SATURDAY NIGHT FACE

Growing up, my brothers and I heard only the juiciest snippets of the Depression-era story: flipping sticks of dynamite into the night off the back of a flatbed truck, men ripping off their own clothes with "cold madness," the murder of a good man by a Pinkerton thug.

But it wasn't until the summer of '83 that I, twenty-two at the time and in grad school, sat down across from my grandfather, William "Bill" Friedrich, with a reel-to-reel tape recorder and begged him to tell the full tale.

"Why in heaven's name would you waste your time on all that?" He gave me that sideways smile and smoky squint I'd seen all my life.

It was a family reunion of the Wisconsin Friedrichs, not long before Grandpa would fall victim to a lifetime of smoking unfiltered Luckies. We sat at a picnic table surrounded by my nieces and nephews as they played croquet and lawn darts and waited for beer-boiled brats to come off the grill. His thin white hair slicked down with Wild Root, the old man fingered a smoke, his hand gnarled from a shop floor accident during the Eisenhower years.

"How many people still alive today," I asked, "witnessed the birth of the United Auto Workers? I'd say not too many, wouldn't you?"

"How many people still alive today give a shit?" Grandpa said, the smile gone. "Unions are dinosaurs, goin' extinct too, thanks to Honda, Volkswagen and greedy company managers."

"Maybe if people understood more—"

He cut me off with a wave of resignation, the skin on the back of his hand like saddle leather. "Go ahead, flip the switch on that fool contraption."

The tape reels began their slow capture as he settled back to tell the story of the first unionized autoworkers in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Lessons from the Allen-A Plant

It was Nash Motors in the 1920s, and Charlie Nash loved his car company as much as he hated unions. Wouldn't let 'em through the gate. So we learned union from what happened at the Allen-A Hosiery plant over by the depot. That's what I said, ladies' *hosiery*.

My chum Roland McClain popped by my house one day with his chest all puffed out. "I got me a job."

Roland had been drifting a bit and loved to pull your leg anyways, so I had my doubts. "Doing just what?"

"I'm a topper." He waited, and would've waited all day for me to ask what the hell that meant, which I did.

"I work at a big old machine as long as a bus," he answered, "making ladies stockings. Me and a couple other guys sew on the tops, the part that goes up *real high*." His eyebrows bobbed.

This was just too good. "You make ladies unmentionables." I held back a big old laugh.

"Somebody's got to make them because every lady just *has* to have a pair, sometimes two pairs for the *comfortable* ladies."

I snorted. "Oh, come on."

Roland's shit-eating grin hadn't drained away one bit. "Now you listen here, Bill. Next to our machine is another one with some of the prettiest girls working you'll ever see. But you won't see them. I will, every day, and—" He stopped short and stared at my face unblinking, grinning, waiting for another *go-on*, which I gave him. "I earn twenty-one dollars a week!" he

announced and then stood there beaming like he'd snatched the last doughnut.

Well, he had me. That was damn good pay back then, and he needed it bad. He was taking care of his mom at the time and she was poorly.

So things went along for a while until Roland dropped by my house after his shift, looking worried, which wasn't his way. Even on a Sunday morning, Roland always had a Saturday night look on his face.

He told me about new machines at the plant that did twice the knitting with the same crew. "Unless fellas start wearing stockings," he said, "a bunch of workers is done for."

"Laid off?"

"That's what we figured," Roland said.

Where was he going with this? "Who's *we*?"

"All of us, the whole lot of union boys, two hundred about." Roland scratched his stubble and met my eyes. "So we walked out."

"Strike?" I was stunned. It was a dangerous new word for us, a whole new idea. But then again, workers in the '20s was back from the Great War and all kinds of horrors, telling the world they ain't getting pushed around no more, and willing to strike all over the country.

Roland's words was speeding up. "So get this: Mr. Allen hollered *You're all fired!* But then he said we can have our jobs back if we drop our union cards in an oil drum fire that's blazing at the front gate." Roland started laughing wild like. "Man, you should've heard the boys go nuts, hollering back. We wasn't hearing nothing more from the likes of him."

Around then, things started getting nasty in town because some workers stayed on strike, and some turned to scabs and crawled back to work. Scabs' kids came home from school with bloody noses. A Mick scab two houses down got his garage torched and I figured he deserved it,

but it scared his wife so bad she and the kids hopped the train for New York. Seems like every other house got a window bricked, and Roland was hard to find at night, if you catch my drift. Roland liked to say that rules was for nuns and aldermen but nothing but a nuisance for real men like hisself.

About two weeks into the strike, me and Roland was swinging on his mom's front porch eating meatloaf sandwiches when a couple cops pulled up to the curb and climbed out, looking prouder'n they had a right to in their brass-buttoned get-ups. I suspected trouble because the day before rabbling strikers had thrown rocks and bricks through windows at the hosiery plant.

They stopped on the sidewalk and cop with a lumpy face shouted up, "McClain, where you been last night?"

Roland took another bite of his sandwich and held up his hand for time. I was nervous all over again, thinking *Roland behave yourself*. Roland swallowed real slow and said, "Right here at my mom's house, officer. Why do you ask?" He was terrible polite but it was as phony as a two-dollar bill and the cops knew it.

"I'm thinking you were inciting a riot," the cop said. "What do you got to say about that?"

The part of Roland that didn't cotton to getting pushed by any man took over right then, mixed with another part that was plain-old wiseguy. He leaped up and waggled his finger at them. "I wasn't at the march, officers," he declared, cocksure. "I was too tired from the night before carrying stones from the lake and hiding them around the plant so my striking brothers'd never want for ammo."

With that, both cops went red and whipped out their clubs, starting up the front steps. But they stopped in their tracks when Roland's mom showed up on the porch in her wheelchair, skinny as a rail and skin like parchment paper, eyes all raccoony. She had a sickness where your

body turns on itself. Later, after that Yankee ballplayer Lou Gehrig got sick, they gave it his name.

Those cops took one gander at the poor woman and dropped their eyes, stupid-faced and ashamed like they shoulda been. They left the car right there and moseyed down the sidewalk to pick on another poor sap.

A week later, a company man named Harold Henderson woke up in his bed, his wife snoring beside him, and looked up at three armed men in black masks. I'm not saying one of 'em was Roland because he wouldn't own up, even to me. They tied his wrists and ankles with Allen-A silk stockings, drove him to a farm, tarred and feathered him and rolled him in a ditch.

But it didn’t do nothing.

Mr. Allen won. Strikers never got their jobs back. Know why? Because union is all or nothing. The knitters’ union bosses was weak. Scabs got away with blowing their noses on the strike orders and that didn’t square.

Over at Nash’s motor plant, we was watching all this happen and learning a few lessons for ourselves, like not doing what the knitters done, which was signing up only one of every two men to join the union. If you want to win, no working man can watch from the sidelines.

Dynamite Run

I was a line rat at Nash Motors greasing gearboxes when the AF of L – that's the American Federation of Labor – came knocking on old Charlie Nash's door.

Nash hated union people poking around so he declared he'd start his own union, a "company union," making the fox the boss of the henhouse. Then he decided he'd pay us by the piece instead of the clock. Imagine that, treating workers like circus poodles, flipping them a piece of chow for each jump through the ring. So one morning, right on cue at 11 o'clock, a hundred assemblers – including yours truly – plopped their asses on the floor and wouldn't budge.

Nash had a baby fit and hollered, "If you men don't get to work, I'm gonna lock up the front gate and pitch the keys into Lake Michigan."

That's when Roland – he was bucking hay on a dairy farm over in Caledonia by then and none too tickled about it – came up with an idea. "You know what'd be the bees' knees?"

At the time, I was having a beer at Clancy's, our favorite watering hole, with a mooncalf named Maceo Kenney who said, "Hey what?"

Roland gave a big 'ol grin. "Do you want to show Nash who's boss?"

"Damn right," I said, curious and sorta anxious at once.

Roland gave that catch-me-if-you-can grin of his. "You blow up that front gate."

I rolled my eyes. Roland was big on big ideas that turned out little. "You got dynamite handy?"

"I will," he said, "if you help me."

So him and me and Maceo take Roland's flatbed to go buy dynamite down in Indiana so's

not to attract curiosity up here. Roland knew a one-eyed fella willing to sell dangerous substances and who didn't insist on official paperwork, if you catch my meaning.

It was dark and we was coming back with the goods. Roland was driving and me and Maceo was on the flatbed with Maceo perched on this box of dynamite like it was a rumble seat. I was sleeping when Maceo swatted my shoulder and stuck his chin down the road behind us. "What do *they* want?"

It was a cop car following far back, headlights on but no siren, not yet. We didn't know it but a bank had got robbed in Valparaiso and the getaway had Wisconsin plates.

"Someone must've snitched about the dynamite," Maceo said, terror in his eyes.

"Easy does it," I said, acting calm but about messing my dungarees and trying to think my way clear of jail time. I shouted at Roland out the corner of my mouth. "Step on it!"

Roland checked his mirror and noticed why the hubbub. "Outrun a cop car? In this jalopy?"

"No, just get clear of their headlights so we can scoot this box off the edge and into the weeds," I hollered. "We'll go back later and pick it up."

Roland sped up but the cops stuck on our tail. "Forget it," I said. "They'll see it bouncing down the side of the road."

Then Maceo surprised me. The man was too dumb to know his thumb from his finger, but he lifted his butt up just a touch, enough to reach in and start flicking sticks off into the weeds, quick with his wrist like dealing cards. All the while we was staring at those cops like we got nothing in our noggins but the bouncing titties at the barn dance.

We scattered dynamite over five miles of roadway. Almost like God's winking at us, those flatfoots waited 'til the last stick was gone before they switched on the siren and pointed to the side of the road.

We was fearing we'd be hauled into Charlie Nash's fancy office dragging chains. Maceo looked fixing to bawl.

"You got nothing on us and we didn't do it," Roland mouthed off, about ready to spit.

Thank the Lord Roland didn't say what he meant by "it" because while they was snapping on handcuffs, the boss cop said we was under arrest for armed robbery. I started remembering the past couple hours and buying that dynamite instead of robbing banks. I was about to pipe up when Roland gave me a look that'd burn your eyeballs blind. I shut my trap and kept it shut the whole time the cops was driving us to the county seat.

After a time, the three of us was cooling our heels in this police station across from a grim-looking cop with a sidearm. Roland slouched with his legs stuck out, wearing the same so's-your-old-man expression he wore in grammar school. Maceo perched stiff with his hands neat in his lap like a Catholic schoolgirl. So I shot him a look wanting to say *you don't owe these goons any respect* and he looked back, glanced at his lap and unfolded one of his hands, just for a second so I could peek. His fingertips was silver with gunpowder. Then he snapped his hands tight and looked straight ahead, scared as a soaked cat.

They locked us in the calaboose. The bank tellers showed up and declared we looked nothing like the crooks. By then, the cops'd forgot to ask why we was driving across Indiana with a dynamite box full of sawdust.

By the time we got back, the union bosses was going door to door hollering to rally at the meeting hall. It seemed Nash cooked his own goose with his big talk because more'n a thousand showed up itching to put down their names. By then workers was striking in Racine and Milwaukee too, giving us all the more courage.

It worked! Nash couldn't stomach the fight. He signed a contract with the AF of L. When his

dream car, the Lafayette, rolled off the line in '34, it was the first in the US of A made by all union boys. And in '35, me and Roland – he'd hired on at the Nash plant stitching upholstery – we was standing just two rows back from the stage when this labor bigwig popped the top of a bottle of something bubbly and named us UAW Local 72. "Celebrate now, men," he said, "because the hardest work is yet to come!"

Of course he was just making words but he was a fortune teller all the same.

Hard Times

Being in a union didn't buy us respect from old Charlie Nash. More like the opposite.

But you know what? He did us a favor. We could all hate him and that brought us together. In the evenings, we'd powwow over beers at Clancy's and bitch up a storm and it took away the sting. The more we was snookered by the company, the more we hated it, and the better we got along. I could be tied in a knot and complain on the porch of Roland's mom's house, smoking Luckies and eating doughnuts. Soon enough, I'd be feeling better.

But that was before the Depression hit the hardest, like a fog bank that rolled in, suffocating, draining the spirit out of everyone.

Nobody was buying cars. So when nine of ten men was let go, we knew why, and we couldn't blame Ol' Charlie any more.

Roland lost his job. Thank God he could sleep at his mom's house.

I'll never forget that winter. So damn cold. Below zero on the mercury. Wind off Lake Michigan like knives of ice.

Five men died at night from the cold – crazy from cold – tearing off their own clothes and lying down in the snow. They found 'em like that, gray as the sky. Sweet Jesus.

Each morning, men huddled around the front gate, dancing a jig in the dark to keep warm while some holy roller led a prayer, and all for a long shot at thirty-six cents an hour. Most was turned away. Nash's guards might crack the gate for a family man, but that didn't do Roland no good. A sick mom wasn't the same as a wife and kids. By then, she couldn't roll her own wheelchair or hold a spoon or use the privy. He did everything for her.

Some men caved in on themselves. A few took off west to pick apricots. We never knew where Maceo went, maybe back to his dad's dry goods store in Omaha. Some fellas turned on their brothers, a fish knife tucked in their overcoat, watching for any guy to cut to the front of the line.

Roland changed. It must've been snowing that night because when he showed up at our table at Clancy's, his shoulders were white with it and his face was wet, and not from snowmelt but from crying.

He pulled a chair real close and sat down, intending privacy with me even though all the boys could see something was terrible wrong and was dying to find out what. I already knew from his face.

His eyes on the peanut shells on the floor, he leaned up close to my ear and whispered, "She's gone, Bill." His mom. The news smacked me even though I'd seen it coming. I figured I ought to hug him but thought twice.

He told me she'd been "fine enough" at bedtime – "fine" not meaning much for a person who couldn't say hey or scratch her own knee – but in the morning he'd found her lying in her bed looking straight ahead. "Her eyes didn't follow me as I walked to her bed, Bill."

I offered up every sorry I'd ever heard but he wasn't listening, just staring. Then he said, "They did it."

I was surprised and worried. Something about the way he said it. "Who did what?" I asked.

"The goddamn company." His face tightened. "If they hadn't fired me, I could've paid for the medicine."

I pulled back. "Oh, buddy, careful now," I said, followed by something I ought never have said and regret to this day. "No medicine was gonna stop your poor mama's slide to the grave."

He looked at me sort of sideways so I added in a hurry, "May she rest in peace."

Roland let me off the hook and changed the subject. "They're gonna pay."

“Who?" I asked, suddenly scared as hell.

"You just wait and see," he said, something black and far away in his eyes. I thought on the possibilities. No way could he reach Charlie Nash up in his ivory tower. Besides him, there was hundreds of company men, any of which deserved a chunk of blame, but nobody worth singling out. I couldn’t tell who the hell he meant.

Spies

Over the next couple months, I'd pop by his mom's house every so often. He was the only soul in those brown smelly rooms, bottles and trash here and there, which was sorrowful because she'd made a right home when she could amble about. I'd coax him out for beers and he'd play along, but he was busted up inside. He'd say nothing for long times, just a sad and loony look on his mug. Hard to explain. But hundreds was scraping for a crust of bread, mad at life, and they wasn't ones with murder in their eyes.

One evening at Clancy's, we was hunched over our brews when a fella we called Red dragged over a chair, ready to burst with news. "Some socialist politician just publicly accused Charlie Nash of violating a Senate act requiring spies be registered."

I looked at him cross-eyed. "Spies?"

Red gave one big nod. "That's what I said. Spies. *Labor* spies, damn cockroaches on the company payroll keeping the union from signing up more men."

I'd heard rumors of such vermin, but no proof in our town. I puzzled over this for a moment and then asked, "What you mean *registered*?"

"According to some law, a company is allowed to have spies," Red said, knowing full well the craziness of his tale, "as long as they're properly registered with the government." This whole time, Roland's eyes are big as pie plates.

I couldn't believe it. "What? What good is putting their goddamn names on a silly list? They should be strung up to a light post by their walnuts!"

The truth fell on us like a truckload of blankets. Spies had been buzzing around us like gnats

for years. We learned later that many'd been Pinkerton Agency detectives before Nash's people hand-picked them to work against us. The damn company had known it all, like when and where we'd meet. No wonder any man trying to be a union leader was first to get the boot.

"Sweet Mary," I said, staring into my beer for a positive sign. "We've been so dumb."

And they knew more. They knew about Roland and the brickings. They knew about tarring and feathering that company man. And they knew about a few things Roland did that I won't speak of.

That's why Roland got fired.

The whole time Red was telling his story, Roland was sitting there with his mouth open. But he wasn't stupid faced, he was thinking. As far as he figured – which wasn't too far in his state of mind – he finally had someone to blame for his mom's passing.

That is if he could find them. I wondered to myself, how do you find a spy?

But then the answer came. With the news out and Nash embarrassed in town, you'd think he would've done like any self-respecting chief and lop off the heads of a few patsy managers. But no way no how was Nash acting like he done anything wrong. Instead, he ordered his hired thugs to crawl out from under their rocks and join the payroll on the up and up, as plant security men.

Two days later, Roland taps on my back door early, his expression lit on fire, which I hadn't seen since before his mom passed.

"Hey buddy," I said. I still had shaving soap on my face.

Roland didn't say good morning or even "you look like shit." He just leaned in to make sure the missus wasn't at the stove. Then he opened the flap on this long motorman's duster he's wearing, the old style that goes down to your ankles. Hanging inside was a ladder-looking thing with his mom's yellow yarn stringing together about thirty sticks of dynamite like a jumbo pack

of Lady Fingers. Eyes all sideways he said, "Happy day."

Well holy shit. My stomach went tight on me. I slipped out to the back stoop, clicking the door shut behind me. “Where’d you get the dynamite, Roland?” I asked. But the answer didn’t matter.

He looked me right in the eye and said, "There's ten times that many sticks where these came from."

I couldn't tell if he was thinking straight. “You don't set off dynamite *pop-pop-pop* like a string of firecrackers,” I said.

He looked at me like I got two heads, closed his coat tight over the dynamite, and said, as if tutoring a toddler, "This way gets me through the gate without fuss." Then he reopened the flap, unhooked the contraption and laid it out on the ground – this thing was maybe three feet long. He rolled it up as big around as Lincoln's stovepipe hat and said singsongy with a devil grin, "This way gets the job done."

I squinted and took him in sideways. “Gets what done?” I was afraid of the answer.

“I figured out where they take their roll call and coffee breaks.”

“Who?”

“Charlie Nash’s spies, that’s who. They rally every morning early in an old railyard shack fifty yards from the east gate of the plant. I’m slipping in with first shift.”

I was scared – scared he’d fail, and more scared he’d pull it off. “You don’t work there anymore. The guard checks for passes.”

Roland shook his head. “I got that covered. Now listen up.” His eyes burned through to the back of my head. “Once I get in, I disappear in the freight cars and roll up my little surprise.” He pats the roll of explosive as gentle as a child’s head. “I’ve got twenty-five seconds of fuse. That

gives me twenty seconds to walk from the trains to the shack and–“ he paused for the drama of it – “five seconds for those Sad Sacks to make it through *the Lord is my shepherd*."

He’d made up his mind and I knew it, a terrible dread spreading in my belly. “When’s all this gonna happen?”

Roland’s face relaxed into a long-gone summer-day smile. “That gets to be your surprise, Billy Boy.”

It was about 5:45 on a clear morning, cool enough to see your breath. I was standing on line with my lunchbox when I spied Roland in his duster about ten men ahead of me strolling through the gate, holding up a pass finagled from God knows where. I broke from the line and pressed my face against the chain-link fence, my guts flopping around inside me. I wasn't gonna peep, but I sure wasn't gonna miss it neither.

Roland was walking head down, hands in his pockets.

“Roland,” I was trying to whisper and shout all at once. I was torn. I wanted him to stop, but I didn’t want to put the guards on him. If someone searched him, he’d be dead to rights.

I didn’t have time to ponder. Roland was about halfway to the rail cars when a big German Pinkerton dick named Shulman came out of nowhere. This galoot had six inches and fifty pounds on my friend.

"What you doing, McClain?" Shulman hollered. Those two had a history together, and it wasn’t pretty.

"Day pass," Roland shouted back and picked up his pace.

"Not here, you ain’t," Shulman replied. He started strutting to intercept him, stern faced, slapping a big 'ol billy club into his hand.

They met up in a patch of open railyard, barking like junkyard dogs. I got mighty nervous

'cause Roland always took a fight ‘til one or the other was lying in the dirt.

By this time, workers was lining up on the fence for a big show, whooping and whistling. I was wondering what would happen if Shulman’s club clipped the boomers.

Pretty soon those two was pushing and shoving. Roland took a swing, which was all Shulman needed to pull back that club. Roland ducked but Shulman came in low and smacked him hard just above the ankle. Roland landed on his duff in the dirt and clutched his leg, grimacing.

That's when his coat flapped open.

Shulman was standing over him, his mouth like a fish. He pointed his club at the goods, yellow yarn and all, and then at Roland's face. Roland shook off the pain, looked up with a big ol' smart aleck smile and raised his voice so every man along that fence could hear. “Hey Fritz!” He paused a second and took in his audience, grinning like a lunatic. “Why don’t you shove that billy club up your fat Prussian ass?”

The rest will never leave me, even if I forget which way is up. That goon standing over Roland turned his head toward the guardhouse just a smidge, like he was about to take a step to get help. But he paused, no more'n a second, then turned his head back, and swung that club with both arms right into Roland's forehead. You could tell from the gasps, every man along that fence heard that *crack,* like whacking a softball over the fence. Roland fell back to the ground in a heap, like a pile of old clothes.

They put the killer Shulman up before a judge. But Nash hired fancy lawyers who talked about Shulman protecting all the workers, and how was he to know there wasn't a pushbutton detonator tucked inside Roland’s coat.

His Honor ruled the killing of Roland Albert McClain justified.

Grandpa stopped talking and just looked at me straight, as if all the lessons of his tale were completely obvious to anyone with half a wit. But I wasn't quite there. I needed more, just not sure what.

"So what happened after that?" I asked.

My grandfather reached out and punched a button on my tape recorder, but it was the fast-forward. The machine whirred. I found the stop and clicked it.

"What was you expecting?" the old man said.

"I don't know."

"A happy ending? That we taught the company a lesson? Sorry buddy. No happy ending for Roland." But then William "Bill" Friedrich pondered while he traced a scratch in the picnic table with an arthritic finger. Kids squealed nearby. I thought of all that remained for my nieces and nephews to learn. Some stories shouldn't be told until long after the days of innocence had ended.

"There was one blessing in the whole sorry affair," Grandpa spoke slowly. "That his mother had already passed and wouldn't know what they did to the boy who never left her side." He looked up at me, a piece of him still standing along that fence, fingers clenching the chain-link, staring at what was left of his friend lying in the dirt of a railyard.

The End