

ABE LINCOLN'S MISFITS

By

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CHAPTER 1

John Smith's life was as generic, boring and predictably middle American as his name in Pleasanton County, Iowa. Indeed, Pleasanton's flat fields of corn, wheat and barley that went as far as the eye could see were as plentiful in 1936 as they had been 2 decades ago. Mother Nature had spared the God fearing and flag loving citizens the wrath of the Dust Bowl which turned most of the crop and grass bearing soil in America into a dust bowl. It had been spared Indian raids five decades earlier. The once proud, well fed and nomadic tribes had abandoned the buffalo-depleted land that was then made to bleed with the plow soon after the first sodbusters arrived. The blood from their plows and metal spades provided the pale skinned residents and their progeny with stabilized prosperity each year. It provided them with everything they needed, and most of what they wanted, in a (relative to anywhere else anyway) crime free paradise with fluctuations that were as flat as the plain Jane pancakes they ate for breakfast, and the hill-free horizons that boxed you in comfortably in all directions.

As for John Smith's role in maintaining this 'going nowhere but not wanting to anyway' Paradise, he had been promoted at the age of 25 to Chief Regional Operating officer for the Iowa State Insurance company. He had a ten year track record of selling more policies than any other agent for three hundred miles in any direction. The company had to pay out less policies for 'accidents' caused by Nature or the hand of man (and woman) than any other agent in Iowa, for which he was generously rewarded by the Head Office.

With that (as Preacher Johnson said, anyway) 'God given' prosperity, John was able to finally woo to the alter Thelma, the prettiest girl in his High School class. He had yearned for her affection since he was able to spout pubic hair on his family jewels and peach fuzz on his upper lip. After spawning his eldest son, averagely handsome on a good day and in the right light Jake, by 'accident', Thelma provided the Smith household with two daughters, Rachel and Agnes.

On this day of October 5, 1936, John, left the office at 5 pm, as scheduled, clad in his plain brown suit which never acquired wrinkles and a black tie that made his white shirt seem darker to the soul. As was his trademark, he departed with polite and perhaps respectful nods from his less than successful and mostly older subordinates. But John was contemplating what surprises his wife and children would provide for him for his birthday at home. The big 40! A landmark, he reluctantly and unexpectedly found himself thinking, and feeling, as half of his life was over. But there was another half to make something of, for himself, his family or...the world. A world which was in turmoil and transition, according to the headline on the newspaper he read from his always reserved for him and freshly cleaned seat on the bus going home.

"Spain is in an uproar again? A civil war starting there?" Paul Williamson noted from the driver's seat in the rear view mirror, reading the headline in the specially ordered newspaper John had opened up, and hiding inside. "And who is this General Franco? Is he with them or with us, as Americans that is?"

"Hard to say, Paul," John noted, reading between the lines to smell out the real agenda of the writer and the newspaper owner within the article about the Civil War in Spain. One one side

there was the democratically elected as well as people serving Republicans backed ONLY by Soviet Russia. On the other side, rich aristocrats, the Catholic Church along with the Army led by Franco, now getting tons of active support from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. "But someone here should do something about the War that is killing far more innocent civilians than armed soldiers," he commented, seeing below the article that the American Congress had just elected to join the rest of the Capitalist 'democratic' counties in the world to ban all exports of any supplies, or people, to the Republicans and their Russian allies.

"Why should WE do anything about it?" Paul inquired regarding the War that had officially broken out four months ago. "There's a big ocean 'tween them and us," he continued. "Right folks?" he inquired of the other passengers, who responded with an overwhelming barrage of 'yeps', 'you said it Paul' and 'that's the God's honest truth'.

"And an ocean of flat land the winners or losers in this new war have to cross if they want to invade us here, which will kill them with boredom," John thought, but dared not say, as his social position and welfare of his family depended on him being 'predictably middle American.'

"But one thing about what's goin' on in Spain," Paul added. "Let them Mexican speakin' Spaniards, Reds, and Sieg Heiling Huns keep the Spanish flu on their side of the Atlantic. Each one of us lost a friend or family member to that influenza. Which none of us woulda got if Europeans stayed in Europe and our troops stayed at home like they was supposed ta."

Once again, John, who had committed the primal sin in Pleasanton to get a free thinking college education, for two years anyway, took in a deep breath. Through tight lips, he held back the fire he wanted to unleash upon his fellow passengers. Who accepted ignorance as truth from master mechanic and unelected Mayor Paul, and who kept his position of power and influence somehow by NOT aspiring to getting any titles.

So, as usual, John retreated into, and found painful solace within, involuntarily and 'accidentally' acquired regret. He self observed himself glancing down at his feet, noting his tight fitting polished business shoes. He recalled the time he wore loose, scuffed by real horses cowboy boots. Then he looked out the window at fenced-in a pasture horses as they chased each other in a game invented by themselves, for themselves. Such reminded him of the days when he had ridden in the local beans and bacon rodeo circuit and on the more open range. They were the good old days, before 'settling in' to being a better paid professional who got his pick of what steaks he could eat as many times a day as he desired. And to become a responsible husband, father and American, taking care of family and country first, second and last.

John's eyeline was drawn to the photo in the newspaper of the latest victims in the Spanish Civil War. Such reminded him of the stories his father wrote back from Europe before he died in the War to End All Wars in the trenches. A father whose body was never recovered. A father who made John promise and solemn pledge to 'stay at home and live responsibly.' Because 'an educated angel like you, John, could never become a devil. Or a man who survives the kind of hell that only the sinful and ignorant of us deserve to be thrown into.'

John's assessment of himself plummeted at he noted the time, 5:15. It was the hour of his birth 40 long years ago. "What did I not do and what did I do out of cowardice or ignorance" he asked himself. The inability to answer that question, or correct it, was only amplified by the citizenry on the bus whose bodies, bellies and material (but not spiritual) needs he had looked after broke out into 'Happy Birthday', after which they gave him a gift. It was a plaque with his face on it, featuring 'Pleasanton's Most Solid Citizen' in the most generic, expressionless black print available. It was signed by what seemed to be most everyone in town. With handwriting that was...generically flawless, and soul-less.

John smiled with gratitude of course. He thanked everyone as he emerged from the bus, then stroked his perfectly combed hair and felt his cleanly shaved face. Such had a covering of short 8 hour old stubble on it, which felt like a layer of thumb tacks to his fingertips. He walked cautiously towards the door to his house, a two-story brick structure which had survived 50 years of weather challenges from mother nature.

But the sun was setting, and he had to face the light of day inside. He carefully, and as quietly as possible, opened the door, As predicted, his family was there, singing happy birthday. Rachel and Agnes emitted the song with lovingly angelic voices accompanied by smiles framed by long blonde hair flowing down past their shoulders. His wife Thelma was the cake holder. With a stylish bob and the dress she first wore on the night of their engagement, she seemed in the light of the candles to be a still pretty 24 year old farm girl. Inwardly, John sense that she was an 82 years tired, and non-expressive, old maid. Which one she was depended on how you looked at her. Yet her voice was...pleasant and, in it own limited way, loving. As for John's son Jake, his face was tense, his smile forced. His 18 year old eyes said something his mouth was not as he sung Happy Birthday in off key tones that felt more like a dirge.

At the conclusion of the (some would say anyway) free home concert, John blew out the candles. He felt a heaviness in his chest, then emitted a cough.

"Are you alright?" Thelma asked, gently caressing John's back. "You aren't smoking again, are you?"

"No," John said, finding no reason to hide the truth.

"So, what are you going to do about that cough!" Thelma insisted.

"And this," Jake whispered into John's ear, pointing to the newspaper featuring stories about the Spanish 'situation'.

John gazed at and into Jake's soul, engaging more deeply into the unspoken conversation which John had welcomed, then had halted, so many times.

"What I, and we, have to, I suppose," John said to John, in words.

"Huh?" John's two girls muttered, in unison.

“What are you talking about, John?” Thelma demanded to know.

John was silent. Thelma turned to Jake, punching him gently in the chest. “Come on, talk! I have ways of making you talk!” she said, imitating a German interrogator she had seen in a recent play about The Great War at the Des Moines theatre.

John felt his lips turn upward, his eyes opening up, his face feeling less tight as he observed Thelma being...expressive, artistic. And filled with humorous Life and Vitality. Finally! After all those years of losing, or forfeiting, the ability to be Alive big A. But it was too little, and too late.

“I have to go out,” John said after a long reflective pause, looking downward so that what he was really meaning would not be understood. “Some work I have to do that I forgot about,” he continued as he walked into his study. “I won’t be long. Really,” he promised as he closed the door behind him.

He gazed at the exit door from the study. It led to open air when he needed a smoke break or a midnight ride that the doctors said was not good for his health. But John could hear all too painfully the interrogation Thelma, then the girls, gave to Jake. “Dad has some important out of town business he has to attend to, which he’s doing, finally, for us!” John could hear Jake say. “He’ll be back soon.”

“When?” Thelma inquired.

As John exited the study, and mounted the horse that would take him to the train station, and perhaps to Madrid (if he could get on the right boat and in the right Socialist Freedom fighting company in New York), he imagined what Jake would say to stall his well-meaning inquisitors. He hoped that Jake would make the right decision for himself as to whether he would value family or the world, or somehow balance those two so often conflicting loyalties. Whatever that was.