

Nightmare in Nanking

By Tony Garel-Frantzen

The following story is inspired by actual events. Some names, characters, scenes, businesses, incidents, events, and locations have been fictionalized for dramatic purposes.

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NIGHTMARE
in
NANKING

TONY
GAREL-
FRANTZEN

To Helene, Anna, Adam, Alex, Sadie and Dylan.

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*A child is like a piece of paper on
which every person leaves a mark.*

CHINESE PROVERB

F O R E W O R D

On a warm May morning in 1941 we reverently placed Wilhelmina Vautrin's bodily remains in the ground and delivered my sister into the hands of God. It seems like only yesterday that I heard that congenial voice of hers on the telephone from China. Has it really been twenty years now? Two decades can pass in the time it takes to swat a pesky gnat. Perhaps it is childish of me, but back in 1941 I got a certain joyousness imagining how God might have welcomed Wilhelmina home. Still do to this day. But first, about her name. My parents branded her Wilhelmina after her maternal grandmother. We quickly shortened that mouthful to "Minnie" because as a toddler I could not pronounce it, let alone ever learn to spell it. How did I imagine the Lord welcomed Minnie home, you asked? Well, in my mind's eye, Minnie was hoisted onto the shoulders of heavenly white-winged angels and whisked away to a happy new life in the eternal hereafter.

Sometimes, I imagine having a conversation about all this with the Lord above. The conversation is more like a one-sided rant. It goes pretty much like this:

"Please forgive my impertinence, Lord, but you damn well know your servant Minnie deserved a better ending. What was wrought on that poor woman—by your own hands I should add—well, where is the mercy in that? Minnie was just an otherwise ordinary woman. She used the unique gifts you bestowed on her—virtue, patience, and a take-charge attitude in any situation—to wrestle with the unimaginable turn of events you laid in her path."

Hold on, there's some more.

"Lord, some of us still don't understand why you cursed her so. Do you ever feel remorse for having made it so?" I would ask. "*What* exactly did you have in mind? I apologize for such queries. But that is how I see it, and that is how I call it, Lord." Yep, that's what I would say.

If I could ever get His attention.

After you learn more about Minnie, you may see irony in the idea that her final resting place involved a box.

My sister was born in an era when men set limits on a woman's role in society. Men—well maybe *not all men* but most—did their darnedest to constrain women in boxes. These boxes had labels like wife, mother, homemaker, seamstress, cook, and wet nurse. From the get-go, my sister Minnie resisted all these labels and the limitations associated with them.

She resisted being put in a box.

Minnie struggled all her life to break through made-up fences that tried to corral her. Perhaps she was a product of the age in which we grew up. The inventions of our time made the impossible seem possible. Limitations be damned, that's how they made us feel. We believed that if someone only put enough thinking and elbow grease into a problem, a solution would come from it. That's how it seemed to us as children. The gilded age, they called it, for so many wonders and innovations made that era golden. It might be hard for you now to imagine life without some of your favorite gizmos. But there were times in my life where one day we did *not* have something, and the next we could not imagine life *without it*. The list of such things is as long as a midwestern day in summertime. I refer you to such wonders as indoor toilets, light bulbs, telephones, radios, moving pictures, automobiles, airplanes, oh, and so much more.

Yep, my sister rebelled against being boxed in. Take marriage, for example. Minnie refused to wed. Not that there weren't suitors from time to time—I know of at least one, although I wouldn't have wished that questionable fellow on my worst enemy's sister. Minnie would have none of it.

“Louis, marriage would shackle me from discovering all the adventures waiting over the horizon,” Minnie told me on more than one occasion. “Marriage?” she asked. “You might as well slap leg irons on me!”

Minnie chafed at the idea of being wholly dependent on a man. So much so that she smashed through stereotypes, slipping her way out of being captured by all those dang boxes. That is how Minnie

lived her life. So, on that May morning in the cemetery so many years ago, I wouldn't have been surprised if someone tugged on my sleeve and stammered, "L-L-Louis, Louis! Look yonder! Minnie's casket has started wiggling and shaking like a troop of monkeys are inside trying to get out. The lid looks like it might come off."

"Naw, that's just Minnie," I would have said calmly. "If I were a betting man, I'd wager nobody will keep my sister confined in that box for long."

Now, here we are again in the month of May—20 years later—listening to our new president tell us we are going to put a man on the moon. Why go to the moon, the man asked rhetorically? He answered himself. Might as well ask why climb the highest mountain? Why did Lindbergh fly an airplane across the Atlantic? Because we *choose* to do these things, the president answered. We choose to go to the moon and do the other things. Not because they are easy, but because they are hard.

That was Minnie. No decent human should have had to endure what Minnie Vautrin faced in China in the late 1930s. Certainly not a kind soul who gave her life selflessly to making the fortunes better for Chinese women, teen-agers, and girls. But endure it Minnie did. She never shied away from chores, from hard work, or from her obligations. She *chose* to endure them. Until she could no longer. "Louis, quitters never win, and winners never quit," Minnie used to tell me when I was going through a rough patch. Well, my sister was always a winner in my book. Always will be.

I never knew my mother. She died shortly after I was born. Minnie took over as the woman of the house, even as a little girl. For me, she was mother, and sister combined into one.

What finally did in my sister Minnie? In the end, I guess, life's rough spots were even too tough for her. You know our father, the town blacksmith where we grew up, was a wise man. He was fond of the saying: "Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hate."

Father offered this saying whenever Minnie or I were red-in-the-face mad about someone we thought had wronged us.

Nary a week goes by still that I don't think about those words. All these years later I still struggle to make sense of Minnie's last act on God's green earth. You say the key is forgiveness, Father? Where did I put that key? Seems I can never find it when I need it. I need it now.

Many tried in vain to put Minnie in a box. Nobody would have guessed the person who finally succeeded would be Minnie herself.

Louis Vautrin

May 1961

PART I:
75 YEARS EARLIER

CHAPTER 1: A NEW BEGINNING

A stranger departed St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1892 bound for the wintry backstreets of Berlin, Brussels, Lisbon, Prague, Paris, Vienna, and London before crossing the Atlantic Ocean toward the east coast of the United States. The stranger first came to the attention of Americans during the Christmas holidays that year. This proved to be an altogether fitting coincidence because the stranger conferred a gift—albeit a dubious one—on each soul visited. Then it was on to Chicago, St. Louis, and various territories as far west as Kansas traveling by major roads, rivers, and railway tracks—the same avenues Americans used to move about from city to city. At first, the stranger generated scant notice and offered little cause for concern.

This would not last for long.

Precisely six years before, the sun rose slowly over the gentle slopes and sweeping valley of Woodford County, Illinois, as it had for millions of mornings. A new day's light shone on Walnut Creek—a small stream that wrapped like a ribbon around groves of 200-year-old oak trees still standing despite countless tempests sent by nature to test their strength. More than a half century later, I can close my eyes and see the endless tall prairie grasses undulate and hear their swishing in the June breeze. It was a calm like no other I've ever known interrupted only occasionally by the gentle babbling of water, the wail of a wolf, or wild turkeys gobbling in the ebony shade of the nearby forest.

The glorious possibilities of that new day summoned ninety-seven souls from slumber in and around my hometown Secor—a central Illinois burg named after an obscure engineer who drew up plans for the railroad extension that skirts Secor's northern edge. This was

a place where visitors marveled at a multitude of foliage—from the woody sumac with its bright clusters of red berries, to the sycamore maple and its five-point leaves. Like the town's bountiful and varied plant life, the lineage of Secorites offered an endless assortment and variety.

Half the states in the Union and as many nations in the Old World gave up their best stock to populate—indigenous residents might say *invade*—this part of the country. Secor was home to refined but stiff-mannered Englishmen, the bonny and fair-headed Scots (whose own country was the destination for waves of invaders), the warm-hearted Irishmen who preferred their share of the abundant local corn crop to be served from the business end of a distillery, and the good-natured but often incorrigible Germans. Despite their differences, all were drawn here by a single promise: the world's richest soil and the crop-friendly climate.

Mixed among this potpourri of people was one genial Frenchman with an uncanny ability to butcher the English language.

Locals called the Frenchman "Elf." Asked where he hailed from, Elf quoted from the Book of Proverbs: "Iron shape iron, one man shape another," he would tell you, displaying a poor command of the language compounded by a pinched nasal French accent. "Marco Polo shaped me. Marco Polo bring me to Secor," Elf confidently asserted.

It was a point well taken. The thirteenth century explorer inspired generations of Frenchmen to set forth on grand adventures searching for a faster route to lucrative commerce and trade opportunities with countries in the Orient—particularly the country the French call *La Chine*. As they searched for quicker passage, explorers like Lasalle, Marquette, Joliet, and other French missionaries discovered, settled, and developed new communities in America where they labored tirelessly to inculcate Christianity. The French were among the first non-indigenous humans to step foot on this central Illinois prairie where a virtually unlimited fresh water supply, abundant timber, and the aforementioned rich soil of Woodford County offered a haven for pioneers that was hard to pass up.

Secorites knew better than to pick a fight with the Frenchman's "man shapes man" theory. Partly because the theory held up. Partly because Elf was bigger than most of them.

A thickset towering man, Elf's beefy hands resembled large ballpeen hammers. He was built like an oak tree thanks to strapping ancestors. The Frenchman wore his mahogany hair long and tied it smartly in a ponytail. The only thing rougher than the calluses on his fingers was his command of the English language. Nevertheless, Elf carried himself in a proud manner and rightly so. Even now in the nippy early morning air, Elf was damp with honest sweat from hard physical work that commenced with the morning ringing of the village bell and concluded only when the sun simmered itself out as it sank below the horizon.

The Frenchman was Secor's blacksmith. The Frenchman was my father.

Born Edwin Louis Vautrin of Lorraine, France in 1854, the nickname "Elf" was bestowed on him by accident the morning he opened his blacksmith shop in Secor for the first time. Folks say a gentleman walked up just as Elf finished hanging the sign over the entrance to his new establishment on Gilman Street. Perhaps the visitor was nearsighted. Perhaps he was one of those Irishmen and had indulged a tad too much of distilled corn.

Either way, the visitor misread the shop's shingle. Instead of E.L.V.—the abbreviation for the proprietor's name—the visitor claimed he saw "E.L.F."

"Hey, looky here!" the visitor shouted as he pointed up to the sign. "Secor's new blacksmith is owned by an Elf!"

The nickname for a supernatural entity stuck with him. But there was nothing supernatural about how my father happened to settle in tiny Secor.

In 1880 at age 26, Elf bid *au revoir* to the forested hills of his family's peasant farm home in Lorraine in northeastern France. He set forth on a 12-week, four-thousand-mile journey with little else than the clothes on his back, his family's best wishes, and a small stake from his father for expenses. Elf had no friends and no home in America. But he had a plan: secure an apprenticeship in a small

midwestern town where the building of railroads meant steady work for a “smithy.” Elf boarded a transatlantic ocean liner crowded with livestock, cargo, and assorted passengers and he endured the oceanic elements tucked in a small corner on deck. The ship crossed the Atlantic Ocean for the New World by way of Cuba and the port of New Orleans where a sweaty paddle wheel steamer turned north and puffed its way up the Mississippi River. Elf stuffed himself among more cattle, passengers, and hot boilers for the 677-mile ride along the Mississippi to St. Louis arriving at long last in the bustling town of Peoria, Illinois.

For the next four years, my father toiled, ate, sweat, and lived alongside a master blacksmith named Morgan until he successfully completed his apprenticeship and claimed the coveted journeyman status.

One day Morgan told Elf about an elderly smithy who owned a shop in a little town called Secor about 27 miles to the east. The blacksmith’s business there boomed thanks to construction of that railroad line extension I mentioned earlier. The tracks ran from near Peoria west to Oquawka some 10 miles up the river from Burlington, Iowa. “The gent’s older now, hard of hearing, and may want to sell,” Morgan told Elf. “Could be your start in the trade.”

That “gent” is important to my story because he was Jacob Lahr, my grandfather on my mother’s side. Grandpa and my grandmother, Wilhelmina, arrived in America from Frankfort-on-the-Main in 1850. They had two children—John, 22, and Pauline, 20—the mother of me and my sister Minnie. Jacob Lahr was one of Secor’s first settlers and he was the second person to build a house there. The story I was told is Grandpa borrowed money to purchase 20 acres at \$15 a piece plus tools, a wagon, and a month’s worth of supplies. Grandpa’s cabin measured twenty feet square and rose two stories high. Each level had a single room. He built it by hand, meticulously cutting small round logs and daubing each with mortar to seal the walls and roof. Grandpa fashioned two doors and two windows—the latter consisting of four panes of glass measuring nine by twelve inches. Where he got glass in those days and in that rural area is anyone’s guess now.

A chimney made of mitered sod rose up above the roof line where it vented various vapors from the fireplace below.

I've been told that Secorites always wondered why Grandpa nearly broke his back clearing an acre of land to plant corn even though not far away sat thousands of treeless acres with nary a stick nor a stone. What they didn't know was my grandpa hailed from a densely wooded part of Germany.

"If trees won't grow on the land, then neither will corn," Grandpa reasoned.

Grandpa learned the blacksmith trade in the Old Country. By the time he set up shop in Secor, Jacob could scratch-build or mend any iron or steel implement for frontier survival using his brains, his hearth, and the basic tools of the trade. Jacob's reputation spread quickly. Neighbors, railroad employees, and a daily stream of travelers passing through on their way from here to wherever brought him their broken hoes, handcarts, horseshoes, plows, rakes, missing tines, kitchen utensils—you name it. Jacob worked morning to night and kept detailed records of job orders, payments received, and debts owed by his customers. Self-employment freed Jacob to negotiate his own compensation. Depending on his needs, Grandpa accepted cash, traded goods, or bartered for services with craftsmen skilled in other trades.

Time passed and with it so did much of Grandpa's virility and faculties. After two decades of the non-stop clanging of sledgehammers and iron against iron in his shop, Jacob developed hearing loss, a slight hunch, and knuckles gnarled with rheumatism.

Despite Grandpa's best effort, the demands of business got the better of him and the quality of his work suffered. As Secorites dropped his services, so did Grandpa's income. At first, he and Grandma Wilhelmina took in boarders to keep up with bills and weekly expenses. At one point, they shared their home with nine members of one family and two railroad workers. It was as crowded as it was humiliating to the Lahrs. One morning, just as Jacob feared he reached the end of his rope sharing his house with strangers, there came the sound of voices arguing out on Gilman Street.

Something about how Marco Polo was responsible for one of them being in Secor.

Elf Vautrin had arrived in town. Anxious to present a letter of introduction from Morgan, my father wasted no time locating Jacob's house behind the blacksmith shop. He knocked on the hand-hewn oak door.

Jacob answered and Elf awkwardly handed him his letter. Before Jacob could finish reading, Elf spoke.

"My name Vautrin. I buy your shop?" Elf asked in his awkward English.

Jacob gave him a disapproving once-over. "Did you say *buy* my shop? Where did you hear this shop is for sale?" Jacob said loudly.

"Morgan tell me," Elf replied.

Jacob scratched his head and looked down at the letter taking a minute to read it. A wave of recognition transformed his scowl to a very wry smile. When he finished reading, Grandpa looked up at Elf.

"I know this Morgan. He is a good man. But I won't sell my life's business to just any Frenchie who shows up," Grandpa barked. "You will have to prove you are worthy, because I have a town full of folks who trust me. I won't be letting them down by selling to just anyone. So, I'm gonna give you a little test first. You're welcome to sleep over there in the barn. We start first thing tomorrow."

Grandpa turned away and Elf watched the heavy oak door close behind him.

Shortly after dawn, Elf roused himself from a bed of straw, hurriedly ate a bowl of flummery brought by Wilhelmina, and walked forty steps from the barn to Jacob's shop. Jacob carefully eyed Elf as he set about lighting the forge fire. Word had spread a new blacksmith was in town at old man Lahr's shop. The day was off and running. A man named Gilbertson brought a team of horses that needed shodding—as soon as possible he insisted. Gilbertson, anxious to return to his farm by 7:30 AM to put in a full day's work in the fields, needed the shoes done now. Elf trimmed the hooves, heated and fit the shoes, then nailed each shoe to its respective hoof.

As Elf bid Gilbertson *au revoir*, he turned to find a man holding a scythe. "I need the butt end custom-fitted to this here particular snead," he told Elf as Grandpa looked on.

“Snead? *Snead*?” Elf asked, puzzled by the word. “What is snead?” The scythe owner’s eyeballs widened.

“Jacob! Who is this man who doesn’t know the meaning of snead?” the man demanded to know.

Elf thought about it for a moment then a grin slowly formed on his face. He pointed to the snead. “You mean *poignée, oui monsieur*? The handle,” Elf said in a self-satisfied manner. “I fix.”

With the snead fitted, Elf was on to shodding another horse. Father’s clothes and hair were moist now from sweat as the jobs continued at a quick pace. Meanwhile, word-of-mouth continued to spread in town. Jacob had a new hired hand doing quality work. More townsfolk made their way to the shop. Elf welded a new link on a broken chain, shod two more horses, took an order for a new swing plow, then received another order from a lady for a set of new fire irons—including a poker, tongs, and shovel—meant as a wedding present for a relative. Throughout, Grandpa watched my father closely.

“Take a breather for a few moments,” Jacob said, keeping a careful eye on the Frenchman. “I have to get something from the barn.”

Jacob wasn’t the only one watching Elf. Turned out my mother had her eye on the Frenchman.

Pauline observed the comings and goings from a rear window that offered a clear view of the forge. Old photos show my mother had long wavy hair the color of sunshine. She had these sympathetically sweet blue eyes that could take in a person and make them feel immediately at ease. Mother was tall, slender, and strong. She never submitted to a day of loafing that she liked because she never submitted to a day of loafing—for good reason. Work in a frontier home never ceased like the non-stop flow of water in Walnut Creek. Everyone had to lend a hand—including children. Pauline began working around the house when she was four years old. Jacob and Wilhelmina gave her simple chores like fetching water from the nearby stream, standing guard over a fire and crying out if it began to extinguish, and chasing chickens and cows caught snooping around seed bags and newly planted crops. Mother learned to handle a horse and plow during planting season and tend the vegetable garden. When

she wasn't mixing soap cakes from lye, water, and fireplace ashes, Mother spun wool into yarn and flax into thread for mending the family's clothing. She milked the cow in the morning and churned cream into butter in the late afternoon.

But unlike most women her age, Pauline also had a grasp of the blacksmith's trade.

Family lore has it that Mother spent hours watching Grandpa work. From the time she could walk to the forge, Pauline asked questions about what this tool was used for and why such-and-such process came before another. She was familiar with Grandpa's shop and his equipment and immediately recognized Elf's talent: this newcomer could handle iron as good or better than Grandpa.

Elf had the strength of two men. He brandished sledgehammers as if they weighed no more than feathers. Yet, as Pauline watched the journeyman's audition, she could see Elf had a head on his shoulders—like her father's—the kind that makes for a successful blacksmith. Elf sized up a problem quickly, formulated a plan of attack, and completed the work in short order. She was most enchanted by Elf's unflinching commitment to see a job through to the end. He had that in common with her father, whom she loved deeply for all he did to protect and provide for his family. During a lull in the work, Pauline filled a cup with water at the nearby well and took it inside.

"Here," she said, holding out the cup to Elf. "It's hot in here. You probably should drink some water."

Elf looked up and instantly took in Pauline's form and features from bottom to top, pleased to have the attention of a comely young woman. He reached out to take the cup and their hands touched for several moments. Before Elf could utter any words, Jacob interrupted them.

"No time for chit chatting," Jacob snapped as he took the cup from Elf's hand. Grandpa held up a coultter he retrieved from the back of the shop. "Here. This must be dressed," he told Elf. "Pauline, your mother needs help in the house. Please go see what she wants."

Pauline and Elf held each other's gaze for a moment before going their separate ways.

The coulter—a large knife from the front end of a plough—cut soil and formed furrows for planting seeds. “Dressing” required Elf to sweat weld a section of steel to the blade’s cutting edge. This involved applying high heat and a fusible alloy like solder to attach the fittings to one another. Not a job for the weak, it required a “striker” to flatten the iron with a heavy sledgehammer. In the past, whenever local farm boys heard Grandpa needed a striker, they stopped by and offered to show off their strength. Few were able to swing the massive sledge accurately without incurring Jacob’s wrath. Invariably, Jacob sent for a blacksmith from another town to help.

Today, such a request was unnecessary.

As Elf finished dressing the coulter more customers arrived with jobs for the next day. Around 6:30 PM the line of callers trailed off and this day came to an end. “You can join us for dinner,” Jacob said to Elf. “We will discuss that ‘I buy your shop’ offer.” Elf returned to the barn, changed his clothes and used a horse trough to wash off the soot and sweat covering his hands, arms, and face. He had a clean body. Now he was about to get a clean start in life.

On this day, Edwin Louis Vautrin proved himself a worthy candidate in Jacob Lahr’s eyes in more ways than one. Grandpa bestowed his blessing on Elf to carry on the tradition of the blacksmith shop. Grandpa also granted tentative consent for Elf to begin courting my mother, Pauline. Elf had forged iron—and a new beginning—at the flaming hearth in the blacksmith shop.

Little did Father know his budding romance with Mother would shape faraway events in the coming new century.