wondering just how direct to be. "Any chance I could look at those letters, Detective?" Hargrave didn't answer immediately. But I saw him start digging through that massive file again. "You see, sir, I've always been fascinated with the spiritual dimension of this case, Miss Knaak's penchant for mysticism, the books she read, and her obsession with self-purification."

"So, Mr. Morgan, do you think these letters and their contents are going to find their way into that twentieth anniversary spread you are doing for that paper of yours, the one you told me about when you called to set up this appointment?" He cleared his throat.

"I guess that depends on what's in them. My piece will certainly mention the spiritual dimension of this case, but I doubt it will be a focus." I paused, trying to read Hargrave's expression. "Would you prefer that I not use them?"

He had pulled out a massive file from the middle of one his stacks. It bore a single word across its front: "Knaak." Putting his glasses on with one hand, he slid a small stack of letters across the cluttered service of his desk. "Ten or fifteen years ago, when I was still in touch with the family of the victim, I'd have asked you to keep this kind of personal correspondence out of the papers. Now, I'm not so sure. I'd just hate to stir up any unnecessary emotion for any of the Knaaks."

"I understand, and I'll respect your position on this, Detective." I meant what I said, but at the same time, I could barely contain my excitement. I'd heard and read about these letters for years. My hands were shaking a bit when I picked them up, and I saw Detective Hargrave noticing.

“Had a little too much coffee on the drive down from the Twin Cities,” I said. Hargrave nodded, smiled, and I began reading the first few of their correspondences.

From Elfrieda on 8/19/28

I'm interested in the various barriers to spiritual growth. Why is it that so many spiritual pilgrims stop reaching or seem to level off at such a rudimentary level of faith? So many of the things we talk about, you and I, are never even brought up in church. For instance, spiritual purification and physical rituals of repentance; I'm fascinated by these matters and believe they have tremendous potential.

From B. Lock on 8/23/28

My dear Elfrieda, the vast majority of religious pilgrims in general—and Christians in particular—are caught in what can only be thought of as an adolescent level faith. They can conceive of nothing beyond sin and salvation, heaven and hell, when none of the great teachers—including Jesus himself—gave a hoot about that nonsense.

Think of it this way, Elfrieda. Everything in this visible world of ours is physical and tangible. The Refiner's Fire cannot be understood in such a world, by such a people, by those whose entire world is physical. You mustn't be surprised or disappointed that these teachings aren't embraced or included in 1920's American churches!

From Elfrieda on 8/28/28

You are so kind, B. It was my good fortune to knock on your red door that August afternoon! How I have longed for conversation of this kind about these matters. How will I ever thank you?

To burn one's self, to submit to fire, is to subject oneself to torturous pain. How do we endure and move through that pain to the other side?

I've hesitated to bring this up, dear B, but I work with my brother in the family pharmacy. I'm around all manner of medications most every day. I have access to several varieties of powerful numbing agents. The strength they all share is

that they don't produce excessive fatigue or render the user unconscious. Please don't think less of me, dear friend, for I am only trying to find a way to pursue the path of purification. But the fear of pain is quite real for me; it is what is keeping me from moving forward to what my soul—my spirit—seems to be calling me to.

From B. Lock on 10/3/28

Think less of you? How could you even think it? I not only understand your fear, I share it, my dear. When we move beyond mere talk and conceptual discussion in these matters of purification, we arrive at the practical dimensions. I'm glad we've reached this point together. And there is no one with whom I'd rather enter the refining fire than you, my sweet friend.

For me, my marriage to Harold is, without question, my biggest barrier to spiritual growth. It has been this way for many, many years. And I am not getting any younger. I have friends who are dying. I would like to find a way to proceed with this, Elfrieda. Truly, I would. I just don't see how I can, not while Harold is around.

I rubbed my eyes and looked up at the ceiling of Detective Hargrave's office.

"Well," the detective said, extinguishing another cigarette, "What do ya think?"

I clenched my teeth and shook my head before responding. "Well, I can tell you that Miss Knaak and this B. Lock weren't alone in their fascination with the spirit world and self-purification."

"How do you mean?" Hargrave asked, flicking the ash from his cigarette into his overflowing ashtray.

"I did a fair amount of research on spiritual movements from that time period. Both Christian and cultic mysticism were flourishing in the 1920s. In fact, after the 1915 World's Fair, New England's 'New Thought' movement made it all the way out to California. That was the same time that Theosophy and Pentecostalism were spreading like wildfire. Even famous people, like the poet William Butler Yeats, were willing to talk publicly about their experiences with spiritual mediums and communication with the dead." I paused, seeing the detective looking puzzled.

He asked, “So how does all this affect Miss Knaak or fit into this case?”

“It just seems to me that the people investigating this case and preparing to rule on cause of her injuries should have looked into this,” I said. “It’s my impression that pretty much everyone had heard or read about Miss Knaak’s claim to have done this to herself. But what still eats at me is that these letters weren’t even available in time for the jury, right?”

“That’s correct,” Hargrave said, nodding. “Your point?”

“Only that once they did come to light, it seems to me that they should have been treated with greater importance.”

“How so?” Hargrave asked, pushing his chair back from the desk a bit.

“I just don’t see how the jury could have come to the verdict they did without any of these letters. I mean, it seems to me, Detective, that it’s precisely these letters—more than anything else—that lend a certain credibility to the notion that Miss Knaak may have at least wanted to purify herself by means of fire. If B. Lock’s letters had been a part of the investigation and deliberation, they might have made the shocking ruling the jury eventually rendered a great deal more plausible.” I added, “But they ruled without even having them. Doesn’t that strike you as fishy, Detective Hargrave?”

Hargrave rose, pulled his pack of cigarettes out of his breast pocket, banged one out, and lit up, moving across to the window. “There’s a lot about this case and how it was handled that smells fishy to me. Always has.” Blowing a few smoke rings up toward his ceiling, he watched their ascent. He looked at his watch and was pulled out of his musings. “Mr. Morgan, I wasn’t sure how long this conversation was going to go or how much ground we would cover. But I can already tell that this could take a while. Give me a few minutes here to clear out the rest of my day.”

I got up quickly and said, “Wow. Thanks. If you’re sure that’s OK.” He nodded and picked up his phone. “I’ll just head to the lavatory,” I said on my way out.

I grabbed my notebook and headed out to the hallway toward the bathroom I’d seen right by the door to the stairway. I couldn’t believe how this conversation with Detective Hargrave was going. He seemed as excited by it as I was. I could only imagine where it might lead.



The Furnace Girl

When I heard him hang up the phone, I tapped lightly on his open door and came back in.

“I don’t mind saying, Mr. Morgan, that you’ve got me more than a little intrigued. I mean, you seem to know more about this case than I do, for Christ’s sake.” Hargrave leaned across his desk and looked directly into my eyes for several seconds.

“I can’t thank you enough, Detective, for clearing your schedule and spending so much time with me.”

“I’ll tell you just how you can thank me, Mr. Morgan,” he said, still staring me straight in the eyes. “By telling me the truth about who you are and what your connection to this ‘Furnace Girl’ case really is.”

I looked down at the floor and rolled my tongue against my lower teeth. “If I did that, Detective,” I paused again, looking back across at the huge file labeled “Knaak,” “you might need to clear your schedule beyond just today.”

He looked at his enormous file, shook his head, and said, “This case...this one case has eaten up more of my time than most of my others combined. It’s still unsolved, Mr. Morgan, unsolved in the most unsatisfying way. It has eaten at me both day and night and may well haunt me in my grave. I’ll clear as much time as this takes but not until you level with me on why this case is so...so personal to you.”



SWIFT HEALTH CARE CENTER — LAKE BLUFF ORPHANAGE

Photo courtesy of the Lake Bluff History Museum

Chapter 2 — It's Only for a While

Evanston, IL — Church Street Station — November 25, 1927

The truth is, it's awfully hard to know where to begin. So I suppose I'll start at the beginning.

On the day after Thanksgiving in 1927, my mother packed my sister Betty and me up and dragged us down to Church Street Station in Evanston, Illinois. Helen Morgan was a slender, high-strung woman in the best of times. But on this particular Friday, my mom was in quite a state. Pacing back and forth on the station platform, her gray coat filled with air and billowed out around her with every change of direction. Poor Betty, my stubby-legged, four-year-old sister, tried to keep up with her, grabbing for the fold of her coat each time it swung out. She finally got a hold of it and hung on for dear life, as we waited for the northbound Chicago North Shore Line to arrive. When mother finally stopped moving, Betty clung to her leg, burrowing her face into the tattered, fraying folds of mom's coat.

As an eleven-year-old, I suppose I was tall and slender, like my mother. I wasn't particularly tall for my grade; it's just that I was always too big for the rummage sale clothes I wore. So I guess that made me

look taller than I was. I remember glancing nervously around that huge train station platform, just wishing my mother would sit down.

For the last six months, the three of us—Betty, our mother, and I—had crammed into Aunt Rose’s Evanston apartment. “It’s only for a while,” our mother had said to us. In the last six months, mom had said all sorts of stuff we didn’t like was “only for a while,” ever since mom whisked us away from our father’s South Chicago house in the middle of the night back in May.

When we finally managed to escape from dad, we took almost nothing with us: a couple of grocery sacks of clothes, the last of mom’s money, my little red ball and jacks, and Betty’s faded brown, threadbare, one-eyed teddy bear. Mom wasn’t even sure she had enough cash to pay the Checker cab that picked us up in front of dad’s and deposited us outside her sister’s apartment at two a.m. on May 7th.

“It’s only for a while,” mom had said to Aunt Rose, when she opened her door with sleep in her eyes and her auburn hair tied up in curlers. She had no idea we were coming.

“Hi, Aunt Rose!” Betty said, way too enthusiastically for two o’clock in the morning. But that didn’t stop Rose from pulling Betty and me into her smothering, flabby embrace.

“Come in! Come in! You are all welcome to stay here for as long as you need to,” Aunt Rose said.

But after six months, even Aunt Rose couldn’t continue to cover the costs of supporting the three of us any longer, particularly where doctors’ appointments and inoculations were concerned. So she announced on the way home from church one November afternoon, with that big, Christian grin on her face, that, “Pastor Baddeley placed a call on our behalf to a place up in Lake Bluff that provides a wide variety of services to children just like you two.” I wasn’t sure what “just like you two” meant, but it probably had something to do with having a drunk for a dad, a mom who wasn’t much better, and clothes that were threadbare to the point of disintegration.

So that’s what landed us in the Evanston train station on the morning after Thanksgiving for this sudden trip to Lake Bluff. Mom had kept trying to explain it that morning at the breakfast table, as she hurried us along. “Aunt Rose found us a free clinic, where we can get you check-ups from both a doctor and a dentist. We’ll take the train there,” our mother had promised, “and then get some ice cream afterwards.”

The Chicago North Shore Interurban Line went all the way from Evanston up to Lake Bluff and points north. At 10:37 a.m. that Friday

morning, the brown, wooden train cars squealed to a stop at the Evanston Church Street Station. Only a few passengers disembarked, and mother herded the two of us onto the crowded second car. We scrunched onto two seats facing forward.

“How long will it take to get to the hospital?” I asked.

“There won’t be shots, Mama. No shots, right?” Betty begged.

Just then, the train began to lurch forward. “Here we go, now,” mother said, forcing a smile as she looked out the window. “Let’s just enjoy this,” she implored. “We’ll be there in about an hour.”

“Will it be dark when we come back?” I asked, looking upward at the wooden luggage racks above the seats.

“What about the shots, Mama?” Betty pressed. But mom just kept looking away, closing her exhausted eyes. Betty grabbed mother’s arm, as she began to notice all the strangers getting on at each new stop. They were bundled up folks of every shape and size, who packed tightly around us in the crowded car. Some of the travelers sat, but many stood, hanging onto brown leather straps that hung from the luggage racks overhead.

“I’ll go first if there are shots,” I whispered to Betty, “K?”

Posted above the exit doors was a list of towns, and I remember trying to read them to myself: Wilmette, Kenilworth, Winnetka, Glencoe, Highland Park, Highwood, Lake Forest, Lake Bluff, North Chicago, and Waukegan. Much later, I’d come to understand that these were all the stops the Chicago North Shore Line would make on this and all its trips. I reached into my pocket and squeezed a tiny red ball, the one I always used to play jacks. But before I got a good grip on it, it dropped out of my pocket. Bending down to retrieve it, I found that it had landed on the top fold of mom’s satchel.

“How come you brought this, Mom?” I asked. “Aren’t we coming back tonight?”

She looked away and exhaled. “It might get cold,” she said, putting an arm around Betty but turning her head away from both of us again. “It’s some warmer things...just in case.”

Betty watched the men reading neatly folded newspapers, and I noticed that several women clutched white handled shopping bags from places like Mandel Brothers and Marshall Fields. We both felt the side-to-side swaying of the train and the rhythmic “ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum” of the rails below.

At the Glencoe stop a tall, thin man got on board by himself. He was shouting things, but I couldn’t tell who he was talking to. “Get outta

my way!” he said, but no one was in his way. I put my arm around Betty. “I thought I told you to shut up! Now, shut up!” he said, but nobody was speaking. I pulled Betty closer.

He had a patchy, dark beard that seemed to have holes in it. His nose was long and crooked, and he kept picking it. “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard!” he yelled, looking at the empty space beside him. People were moving away from him, as he continued his angry conversation. I tried to look away, but my eyes seemed to keep returning to him.

“What are you looking at?” he screamed. I bent down again, pretending to look for something under my seat.

“Lake Bluff! Lake Bluff is next!” hollered the blue uniformed conductor, passing down the crowded aisle. He had one of those curlicue mustaches and a gold chain that hung from one of his vest pockets across to the other.

Mom motioned for us to get up. “Here we are,” she said. She wrung her hands, and glanced down at her far too heavy satchel under the seat.

“Will there be shots here, mama? Will the shots be soon?” Betty whined.

I slid the satchel out from underneath mom, struggled to pick it up, and handed it to her. Mom grabbed it from me way too quickly, and looked away immediately.

“This way.” She led us toward several descending steps. I stooped to lift Betty, and she clung much too tightly to me, sinking her nails into the back of my neck. We both craned our necks in search of our mother. She’d exited the train well ahead of us, and when we entered the gray light of the outdoors, the first thing we saw was the dark brick train depot. Down the steps and to the right was our mother, whispering to the conductor, who turned to point back behind them, off to the east. He glanced at us as we descended the steps, shook his head solemnly, and walked in the opposite direction.

Mom shot us another forced smile and beckoned us toward her. I set Betty down but held onto her tiny hand. Her grip had not relaxed. Looking across the tracks to the east and then south, I saw a small, well-manicured village green. Beyond it were some shops that I couldn’t quite make out. Up ahead to the left was a neat row of dark brick shops: a bakery, a pharmacy, and a hardware store, I think.

We followed mom down Scranton Avenue, heading east, and were greeted by huge, overhanging oaks and maples that towered above

the commercial buildings. In the distance, the broad street seemed to narrow into a slate gray mass that I would later discover was the western edge of Lake Michigan.

We passed the small, brick shops on Scranton, and then the small but well kept homes with wide, manicured yards and even more of the majestic trees. Just a block beyond the center of town, we came upon several huge, red, brick buildings set way back from the road.

“Here we are,” mom said, as she led us up the sidewalk, where a sign said “Mackey Memorial Building.” Two huge doors stood upon a cement stoop. Inside were clean, squeaky, marble floors beneath a high, vaulted ceiling. I remember it being eerily silent, except for the echo of footsteps that we heard in the cavernous distance. Mom led us to the main desk, where a tall woman in a pressed white shirt looked up from some files. Removing her glasses, she said, “Ah, you must be Mrs. Morgan, then?”

“Helen, yes,” mom responded. Betty let go of my hand and rushed over to our mother, again clutching mom’s leg. Mom closed her eyes and reached for the edge of the desk.

Rising from behind her large walnut desk, a tall matron with ramrod posture put her glasses back on her long nose. Stepping around her desk, I saw her plaid skirt. She said with a voice full of authority, “I’m Miss Arbuckle. Children, those chairs over there are for the two of you, while I speak with your mother for a few minutes...alone.” She pointed out some small, painted wooden toys and used a small, scruffy doll made of stuffed socks and yarn, in an attempt to lure Betty away from our mother.

“Mommy said we’ll have ice cream after the shots and then the train.”

Miss Arbuckle smiled at Betty, glanced at our mother, hesitated, and said, “Oh...I see.” The matron’s eyes met mine for just a fraction of an uncomfortable second.

I grabbed the doll and crossed over to Betty, took her hand, and pulled her over to the chairs. Glancing out a window beside us, I saw a large wooden playground with four swings, a seesaw, and a wooden jungle gym for climbing. I picked up Betty to show her. “Look, Betty! See the playground?”

Back at the desk, where the two women spoke in faint whispers, Miss Arbuckle took my mom’s heavy satchel and set it behind her desk. She then seemed to work through some sort of checklist with my mom. Mom had her head in her right hand, as she kept wiping her nose and

eyes with a hanky. Miss Arbuckle then placed a clipboard in front of my mom and handed her a pen. Mom signed it quickly and stood up.

“Come along, children,” we heard mom say, moving back toward the double doors we’d entered just minutes before. Betty ran to our mother, still holding the doll. I glanced back down the long hall in the other direction and noticed two teenagers peering at us through the crack of a barely opened door.

When we got back outside, the November air carried a chill, and I remember the sky being completely colorless. The four of us walked eastward along the main campus sidewalk, paralleling Scranton. We passed two more large, brick hospital buildings. Looking up, I saw what I was pretty sure were the heads of several children, silhouetted in the glass. I think they were watching us.

Miss Arbuckle turned left on the walkway that led up to the Swift Health Care Center.

“Swings, Mommy! Let’s try the swings!” Betty said, but my mom didn’t even look up.

“Yes. Aren’t they pretty swings? We’ll give them a try after we see the doctors. They’re waiting for us. Come along.” Our mom kept dabbing her eyes with her hanky.

“It’s only for a while with the doctor, right, Mommy? Only for a while?” Betty said in her best grown-up voice. “And then we’ll have ice cream.” Miss Arbuckle held the door open, and mom ducked inside without even responding.

Once again, marble floors amplified our footsteps. Across from the front desk, a couple stood smiling and whispering excitedly. “I’ll bring the child right out,” a nurse said, looking back at them. The husband and wife stood and took several steps in the direction of where the nurse had disappeared, then stopped, hugging each other.

Behind a desk, much like the one in Mackey Memorial, two women in white nursing uniforms stood like sentries. Miss Arbuckle approached them and gave them muffled instructions, pointing back toward Betty and me. The shorter of the two began waddling over toward us, with her partner close behind. I kept my eye on Miss Arbuckle who was watching my mother out of the corner of her eye, as if my mom were about to steal something from the desk. Over to the right of where the nurses had been, I saw another door that was slightly ajar. Three girls’ heads peered out from behind it. One of them had her hand over her mouth as she stared at Betty.

“You must be Betty. I recognize that dolly you have.” The waddling woman took Betty’s hand firmly and added. “I’m Nurse Sanderson. I’ll take you back now.” Nurse Sanderson waited, while her taller, older partner made her way toward me.

“Right this way, young man. My name is Nurse Blueberg.” She was tall and big-boned. Her lips were thin, and her jaw firmly set.

I nodded but didn’t say anything. The four of us began walking toward a pair of heavy wooden doors, a little to the left of where the three girls had been. They were now gone. Betty asked, “Does the doctor have shots for us?”

“No. No shots today,” Nurse Sanderson answered, glancing curiously at her fellow nurse. Betty turned around in search of mom. Not seeing her, she suddenly pulled away from the nurse and cried out.

“Mommy? Mommy!”

I turned back toward the now empty reception area and scanned the cavernous halls in search of our mother. I didn’t see her at first, but soon heard her unmistakable wail, coming from all the way back by the entrance doors, where mother was at a dead run, running away from us.

“Mom!” I screamed. And then again, “Mom!”

Miss Arbuckle had corralled Betty and was trying to shield herself from Betty’s kicking and flailing. Our mother was gone.

“Jesus,” Hargrave said, looking down and shaking his head.