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The Pitcher's Kid

a memoir



by Jack Olsen

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The Pitcher's Kid: A Memoir by
Jack Olsen

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one

Beginnings

1.

No one in my family expected me to earn my living off murder, mayhem, overtime parking, and other high crimes and misdemeanors. In early photographs I look like a guileless little fellow trying to think of something nice to do for his mommy. Pictures taken with our Kodak Box Brownie show me in droopy socks, short pants, and an oversize cap that could have been worn by a striking miner. In one picture I hold a Bible as a prop, in another a toy car. Family and friends regarded me as a pious and mannerly child. I knew better.

The first victim of my larcenous ways was our bulldog Jiggs. After Mother put his soaked kibble on the back porch, I nudged him aside and ate his meal. It was the perfect crime. We were both three and a half, but Jiggs couldn't talk.

Our family was vacationing in Atlantic City when I made my next score: a tin of chocolates from Mother's travel case. The brand name was on the little blue box; I couldn't read, but I recognized two X's. We were promenading on the Boardwalk between the frozen custard and Ski-ball when the spasms struck. Before we straggled back to our rented bungalow, I'd paid a call on every public restroom from the Steel Pier to Connecticut Avenue. Daddy promised to enter me in the sprint events at the 1932 Olympics.

The details of my birth in June 1925 have been lost in other events of that portentous month. The country was suffering through a heat wave that took 200 lives. Walter P. Chrysler opened an auto plant. Tennessee schools dismissed the theory of evolution. An earthquake hit Santa Barbara. A man named Schaeztle invented a wireless phone for automobiles. Civil war broke out in China, inflation in Germany, military revolt in Greece. In so much commotion, hardly anyone noticed that a child named John Edward Olsen had been born in St. Vincent's Hospital in Indianapolis, Indiana.

I was never entered in a baby contest, and the old photo albums show why. An uncle told me that Daddy took one look at me and summoned the nurse. Listen, girlie, he said, there's been a big mistake.

When she showed him my I.D. band, he said, Between this here model and a used Hupmobile, I'll take the Hup.

Daddy took his revenge by running out on the hospital bill. He collected me and my nineteen-year-old mother at the back door and drove us non-stop to Detroit. As we passed Navin Field, he reminisced about his triumphs as a Detroit Tiger pitcher. Two or three times he took Mother across the river to Canada to enjoy beverages that were outlawed in the United States. When creditors banged on the door of our furnished room, the landlady would say, They went abroad. Daddy repaid the kindness by sparing her some tedious bookkeeping. We left while owing three months' rent.

After a few weeks in Dallas, we ran up another unpaid bill in a Miami trailer park, then lit out for a low-rent section of Philadelphia. Family history holds that we left Miami just ahead of the 1926 hurricane and that I was napping on our Reo sedan's back seat

when a hanging traffic light broke loose and smashed through the rear window. This may or may not be true. Everything concerning my family may or may not be true. As a journalist, I am the only member trained to tell the whole truth, most of the time.

2.

The human infant has been described as a long tube with a loud noise at one end and a total lack of responsibility at the other. I have no memory of my first few years, but I'm told that I met the description. I recall no moo-cows on the road, no magical timeless summer, no cameras with their shutters open. I wasn't called Ishmael or much of anything except It. When It flung a cupcake against the wall at Its second birthday party, Daddy predicted (mistakenly) that another Olsen was headed for the major leagues.

At three I wobbled around the house in footie pajamas and banged into bureaus and tables. I remember the sting of iodine and the bright red color of Mercurochrome. I squooshed a butterfly to see if there was real butter inside. Mother said I was annoyed at the results.

Early photos show a resemblance to Babe Ruth: the same dark hair, brown eyes, broad face, and upswept nose. Mother later claimed that my looks came from her grandfather Francis Zawadzki, a figure of respect in Jersey City's Polish community and the dominant male in our family tree. The resemblance ended at our personalities. I have tiptoed through life in a state bordering on hysteria, but Great-grandpa Zawadzki feared nothing and no one. He decked a beefy dockworker who referred to him as a greasy Polock. When the man apologized and said he'd meant to say Pole, Francis Zawadzki slammed him against a bulkhead. No Pole, he said. No Polock. Greasy American.

That incident was said to have taken place around 1850, after Great-grandpa and five other members of his family arrived from Gdansk along with mobs of eastern Europeans headed for the coal mines of Appalachia. In three weeks at sea, my ancestors survived on a pig's head and a sack of turnips. Family history holds that Great-grandpa Zawadzki kissed the Hoboken wharf and announced to his wife Balbina Rumienska that they must start speaking American immediately. Overnight, borscht became beet soup and kielbasa became sausage. Pig's heads were permanently banished from the menu after he declared, Pig heads for old country.

Apparently Francis Zawadzki was a stern parent whose rules applied in perpetuity. Decades after he died, his daughter Caroline Zawadzki Drecksage sang me a Polish lullaby about a girl who wished for wings like a goose so she could fly to Johnny in Silesia. It was the only time I ever heard my grandmother use the language of her parents. Jackie, she whispered, don't tell nobody.

Great-grandpa Zawadzki was famous in Jersey City for winning a test of strength at the Communipaw Engine Terminal, where he supported his family by chipping slag off locomotive boilers. The roundhouse workers argued over who could move a 4-6-2 Royal Blue Pacific by hand. Great-grandpa's main competitor, a triple-chinned Irishman named Hanlon, shoved and strained, grunted, cursed and gave up. Great-grandpa climbed into the cab, released the brakes and won handily. Or so I was told by an aunt who died before ethnic jokes were in style. I doubt that she realized she was telling one.

The Zawadzki family remained properly respectful of its patriarch, even in his fading years when he would don a flashy uniform and join in the parades along Ocean Avenue. All spit-and-Polish, the old man would ignore entreaties from his embarrassed children: Pop, it's the Sons of It'ly.... Pop, it's the Spanish-American War Vets....

At intervals along the line of march he would unsheathe his saber and demonstrate some of the techniques that had made the Polish Cavalry the most feared mounted force in north-central eastern Europe.

I hasten to admit that some of these stories may seem short on provenance. Even as a child I didn't believe every word of my family's alleged history. But we had positive proof of one fact (and were quick to show it to doubters): Great-grandfather Zawadzki had served as an officer in the Imperial Polish Army. On our mantelpiece we kept a photo of our aristocratic ancestor in dress uniform, his chest bedecked with embroidery, gloved hand resting on the hilt of his sword, sleeves bearing the four gold stripes that traditionally denote exalted ranks like Navy captain or Supreme Court Chief Justice. Copies of this picture, edged in a frame of simulated gilt, may still be seen in the homes of some of my relatives.

Alas, the photo is not worth a thousand words, or even a dozen. An elderly second cousin informed me that Great-grandpa had posed in the uniform of a Jersey City fraternal order. Before my grandmother died in 1960, she told me that her parents had owned a farm near Warsaw and were run out of Poland by the Cossacks who swept across the country in the 1800s. Sleep well, Field Marshal Zawadzki. I hope you were buried with full military honors.

3.

In 19th-century Denmark, the name Olsen was as common as sprats, but the paternal branch of my family seemed to include no one of that name until certain members decided to reinvent themselves in America. When the soil turned fallow, my ancestors deserted the family farm on Falster Island in the North Sea. My great-grandfather Ole Kristofferson Moeller stayed behind with his wife Ane, but their seven sons worked passage to America. By the time of their arrival in the 1850s, they'd recast the family name as Olsen (son of Ole), perhaps to begin a family tradition of eluding bill collectors.

The freshly minted Olsens were met at the Hoboken docks by a Danish-American preacher who guided them to a part of the Wild West where Lutherans were in short supply and the place had been named after Indians. With one eye out for burning arrows, the brothers helped to build the Danish Lutheran Church in Indianapolis. My great-aunts Edna and Elva Olsen were the church organists for fifty years.

The immigrant Olsens and their descendants prospered in the New World. Even my raffish father achieved a degree of success. For a few years he earned his living as a juvenile delinquent and newsboy before finding steady work as a pitcher. Daddy claimed that he could curve a baseball around a haystack and through the side of a barn. And if you didn't believe it, he would show you the haystack.

Or so he told eighteen-year-old Florence Mae Drecksage on one of their first meetings. When my sister Carolyn and I were kids, Mother seldom spoke to us about her courtship

with Ole Olsen, perhaps because she was never one to dwell on the past. But in her declining years she opened up about the greatest tragedy of her life: her marriage.

4.

My mother and father met in 1924 while he was working in Newark, N.J., as an insurance adjuster, specializing in auto collision. Early photos depict a sternly handsome throwback to the dandyism of a previous century, a *bon vivant* with the same keen sense of dress style as Zachary Taylor. In the nineteen-twenties and well into the thirties, Daddy's everyday wardrobe included corduroy knickers, flat straw hats, derbies, and high-top shoes. Except when wading, he wore spats. His stiff brown hair was cut about three inches tall, *en brosse*, or what was known in those days as a German haircut. If the pictures in our family albums are any indication, he chain-smoked cigars. His generation seemed to regard the stogy as a mark of distinction.

Flo Drecksage was put off when she first encountered Ole Olsen. He acted fresh and talked out of the side of his mouth. He told her that "Swede" was his baseball moniker and he didn't care what she called him as long as she didn't call him late for breakfast. Mother had an ear for stale lines and wasn't impressed.

She was equally bored by his baseball credentials. As "Swede" Olsen, he might have pitched in the big leagues, but baseball didn't count for much in the Drecksage family. There were three major-league teams across the bay in New York, and Mother didn't know their names.

She was also put off by his English. His standard greeting amounted to How ya was, Toots? He pronounced the P's in words like ptomaine and pneumonia on the grounds that the people who invented English had put them there for a reason. Ain't and youse were staples of his vocabulary, along with double and triple negatives. At first, the lovely young Flo wasn't sure if he was serious or playing the fool. By the time she found out, it was too late.

Somehow this specimen had talked himself into a white-collar job with the New Amsterdam Insurance Company of Newark. At the time Mother was working as a steno for Bristol-Meyers and dating an accounting major at Syracuse University. She was a high school honors graduate, chestnut-haired, hazel-eyed, bright and pretty – and naive, as it turned out. Her friend Mary Martin introduced them. Mother forgave her after fifteen or twenty years.

One Sunday after church, Mary had informed Mother that Ole was smitten with her. Mother said, Doesn't he know that you and I are best friends?

Mary confessed that her own romance with the insurance man was over. He talks about you all the time, Flo. Why don't you go out with him? He doesn't bite.

5.

The ex-pitcher arrived at the Drecksage's first-floor flat on Claremont Avenue in Jersey City in a sputtering car that sent the family beagle diving under a bed. Mother's younger brothers Bob and Sonny stood googoo-eyed as the gentleman caller unlatched the hood to

show off the engine. Look here, sport, he said. Twenty horses! Four cylinders. You couldn't buy no better for a thousand clams.

Mother waved a nervous farewell to her family as Ole headed toward the waterfront in a cloud of fumes and dust. He told her he'd written a poem about his car and recited it on the way. Mother was sure the poem was stolen but didn't challenge him. Every man she'd ever met had tried to impress her with little white lies. She asked Ole if he liked Browning. He said he didn't cook.

They parked at the Jersey Central Terminal and took the ferry to Manhattan, where a ten-cent jitney delivered them to a vaudeville theater off Broadway. After the opening number, Ole whispered, That jane can step. Mother gathered that *jane* meant girl and *step* meant dance. If I see this guy again, she said to herself, I hope he brings a translator.

After weeks of persistent attention, Ole arrived at the family residence on foot. Mother asked what happened to his car. He gave a long answer that she didn't understand, as the word repossess was not yet in her vocabulary. That night they returned to Broadway for *The Cat and the Canary* with Henry Hull (later to star as the Werewolf of London), and Ole autographed the ticket stubs before handing them to her as souvenirs. She showed them to a friend at Bristol-Meyers. Those are Annie Oakleys, Mother was told. They punch 'em twice so you can't use 'em again. He ain't going broke on ya.

When Mother inquired, Ole explained that the New Amsterdam Company awarded incentives to its top adjusters. She asked what an insurance adjuster did for a living, and he explained that after every car wreck, the customer always demanded too much and the company offered too little. I adjust the difference, he explained. It's a living. Keeps me in walking-around money. He flashed a roll of bills.

Walking-around money. Mother shook her head.

After some polite conversation on her stoop, he told her he had to return to Newark for his beauty sleep. Night, Flo, he said. It's twenty-three skidoo for me.

Mother said, Pardon?

Gotta take it on the lam.

He pecked her on the cheek and left.

6.

On a hot July weekend the courting couple rode the subway to Yankee Stadium. Ole pointed to the sidelines and said, That's Meuse! He don't signify. See that there fat guy? That's the Babe. Swings like a rusty gate. That's Gehrig over there. I got his number. Don't tell nobody....

If he knows so much about baseball, Mother said to herself, why isn't he on the field? She still hadn't learned his age, but he looked to be in his late twenties and seemed healthy enough. When she asked why he'd quit pitching, he said, The old soup bone went bad. Then he changed the subject.

The next weekend he showed up in a 1916 Reo touring car, charcoal black, with side curtains, spoke wheels and two little vases for flowers. It was shaped like a bar of laundry

soap. He told her he was test-driving it for a friend. (He test-drove it for years; it was the car that was hit by the falling traffic light in the 1926 hurricane.) En route to Bear Mountain he stopped at a roadhouse speakeasy where he seemed to be known. He ordered an ale for himself and a sarsaparilla for Mother. As they strolled across a meadow, he broke into song:

Although the Kaiser is a friend of Budweiser

Budweiser's a friend of mine....

Mother wondered why he was so backward about music. Hadn't he heard of Paul Whiteman and the Rhythm Boys? Rudy Vallee? Laura La Plante? Some of his selections were from the 1800s. Her German father and Polish grandfather had sung musical tributes to beer, giggling over lines like, If you don't want to drink it, they force it on you....

On the return drive Ole described his riverside home in Indianapolis and other holdings, including a Locomobile race-car and a racehorse. He said he didn't expect to be stuck in Jersey much longer; New Amsterdam Insurance had big plans for him. He said, Stick wit' me, Flo, and you'll wear diamonds.

After a few more dates he bought her a friendship ring. He held it up to a lamp and said, Chick, ain't it? Stimulated rhinestones. Them's the rage this year.

Mother accepted the gift even though something told her she might be making a mistake. Her Syracuse boyfriend hadn't written in weeks, and she'd begun to find him a little dull, with all his talk about double-entry bookkeeping and vertical integration in the ladies' hose industry. Ole was a study in words and music. He waltzed like a professional and performed an energetic buck and wing. He taught her a tango variation that he said he'd worked out on his own.

What do you call it? Mother asked.

The Tapioca, he said. It's registered with the Patent Office.

He offered to do a sand dance if Mother supplied the sand. She asked if he'd ever considered vaudeville and he said he didn't want to put Jolson out of business. He said, Al's the sole support of a aging mother. I went into baseball instead.

7.

En route with Ole to see her favorite movie actor, Francis X. Bushman, Mother admitted to herself that her fiancé was becoming more interesting with each date. He talked about catching sailfish off Miami, racing a car up Pike's Peak and shaking hands with Mr. Pike himself, wrestling a crocodile for Ringling Bros. He said, Take my word, Flo. Them crocs can bite!

Mother had never been south of Bayonne, west of Newark, or north of Hoboken. When they were out on the town, Ole seemed on a first-name basis with everyone. If he ordered two items from a menu, he would instruct the waitress, One must be good, girlie. After the main course, he would ask, What's on the desert? Afterwards he would request the total incurred indemnity. He never failed to tip. There you be, girlie, he would say as he dropped a dime in the waitress's hand. Don't spend it all in one place.

He drank his share of bootleg beer and bathtub gin but never seemed tipsy. He addressed men as cap, old top, or old-timer, depending on their age. Mother marveled at the clever phrases that poured from his mouth: It takes all kinda people to make a world.... Never trust a guy that wears a funny hat.... You can't fool me; I'm too ignorant... There's more than one way to skin a cat.... Not for all the tea in China.... It just shows to go you.... More than you can shake a stick at....

When Mother invited him to the annual rummage sale at St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church, he said, No, thanks. I already got plenty of rummage.

When her friend Bette Jane Holder said that she intended to have lots of children, Ole warned her to stop at three.

Why?

Jeez, ain't you heard? Every fourth kid born on earth is Chinese.

On a thoughtful evening of conversation on a bench over-looking the Hudson, Mother's new boyfriend explained how to tell the races apart. Eyetalians like music and spaghetti, he told her. Swedes are quiet and dumb from eating too much herring. Germans are bullheaded. Chinks eat rice, wash clothes, and can't speak English. Jews are clever with a buck but don't turn your back. The colored can step and do good work on shoes. Englishmen are all pansies.

What about Poles? Mother asked him.

Polocks? he said. What about 'em?

Mother informed him that she was half Polish. A few days later he warned a mutual friend, Don't knock Polocks. You'll hurt half of Flo's feelings.

Sometimes Mother wondered if English was his second tongue, or maybe his third. If he was in a hurry, he would tell her to shake a leg. He never seemed to call anything by its correct name. Eyeglasses were *cheaters*, clothes were *rags*, trains *rattlers*, restaurants *hash houses*, bums *palookas*, matches *lucifers*, cigarettes *coffin nails*. He called money everything except money – *dough*, *cabbage*, *lettuce*, *spondulix*, *sugar*, *simoleons*, *mazooma*, *geetus*. A five-dollar bill was a *fin*, a ten a *sawbuck*, and a twenty a *double-sawbuck*. He called the \$100 bill a *C-note* and told her, I ain't holding one at the present time, but I got a few back in my wall safe.

On an evening stroll to a dime moviehouse on Ocean Avenue, the couple encountered some men kneeling along the curb. Ole stopped as though he'd walked into a wall. This is my game, he whispered. I wrote the book.

He dropped to his knees and slapped down a dollar bill. Gimme them rats and mice, he ordered. Mother grimaced when he spat on the dice and exclaimed about Big Dick from Boston and eight the hard way. His dollar bill grew to two, then four, then eight, then disappeared.

He led Mother away by the arm. Out of the players' earshot, he said, They musta rung in some crooked dice.

They were married in the office of the Manhattan borough clerk. It was 1924; Mother was eighteen and Daddy was thirty-four. The newlyweds had barely settled into his two-room furnished flat in Newark when a private detective arrived to ask the bride if she knew the bridegroom's whereabouts. It appeared that he'd made a midnight requisition of two thousand dollars from his company's cash reserve. When Ole got home, he explained, I didn't steal that dough, Flo. I borrowed it. Is that a crime?

Mother thought it was an odd comment. Shortly after midnight they were chugging west in the old Reo on U. S. 40, the Lincoln Highway. Everything they owned was in the trunk.

In Indianapolis the teen bride discovered that her husband's riverside mansion was a sagging frame house near a stagnant creek that the locals called the White River. The house belonged to the estate of his first wife, Margaret Pine. When Mother asked why he hadn't mentioned the marriage, he said that Margaret had died in childbirth and he didn't like to talk about it.

A day or two later Florence learned from his organist cousins that there'd been a second wife, a "fast" Philadelphia woman named Josephine, whom he'd divorced on grounds of adultery. In between wives, he'd dated a long string of flappers. By the time Mother realized that she might have made a terrible mistake, John Edward Olsen was on his way.

9.

Up to the day I dined on that serving of sun-dried dog food in Philadelphia, my life is a fuzzy memory of long drives in the dark, being shushed, being hoisted in the air, and dining on pabulum and zwieback. When I learned to walk, I would toddle into Mother's closet, rub her beaver coat, and marvel at the way it turned from dark to light brown. Our household was an infant's paradise, with songs like "Japanese Sandman" and "Poor Butterfly" tinkling out of the kitchen radio and the scent of baby powder and *eau de cologne* in the air.

Then something alien arrived on the scene. It was called a sister. It yelled in the night and burped. I was glad I'd never acted like that. Mother explained that the noisebox came from a cabbage patch. She refused my request to put her back.

A few months later Mother's story changed. In response to shrill questioning, she admitted that Carolyn Louise hadn't come from a cabbage patch. She'd come from Lit Brothers Department Store.

I was relieved. I said, Then you can take her back.

Mother said, You can't return sale items.

A captioned lithograph summed up the relationship between my sister and me. It hung on the wall of the row house we rented in the Overbrook section of Philadelphia and showed two children seated at table with their parents.

Is that big piece for Sister?

No, son. That's for you.

Oh, what a little bit of a piece!

A single document survives from my fourth year. It is printed in red crayon on a cardboard shirt stiffener:

I LoVe MY MoTHeR.

LoVe

JACK

SISYISMeNe

From our earliest years, Carolyn and I turned the back seat of our Reo into the Battle of the Marne.

Sissy's on my side....

Jackie touched me with his foot....

She's....

He's....

Decades before the expression would enter the language, my parents were imploring, Can't we just get along?!

Eventually Daddy would say, If youse don't stop fighting, I'm taking youse straight home.

Sis would say, He foughted on me first!

I would whisper, Tattletale.

Sis would start to cry and I would tell her to shut up.

Jackie said me to shut up!

That's a false lie!¹

One Sunday our trench warfare grew so loud that Daddy made good on his threat. On the drive home, Sis and I wailed and sobbed and begged him to reconsider. Will youse shuddup? he yelled. He lit a fresh Bayuk Phillies cigar and puffed hard. His hoarse whisper reached the big ears in the back seat. Florence, he said, I'm gonna install two belts back there, good strong webbing with a goddamn snap in the middle. That'll keep them little buggers in their place.

Luckily nothing came of his idea.

10.

Our dark-haired young mother didn't seem bothered by the war between my sister and me or any other kinds of dissension. When controversial subjects like Herbert Hoover or the prohibition laws came up, she would smile agreeably and say, I wouldn't be surprised. Or: That's one point of view. Or: Some would say so, some would disagree.

Mother's child-raising techniques came straight from her own mother, Caroline Zawadzki Drecksage, who'd raised two sons and three daughters in an era when a parent's

main job was to produce kids who survived. Nanny taught Mother that children should be seen and not heard, fed on schedule, put to bed at the same time, and awakened at the same time, never hugged (because it would spoil them), never praised (it would make them braggarts), and never exposed to nudity (it would turn the males into sex fiends and the females into unwed mothers).

I'm sure Mother loved Sis and me, but she took pains to keep it a secret. This seemed to be the parenting style of the era. Hugs and kisses were out; dedication and hard work were in. Mother stayed up late making me a pirate costume and decorating my trike for a Fourth of July parade. She would spend days preparing for our birthday parties – selecting games, buying prizes, making up guest lists, sending out invitations. On party day, she would get up at dawn to prepare cakes and pies, cut out favors, and drape the house and yard with swags of Dennison's crepe paper. Later she would collect the favors and birthday cards and paste them into scrapbooks. Sometimes the entries included planted items from the neighborhood newspaper:

For his fifth birthday, Master Jackie Olsen of Diamond Street, Overbrook, entertained....

Every night she tucked us in and read us stories till we learned to read them back: Tim is sad. The fat pig is bad. Tim ran and ran....

I became an early but wildly imprecise reader and speaker. Mother patiently corrected my mispronunciations: *corpsuckle*, *Sir Lank-a-lot*, *org* for *ogre*, *Alsop's Fables*, *fantackus*. Her own English was simple and direct, with a preference for well-worn expressions and an occasional indulgence in our family tradition of getting things a little wrong. She might refer to shooting fish in a barrow, as calm as a clam, as Polish as Paddy's pig. She was the first person I ever heard who said *Perish forbid*. But she was also the first to open my eyes to the rich possibilities of English, correct or incorrect. Mother taught lessons that couldn't be learned in school.

On the other hand, Daddy's English was just plain confusing. One of his pet phrases was I'm from Missouri. I figured he'd had plenty of years to find out he came from Indiana. He didn't seem sure about his own son's birthplace. When I sneezed and sent a few drops of grape juice across the kitchen table, he asked, Where'd you come from? The city dump?

I came from Lit Brothers.

Who learned you that?

Mother.

Your mother ain't worldly. You come from the same place I come from.

Missouri?

I once heard him claim he was free, white, and twenty-one; at the time he was forty. He would open a door and say, After you, dear Alphonse. Once he called me Lucky Pierre. If I spilled food, he would say, Sloppy Joe, the bartender's kid! But I was Jack, the pitcher's kid. Didn't he know that?

In my first five or six years of life I spent half my time laughing at Daddy and the

other half trying to figure out what language he was speaking. Why did he say, A stopped clock is right twice a day, ain't it? Why did he order Mother to tell it to the Maureens? Why did he let friends call him Swede? He was half Danish and half German. Why didn't they call him Dane, or German?

When I wasn't trying to understand Daddy, I was trying to make sense of other words and expressions. I was baffled by the pledge of allegiance and the phrase One nation invisible and the Fourth of July ceremonies when people sang about My country tizzifee. Who was this man named Franklin Rose Velvet and what was a prez-dent? Why was a playmate nicknamed Reds when there was only one of him? Why did Mother tell me not to cut off my nose despite my face? Who would want to idolize salt? Why did Daddy call our mayor the lesser of two weevils? Why did that huge gray animal at the zoo use his long tail to pick things up, and where was he stuffing those cabbages?

For a time, a flasher operated on our block, and we kids didn't understand why we were ordered to stay away from such a friendly man. Usually he showed his wee-wee, but when he exposed his belly button to Margaret Stine, she inquired as to why his went out and hers went in. He just giggled and gave her a kiss. How could you dislike a guy like that?

Daddy yelled, Do not ever! – bring him! – home! – again!

No one would have believed that someday I would write books about sex criminals.

11.

Our family's love of pets probably came from Mother's side. Drecksage females kept their kids at arm's length but slobbered over pets. If my grandmother was in a hugging mood, she reached for Laddie, the dog she'd raised from a yearling. Laddie combined German shepherd and pointer in unknown proportions. He was a dark brown animal with a black muzzle, eyes like Ronald Colman's, and teeth from a Pepsodent ad. In his middle years, Laddie pointed only small birds and Norwegians, or so Nanny explained on one of our visits to Jersey City. When my Aunt Ronnie brought her fiancé over to meet Nanny, Laddie went on point. To make matters worse, he followed Bill Johnson down the hall and pointed him through the bathroom door, then dogged him to his car. Bill Johnson never returned, even after he married Aunt Ronnie and became my Uncle Bill. As he explained to my aunt, I'm not gonna be pointed by no goddamn dog.

In the Olsen family, pets were loved to death. Daddy backed the Reo over my angora rabbit, and when he was rushing to Fluffy's rescue he stepped on my frog Rivet. Our angelfish Teddy expired after too much kissing by my sister. Our pug Jiggs² died of distemper that he caught from a nasty bill collector, or so my father explained. The innards of Frosty, our snow-white Samoyed, began to leak out of her orifices from too much squeezing and she had to be put to sleep before she disappeared.

A chow named Chan was our only success story. He was a one-man dog, and the one man was my mother. He enjoyed sitting at her feet, his purple tongue rolling around and dripping. Anyone who got between Chan and Mother risked a nip. He turned two or three circles before flopping on our rug. Mother explained that chows and Tasmanian devils had developed this habit to avoid sitting on snakes, but Daddy said he was from Missouri. He

would take the dog's muzzle in both hands, stare into his brown eyes and say, There's no goddamn snakes in our house! No! Snakes! Understand? Then he would turn to Mother and mutter, He don't listen.

Chan would pad to his corner, circle two or three times and sit. That don't phrase me, Daddy would say. Then he would resume the lesson.

The infighting between the dominant males lasted three years, until our chow caught the ague from a shot of blackberry brandy that Daddy gave him to cure diarrhea. Full of remorse, he held Channie on his lap all night, stroking his head and instructing him not to die. Just after dawn, the dog batted his eyes, gave Daddy's hand a purple lick, and stopped breathing.

I can't understand it, Daddy said. I thought he didn't like me. Whattaya think, Flo? Did he really like me?

Mother said it was a language problem.

After we presided over the deaths of a small zoo of animals, including guinea pigs, white rats and canaries, we decided to try cats. Pearl, a calico, slept in her litter box and meowed until someone picked her up and petted her. Then she returned to the litter box. Gemini, a half-Persian with a contralto purr, dragged her kills into the house and suffered from permanent mouse breath. Daddy's attempt to rinse her mouth with Listerine resulted in a call to the fire department to remove her from a locust tree. The fireman who handed her to Mother said, That cat has some breath!

Our twin toms Mike and Ike began a campaign to beat up every cat in Philadelphia. When they didn't come home one night, Daddy explained that they'd tangled with a border collie and were herded to death.

We tried to turn an angora kitten named Blossom into a watchcat, but she just wanted to lick our hands with her No. 3 sandpaper tongue. Mother worked for two hours cleaning up a set of prints that Blossom left after I dipped her front paws into a bottle of black ink for my J. Edgar Hoover Fingerprint Kit. I never understood Blossom's choice of escape route: across the rug, over the sofa, up the curtains, down the curtains, back across the rug and out the front door. You could tell she was moving fast because she left one pawprint on the ceiling. Mother hadn't been so annoyed since Sis and I tied cantaloupe rinds to our shoes and turned the kitchen floor into a skating rink.

12.

Our house wasn't far enough from civilization to have wild animal problems, but one thieving visitor couldn't resist adding our property to his beat. He would rattle the lid off our garbage pail and scatter cans, meat wrappers and bones. Most suburbanites would have tried to snap his picture, but Daddy took the intrusions as a personal insult.

One night he grabbed his flashlight and his war surplus single-action Webley revolver and padded out the front door. Neither adversary acknowledged the other for several seconds. Then Daddy sighted down the flashlight beam and fired. The raccoon took another bite of drumstick. Daddy had neglected to pull back the hammer.

Fumbling and cursing, he cocked the pistol while the animal ambled around the corner of the house. Daddy followed, and so they went, around and around, with Daddy firing three shots, all wild. His ammo exhausted, he flung the gun at the coon, picked up a rock, missed again, and put a dent in the neighbors' Moon cabriolet. It took a while to explain to the police, but we had a good record in the neighborhood and he was released on his own recognizance.

13.

Jesus Christ entered my life when I was four. I'd heard his name around the house and noticed that it was usually yelled. Our cleaning lady, Amanda May Johnson, crossed herself frequently and referred to Jesus, Mary and Joseph. That made me wonder if Jesus was a family man, but somebody told me that he was an only child and his parents had passed away.

The six-year-old boy next door said he thought Jesus's middle name might be Herbert, as he'd heard his father mention Jesus H. Christ. He also claimed that he'd seen a sign: Jesus Saves. We were pretty sure that Jesus was in banking.

One morning our milkman dropped a bottle and exclaimed, Christ on a crutch!

I thought, How unfair! Not only is Jesus an orphan, but he's crippled. I asked Mother if we could buy him a sympathy card, but she couldn't find his address.

I learned more about Jesus from a Sunday School teacher who gave me the impression that God was an old man with a beard, Jesus was his son, Mary was his mother and they lived in a riding stable. Once a year three wise guys brought them franks and incense. People in trouble asked Jesus for advice. Daddy always said, Tell your troubles to Jesus.

One night I tried to find out where the wholly family lived. Daddy pointed into the sky and said, Up there. Just behind the Dipper. I scrooched up my eyes but couldn't see anything. Daddy said, They must of went out for the evening.

Even though I couldn't read, I began to comprehend the stories in my illustrated book, "Minute Stories From the Bible." The Bible itself just confused me. Our Sunday Kindergarten teacher made us recite the Twenty-third Psalm, but I couldn't get past the first line: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.... I thought, What kid wouldn't want a nice guy like Jesus?

I heard about the parable of the Five Talents and asked Mother, What're these five talents anyway? Singing? Dancing? One of my friends said the Bible must be about baseball as there was something about a sermon on the mound.³

My father, Rudolph Olaf Olsen, didn't attend regular church services and had to be reminded about all holy occasions except Christmas and Easter. He had one foot in the 19th Century and the other in the mythology of his ancestors, so when he announced that our family would celebrate Christmas in the Scandinavian tradition, Sis and I rejoiced. That meant we could stay up late on Christmas Eve to greet the Danish Santa.

I was prone on the living room floor trying to read the comics in the Evening Public Ledger when a fat bearded man in a red suit burst into the room yelling Ho ho ho!

Carolyn screamed and I jumped into Mother's lap.

He won't hurt you, she said, patting me between the shoulder blades.

When the racket subsided, I said, Are you Jesus?

I'm Santa, the fat man said. Ho ho ho!

Why didn't you come down the chimbley?

I did. You musta just missed me, Sonny.

He spoke in a strained voice, as though a reindeer had gored him in his wee-wee. I asked myself, Is this Jesus, Santa, ... or Daddy? I decided it had to be Daddy. Jesus wouldn't smoke cigars and Santa wouldn't smell like bay rum.

After everybody went to bed, Mother put out milk and almonds for our night visitor's return. When Daddy woke me up on Christmas morning, he had almonds on his breath. Who did he think he was fooling? He must have thought Mother and I were stupid.

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