
Chapter One
Still Born

The prodigal was in full flight. Nervously pacing the deck of the steamer, C.F. Tietgen, Matti Markko searched the crowd standing below on the dock at Copenhagen Harbor. Since crossing the Kyrö River he'd been looking over his shoulder, anxious over the possibility that other members of the black-clad Heränneet, "the Awoken," would follow and return him to Ylistaro to reclaim his rebellious, wayward soul. But, other than chaining him to a life of ultra conservative religious orthodoxy, Jesus hadn't done much for Matti and, like Cain of old, he was running from the face of God. Resigning himself to never again look upon the dark, fir forests of his beloved Finland a deep depression settled over mind and spirit. Impatient for the steamship to slip her mooring, he was oblivious to the other 2,300 passengers hoping to "whittle" gold in America. In his mind he had abandoned his faith and, for a Finn, that was a big deal. From days of antiquity when altars were built on mountain tops or near living springs, when sacrifices were offered to Ukko, Lord of time and space and Tuoni, Lord of the nether world, Finns have "lived close to nature and have always been open to the mysterious suggestions and whisperings of the spirit world." But God wasn't whispering anything Matti wanted to hear and he'd suffocated under a gospel of strict piety long enough. Resembling present day Amish, he'd finally grown weary of "wearing the uniform."

But military-aged men in June of 1913 had bigger things to worry about. Finland was a Grand Duchy under the Russian Czar and would remain so for four, more, agonizing years. The coming revolution in Russia would provide opportunity for Finnish independence taking the lives of 30,000 Finns most by execution or prison camp internment. Born in 1885, Matti was 15 when Czar Nicholas II declared his "February Manifesto" against Finland. Approved by the emperors under solemn oath, Nicholas removed many of the rights guaranteed under Finland's Constitution. He also added the compulsory Military Service Law mandating conscription in the Russian army for every Finnish male. For centuries, Finland had been a wasteland of blood serving as the prime battlefield between Sweden and Russia. With 400 Russian soldiers bivouacked in his hometown there was no reason for Matti to believe that anything would change. The Czar exiled the more active political leaders and a period of general suspicion of peaceful citizens resulted. Such stimuli spawned an exodus of more than 320,000 Finns, driven from their ancestral homes to "the land of the free and home of the brave." ⁱⁱ

Arriving at Ellis Island on June 18th, 1913, he and fellow travelers from the villages of Isokyrö and Kälviä were headed for the growing Finnish settlement at Ashtabula Harbor along the cold shores of Ohio's Lake Erie. Formed in the 1870s the first community census counted fifty men, three women and seven young children. They were part of the Finnish section gangs laying track for the Ashtabula, Youngstown and Pittsburgh Railroad in Ashtabula Harbor. ⁱⁱⁱ Notations of their growing community began to surface in local newspapers. "Among our railroad operatives is to be found a considerable number of Finlanders - a class of people that have but recently made their appearance among us. Like their neighbors, the Sweeds [sic], they are a hardy set of men, steady of purpose and habit, frugal, sober and industrious. If the specimen among us is a fair sample of the race, their emigration to the country will prove highly advantageous to the country." ^{iv}

Like my grandfather most of the immigrants were single, adult males employed as dockworkers and longshoreman unloading iron ore ships sailing the Great Lakes. ^v Unskilled laborers from a Scandinavian economy of forest and farm, they bent their backs to a vocational

nightmare; "a life of death by inches" as described by a local reporter.^{vi} At 10½ cents per ton a man had to shovel 50 tons of ore per day to make five dollars. That's 50, one-ton ore buckets requiring 120 shovels per bucket at 20 pounds of ore per shovel, day after day after day.

The lack of decent living quarters and the heavy demand for accommodations drove the Finnish immigrants into the boarding houses. Local newspapers described a house as "occupied by a party of thirteen Finlanders among whom are two women. It is a small two-story structure, about 16 x 20 feet and was originally designed for a store. In this dirty, little house, destitute of furniture and all the comforts of life were housed and fed these men and women."^{vii} Ashtabula Harbor didn't have a sewerage system on Bridge Street, where many Finns lived, until 1886 and good drinking water didn't arrive until the following year. Typhoid and diphtheria were the result of conditions described in the Ashtabula Telegraph on August 15, 1885: "The houses on Bridge Street are built on a side hill and are crowded with inmates, as many as forty living in some of the houses. Directly in front is a ditch and into it flows the filth and refuse matter from these houses." It wasn't a life suited for families and, until the 1890's, there weren't many of them around.

Families weren't generally designed for mutual enjoyment. They were sources of labor and, for the men, sources of comfort when needed. At the end of a day most of the men didn't go home. Drinking heavily, they spent the evenings at Finnish saunas dotting the harbor landscape telling nostalgic stories about a country they couldn't wait to get out of only a few years before. Gathering with their "old country" buddies to sweat out "the poisons" of iron ore dust, they threw water on hot stones, punished themselves with oak branches to stimulate blood flow and then ran out to roll in snow or jump in the partially frozen harbor waters. In 1916, three years after Matti's arrival, a privately funded census recorded 1,115 adult men, 1,063 adult women and 1,713 children. Grueling labor and deplorable conditions didn't prevent them from breeding, the resulting children paying a severe price. While no single set of statistics can accurately describe the soul of a group of people, we may certainly discover something of underlying principles by examining the value placed on their children. The terrible truth is that

funerals were the one occasion when children took center stage in the Ashtabula Harbor Finnish community.

There were years when 75% of the funerals held in the community were for the little ones. In other years, children one year and younger easily made up more than half the total deaths. At the turn of the century every fifth child in Ashtabula Harbor and vicinity died before reaching maturity. Epidemics remained a scourge in immigrant communities. The deadliest, known as "children's cholera," accounted for one third of the deaths. "Standard" afflictions of poxes, whooping cough, diphtheria and an inflammation of the cerebral membrane known as "brain fever," killed hundreds more. Children were expendable, second-class citizens who didn't get medical dollars. Parents lay them on a bed in the corner and let them wither away. If they got better, fine. If they didn't, fine. "We'll make more." This mindset was a carryover from Finland where the tragic numbers were higher still.

The cultural imprint resulting from all of this found its expression in the words of Elis Sulkanen, an activist in the Finnish American labor movement in the early 1900s. Speaking of their early years in America he said,

"We felt as though we would live endlessly in this youthful period. Family ties seemed frightening and constrictive although we certainly fell in love and got married. We tried every means imaginable to avoid increases in the size of the family since the family tied the mother and father to the cradle and increased our responsibilities intolerably. We had no time for these broad family responsibilities. We needed the time for far more important activities - the building of a better world." ^{viii}

In their "better world" babies seemed an impediment and building a world *with them* an idea beyond their grasp. How can you build "a better world" when you litter it with broken and abandoned children forced to live below the level of their privilege as human beings? When this kind of "driven-ness" contaminates a people, its consequences are tallied for generations. Twenty-five years later, an incest-polluted gene pool from

Kentucky would move toward a nexus with these better world builders excreting another trail of incomplete children with their "intolerable" responsibilities. They were great pioneers but they were lousy parents. Markko by name, I have none of their blood, yet all their diseases.

"I was stillborn. My parents didn't want me but I was still born." In my more cynical moments I've described myself as someone who "*crawled out of the primordial ooze only to be raised by jackals.*" My mother was a fifteen-year-old child when she met my biological father. I finally met him when in my mid 30's. Measuring these words carefully he is most succinctly described in that meeting as an ignorant, filthy, snaggle-toothed, junk dealer. With his day already inconvenienced by a genetic accident, he didn't bother to wash the thick grime from every exposed inch of his skin. And he knew I was coming. Sitting nervously in his living room we made ineffective small talk until he pointed to a photo on the table and thoughtlessly ventured, "That's my oldest son. . ." Before he could speak the name I reminded him, "No he's not." But he required a reminder. I had never been in his thoughts. At least I get to attend the annual Father and Bastard Picnic. There's that silver lining.

But I doubt my mother cared anything about his parenting skills, looks or station in life. She was driven by the near-sighted energy of anguish to escape home by any means necessary. Sexually molested by her own father in Kentucky until she was fourteen, it damaged her forever. She has never been able to develop a healthy, nurturing relationship with any man including her own sons. Kedrick was a bridge to her, nothing more. He wanted nothing to do with me and, as it turns out, neither did my mother. She gave me to her sister, Edith, living in the same, small town of Fairbury, Illinois. With apologies to Doctor Laura [*"I am my kid's Mom"*]; I am my mother's abandoned child.

An old copy of the Fairbury Blade labeled the Illinois town, "The Queen city of the Corn Belt." Sitting squarely on the ancestral grounds of the Kickapoo Indians, Fairburians take their prairie heritage seriously. Their polling places are still referred to as Indian Grove 1, 2, 3, etc. Made up of a few thousand agrarian folk, Fairbury's one claim to fame is that it has no claim to fame. Pretty much nothing of world interest ever happens there. While the motto of the Association of Commerce is,

"Pride and Progress at its Best" you still can't find a hotel room in Fairbury after 145 years. You may need to go all the way up to the "big city" of Pontiac for that.

Nothing much ever changes. The summer still begins with a concert in Central Park from the 33rd Illinois Regiment Civil War Band followed by the annual ice cream social of The Prairie Central Music Boosters. Did I mention they're proud of their prairie heritage? Kids from Prairie Central High School participate in the Prairie Farmers 4-H Club, holding meetings the third Monday of every month at the United Methodist Church. Other than that, most teens just look at each other all summer long trying to find a clever way to say, "I don't know. What do *you* wanna do?" Filled with the business of dusty cattle and prairie crops, summer closes with the Labor Day races on the quarter mile, dirt track of the American Legion Speedway. Sounds like a decent place to grow up. Particularly when you're raised by a woman who wants you. Perhaps the Fates were being kind to me, after all. Perhaps the comedian was correct: "We're born naked, wet and hungry and it's all downhill from there." The jury was still out on both counts.

Reported to be a "sickly child," my aunt Edith would later recount how she spoon-fed me warm milk and honey because I was unable to eat solids. She was the only mother I knew: from the hospital directly to her heart with no stop between. Her son Bobby was like my big brother. Shielded from the world in a rural haven, I sat on the front steps and watched a car pull up in the front yard. It was late summer, 1950 and my two and a half year old rug was about to be pulled from under me.

Though unknown to me the tiny, vociferous brunette stepping from the car was well known to Edith. It was her sister; my mother. Living in Chicago she met and married a man just out of the Navy who, for a while, worked as a bodyguard for a crime figure in the city. For whatever reason her 17-year-old brain conjured, it was time to reclaim her baggage. Prior notice was deemed unimportant. "Pandemonium" is how the scene was later described. My aunt wept as she painted a picture of the forceful removal of a suddenly traumatized child. Kneeling to embrace me for the last time, she peeled my clutching arms from around her neck and gently forced them into an X across my chest. With

tears bathing a forced smile she stood up, turned me around and pushed me into my mother's arms. As a child-mom dragged her protesting bundle toward an idling car and a doubtful future, Edith walked through the door of her home and closed it behind her, never looking back. The woman my brain knew as mom was gone. I had no idea who this stranger was. I still don't. Thirty years later I fearfully approached that same door. Before I could knock a thin, frail woman threw it open, embraced me and sobbed uncontrollably on my neck. She recognized me coming up her sidewalk. It was the only time we would see one another. She died the next year.

About five foot two inches tall, with hair as wild and dark as his moods, Matti Markko's son was a violent man from violent stock. Working his entire life as a mechanic or maintenance man, a well-hardened fist to the face was his method for dealing with all disciplinary issues. He kept it simple. The word "nurture" wasn't in his vocabulary. Then again, little else was. He never bothered learning to read beyond a second grade level until knowing the Bible became important to him as an adult. Like most of us, he received his parenting skills by osmosis, from his father.

A decade after moving to Ashtabula county from Finland, Matti left his wife and three children behind to go build a better world. The concentration of immigrants in Ashtabula Harbor provided a labor mart from which workers were exported to other areas of the country.^{ix} Hoboing his way across America he worked on railroads and in lumber camps of the Northwest, leaving his wife to scrape a life together as best she could. Until she died. Learning of her death and knowing his children needed him, he simply turned them over for adoption. The Holcomb family in Conneaut adopted my uncle Eino and his two sisters, leaving the family farm to them when they passed on. In 1968 a winemaker bought the property for \$15,000. Planting the first successful growth of European *Vinifera* vines east of the Mississippi, the property became the birthplace for Markko Wines, well known among domestic grape growers.

Remarrying and settling in Chicago, Matti spawned a large brood possessed of a few dark spots. Mandatory Sunday school attendance in a storefront, Finnish Mennonite church in Chicago did little to gentle

their souls. They grew up tough and scrappy. Even the women. Correct that, *especially* the women. Most of my aunts and uncles clawed their way out of that hard-times world, becoming contributors to their communities, respectable people with healthy families of their own. But Gilbert stayed messed up. Dropping out of school in the ninth grade he lied about his age and went into the Navy at fifteen. This wasn't the politically correct Navy of today. This was the Navy spewed from the Second World War, a "randy" group, at best. *This* was his high school and *they* were his professors. As negative as all that sounds he was still a significant upgrade from the junkman.

1950 saw the tail end of a cultural migration that funneled poor people from the rural South to northern, industrialized cities like Chicago. Blacks and whites settled into their own communities, many bringing their ghettos with them. Drummond Street on Chicago's North side was a concrete misnomer. One block off Clark Street, just south of Wrigley Field, it wasn't a street. It was an alley with the service entrance for the local Cadillac garage 20 feet from our door. The fenced-in schoolyard of Alcott School marked the end of the alley and the beginning of the wide world. Before turning seven, I was arrested twice by the Chicago police for breaking and entering. Though never proven the police felt my mother taught me how to rifle apartments looking for valuables. I do know she still thinks it funny remembering the top of my seven-year-old head peeking over the top of a stolen, steering wheel. It came with a car wrapped around it. My brother Randy, born while I was in Fairbury, was on the floor working the pedals. As a parent I can't imagine thinking such a thing funny, even in hindsight.

Now, you know, any story like this worth its salt must include the obligatory Litany of Nonsense most notable for its incessant use of "I". So here goes. Don't hate me. Scouring the fire escapes, porches and entryways of an alley environment I stole pop, milk and beer bottles, redeeming them at the local Mom-n-Pop store for cash. At two cents a bottle for most and a nickel for some, a couple hundred bottles gave a kid some meaningful ice cream and candy money. I often broke into Alcott School stealing monies raised for class projects including the Red Cross or Tuberculosis Society. Randy, 18 months my younger, wreaked havoc in the neighborhood beating every other kid into submission,

taking whatever they had that he wanted. I had my first sexual experience at age seven, a magical year, with an older woman of nine. The best thing happening at home was watching Gilbert harvest commode-bound-rat-babies [sounds like the name of a heavy metal band] from their nest beneath the pantry floor. It was a hoot. That momma should have taught those babies not to squeak away their position. Offended rat advocates may now stop reading. Our world was an impoverished, white trash ghetto destined for demolition within 15 years.

Sisters Laura, Esther and youngest brother Matt all followed within four years. Ultimately, eight children by four men called her mom. At night, Gilbert was forced to lock his cash in a desk drawer because she was known to steal every dime left foolishly about. Quietly prying the desk open in the middle of the night, she took the cash from his entire paycheck and disappeared, leaving nothing for her husband and five children until the next payday. Always open to a good time, she took vacations with other men calling Gilbert for bus money when the party was over. He was trying to hold his family together without a single clue as to how to go about that. He couldn't be father *and* mother so mom's inability to say "no" meant we were left, occasionally, with the babysitter.

Paula was an obese, toothless old woman who, more than once, lined us up on the couch and then peeled off her soiled underwear. Dropping them to the floor she squatted down and urinated on them in front of us. All together now, "eeeeuuww." We learned to hide behind that same couch when bill collectors came. They learned yelling, "*I know you're in there,*" means absolutely nothing to people who don't know where they are: "Who, me?" Randy, Laura and I all slept on the same, lived-on-by-generations-of-children mattress. Sorry for the excessive hyphenation. I didn't want to use the word "urine" again. As far as we kids knew, everybody lived like this. This was it. This was life. And I've omitted the truly creepy stuff. These were the materials from which we were to build. Worse still, the foundation was never right.

Moving just after my seventh birthday, none of the other kids came along. They were all placed in foster homes and I became a "latch-key" kid; spending the day alone, listening to the radio. Gilbert had his own

weighty issues to deal with and was incapable of parenting alone. It wasn't a matter of desire. It was a matter of ability. Ignorance, married to violence, doesn't equip anyone with the tools for model parenting. He did what he had to do. In April of 1956, just before my eighth birthday, the agents from children's services in Chicago showed up to remove me for placement in a foster home. My mother was there that day. She stood at the top of the stairs while I clutched hold of the railing, screaming for her to stop them. It was the exact, same picture painted for me by my aunt Edith when my mother showed up to drag away a screaming toddler.

ⁱ The Americanization of the Finns
John Wargelin, A.M.,
President of Suomi College and Theological Seminary

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ⁱⁱⁱ John I. Kolehmainen, [Founding of the Finnish Settlements in Ohio](#)

^{iv} Ashtabula Telegraph, November 16, 1872.

^v [Reino Keroa](#), Published in *Turun Historiallinen Arkisto* 46(1990), p. 71-84

^{vi} *Conneaut (Ohio) Post Herald*, May 31, 1899.

^{vii} Ashtabula Telegraph, March 17, 1876

^{viii} Elis Sulkanen, *Amerikan Suomalaisen Työväenliikkeen Historia*. Fitchburg, Massachusetts, 1951, p. 168

^{ix} John I. Kolehmainen, [Founding of the Finnish Settlements in Ohio](#)