

Shifting Shadows

HADLEY HOOVER

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The Dutch windmill—a *Stellingmolen*, or grain mill—featured in the cover photograph resides in Orange City's Windmill Square Park. Builder-designer Rod Shea researched, carefully handcrafted, and donated six molens which, along with a canal and drawbridge, are incorporated into a beautifully designed setting.

The scale-model authentic replicas of historic molens with varying original uses (pumping water, grinding grains, making flour, sawing logs, etc) provide a striking tribute to the Iowa town's rich Dutch heritage. Thanks to Mr Shea for permission to use his work of art on the cover—and to Art & Doris DeHoogh for their timely assistance.



I appreciated working briefly with five personable, talented, energetic and intelligent young women who gave me a glimpse of what it is like to *be* the Queen's Court in the exciting months leading up to the 2009 Tulip Festival. Queen Juliana and her Court—Carissa, Kim, Kelci, and Karina—continue the long tradition of serving their community with dedication, humility, and joy.



Kudos to members of past Tulip Festival Queen's Courts who dusted off their memories and answered my questions with patience, humor, and insight. And thanks to Anita for her nick-of-time help and enthusiasm.

Although there is no Laura VanHousen on the roster of past Courts (she exists only in this book) the Tulip Festival link at www.orangecityiowa.com provides factual details for the annual May event.



Those living in Orange City on Wednesday, June 3, 1964, likely recall when a 1:00 PM whistle called the local volunteer fire department to the Vogel Paint and Wax Factory. I am indebted to the members of the Vogel family and others in the community, including several firefighters, who threaded my needle with the strands of truth which I wove into my fictional account of events surrounding the actual fire.



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BEGINNINGS . . .

For most of my thirty-eight years I have lived in the haze of self-deception, so when *Honesty* erupted like the vivid blooms that pierce Iowa's frigid ground each Spring, I was more frightened than awed. What brought the thaw? The answer surprises even me. The first brave tips of *Truth* pushed through crusty soil after our year-end parent-teacher conferences for Chloe.

Her English teacher is rather formidable (to adults, that is; his students adore him) so when he warned that, unless Derek and I take a hard-line approach at home, our daughter will fail Creative Writing, we listened. The assignment most critical to her passing? A memoir.

Memoir? Whatever happened to topics like "How I Spent My Summer Vacation"? Sensing that Derek was equally overwhelmed by the responsibility Mr Rowland had foisted upon us, I swallowed my pride and stammered, "I, uh, must admit, I am unfamiliar with the . . . well, the *specifics*, one could say, of memoirs . . ."

Unnerved by the teacher's penetrating gaze through horn-rimmed glasses that required constant readjustment on his patrician nose, I caught only splashes from the fountain of information that spouted forth: *isolate one incident . . . a story worth telling . . . make sense of a vivid memory . . . universal truth rising to the surface . . .*

"Sir—"

He silenced me with a raised finger. "Unlike an autobiography, a memoir does not include all of life's details. Indeed, a memoirist may skip over family members who play no pertinent role. I do not expect a lengthy tome; the assignment is simple: capture and analyze one event from childhood. The forthrightness with which Chloe conducts her self-examination is more important than the length of her life."

Simple? Catching Derek's dour expression, I mused wryly, *Chloe would be wise to give this length-of-life business some serious thought!* Nothing Mr Rowland said altered my impression that it was gray-haired, wrinkle-faced authors who wrote books with '*A Memoir*' for a subtitle. *What an odd assignment for teenagers—and what punishment for parents assigned to monitor its completion.*

Belatedly tuning back in, I fumbled in my purse, thinking that at least one parent should take notes. Finding only a shopping receipt

(around a wad of gum) and no pen, I tried to focus on the barrage of words: . . . *complex journey of self-discovery . . . soul-searching . . . therapeutic experience . . . demands honesty and bravery.*

I resisted sarcasm's tug—*You do realize these are high school juniors?*—for it served no purpose to annoy this gaunt, yet oddly elegant teacher who would grade (and hopefully pass) Chloe. To avoid sabotaging her success, I assumed the façade of humility and alternated thoughtful nods with vague murmurs—anything to appease the man who would hold a red pencil.

Naturally, when we presented the issue at supper, Chloe insisted she lives "such a boring life" that nothing memoir-worthy exists. After lengthy discussion and heated debate, Little Miss Procrastinator grudgingly agreed that her sister's suggestion of the day Chloe stole Grandpa Dykstra's pocket watch had potential for "*universal truth.*"

After supplying Chloe with paper, pen, and a pep-talk that hinted broadly at being "grounded for a month" if she flunked anything, especially Creative Writing, Derek disappeared behind his newspaper. My kitchen tasks engaged few brain cells so my mind roamed (returning frequently to *And who would be in charge of the day-to-day enforcement of Chloe's grounding? You could have discussed that threat with me first, Derek!*) as I vigorously polished the sink to a high-sheen which would last only until the next use.

From the sludge of miffed and mundane thoughts, a fledgling notion beat its feeble wings and whispered through widening cracks in its confining chrysalis: *Write your own memoir.*

Even knowing I was alone, I spun around, so real was the voice. *Me, write my memoir?* Half-laughing, half-sobbing at such a ludicrous proposal, I gripped the counter's edge. What lofty purpose would be served by memorializing a life that totters on the shaky foundation of deceit? I stared at a wild-eyed reflection in the window.

If . . . *Did I actually think "if"?*—*there is no way I would even consider this!*—Okay, okay . . . *if* I pursued such a brash idea, whatever emerged from the dusty cocoon buried deep within me would more closely resemble a maggot than a butterfly. There can be no *if*. What "*universal truth*" could sift through the muck of a life as devoid of honor and trustworthiness as mine? *Write my memoir? Ha!*

Yet . . . I know—and have known, just not admitted—that brutal, bold, blunt truth is long overdue. *Truth* as only I can tell it. For, unlike Chloe, I have no difficulty in thinking of a "*pivotal incident.*"

Therefore *Truth* shines through nine words with which I begin—not as introduction, but as dawn's first glimmer after night's shadows: *My name is, but should not be, Muriel VanHousen . . .*

CHAPTER 1

Shadows: How could Derek not know I am awake? I lie beside him and tug the blanket, fluff my pillow, and issue deep sighs. He snuffles softly, rousing intermittently to repeat the ridiculous question: "Can't you sleep?"

Obviously not! When will I learn? If I try to involve my husband in my frustrations (though I manufacture trivial concerns since *Truth* opens doors best left closed) he claims exhaustion. So I fuss and fume, flop and fidget while he of the clear conscience sleeps in peace.

What spawns such restless nights? No heart-searching is required to find the answer. It is always the same: reverberations from the 1944 Christmas season—that time which should have been my shining moment but, instead, shades the intervening decades as my monumental shame.

These moonlit hours are when I could—when I *will*—write my memoir. A week has passed, but I finally am ready to admit that a memoir could reveal how to make things right by "*honestly and bravely*" (to quote the inimitable Mr Rowland) analyzing how I failed. I dispute the wisdom that claims every journey begins with one small step. My journey must leap the vast chasm between the slippery slope of *Wrong* and the firm ground of *Right*—nothing small about it.

Feeling my way along the hallway, I breathe deeply only when I reach the sewing room. Closing the door, I flip the light switch. After exchanging gentler lamp light for the harsh overhead glare, I pause to revel in the room's comfort. Though I reign in the kitchen, I share it with others. Not this room; it is completely mine. Derek has his shop; I have my sewing room. And the girls? I feel guilty, for if I relinquished my sewing room, they would not need to share a bedroom—but not guilty enough to surrender my ten-by-twelve oasis.

Even with the calendar approaching the end of April, the night air is cool; I wrap an afghan around my shoulders and shift the rocker so the lamp's circle of light falls across my shoulder. Night's whispering voice mimics Mr Rowland's dramatic intonations: . . . *not all the details, just honesty* . . . Even today, a week after I first considered writing this memoir, the long arm of my disgrace reached across twenty years with a resounding slap . . .



"Good afternoon, Mrs VanHousen," Lydia smirked. I cringed reflexively when she cracked open a roll of quarters on the cash-register's sharp edge. One coin escaped, so my muttered response went over Lydia's head, literally, as she bent to retrieve it from behind the counter where, as the grocery store's senior clerk, she rules five days each week.

I didn't linger to chat; I had nothing socially acceptable to say to a high school classmate who uses (perhaps seeks?) opportunities to needle me. If that sounds chilly on my part, chalk it up to years of cool reception from Lydia and others infected by her toxic gossip.

Her taunting use of my married name was an intentional turning of the screws, a little tighter each time, until I wanted to scream: *We're the same age, Lydia, so just call me Muriel, okay? I'm fully aware you think I have no right to share Derek's surname.*

The logical question is: What was I doing at Vander Molen's Grocery on a Thursday? It is common knowledge that Tuesday is Lydia's day off, so that is when I usually shop. Why court trouble, right? But I ran out of detergent and, as Derek had informed me when he needed to change clothes mid-day after a messy job, he had run out of work clothes earlier than usual this week. So there I was, braving an inevitable encounter with my nemesis.

Make your purchase and go home, Muriel; this doesn't need to turn into a crisis, I chided myself. Wrinkles lurk, eager to take up residence, so maintaining a pleasant countenance is a persistent effort on my part. Thus despite my neutral expression, a less-than-sunny disposition churned inside me as I strode towards the non-food aisle. The front door's bell announced the next customer just as I reached the array of detergent choices.

"Hello, Brigetta!" Lydia pitched her voice to carry; I know she did because there's absolutely nothing wrong with Brigetta de Boer's hearing. Grimacing, I waited for Lydia's inevitable jab. A heartbeat later, it came: "What's this *exciting* news I hear about your children?"

It was hardly an innocent question, not coming from Lydia. Her malicious words whipped past end-cap displays of cereal, coffee and

mops to where I clutched a box of Tide against my chest, unconsciously denting the cardboard into a nearly unsalable shape.

As I poked and prodded the box in a frantic, but futile, attempt to recover its original form, I heard Brigetta laugh happily. "If you mean their move to Dutchville, it's true! Bram and I are delighted that all the big changes at the Rochester State Hospital mean Sanna and Fred are coming home." There was nothing malicious about Brigetta's joy. Not only was she unaware I lingered nearby, but her daughter's absence had weighed heavily on her for years.

Sanna de Boer . . . returning to Dutchville . . . I lost my grip on the damaged soap container and yelped when it grazed my big toe before landing on the floor in a resounding thud. Waves of powdered beads surged from the mutilated box, drifting like whitecaps around my feet in a veritable flood of *America's Washday Favorite*, as the slogan proclaimed in bold colors.

Staring in helpless dismay at the floor, I heard Lydia exclaim, "Mercy! *What was that?*" accompanied by her scurrying footsteps. Skidding to a stop an arm's length away, Lydia chirped loudly, "Oh, my, Mrs VanHousen! Well, don't you worry about making a mess; Willie can have it all cleaned up in no time at all."

I forced a "Thanks," past gritted teeth. *Is it dreaming to hope Brigetta assumes Derek's mother is making messes, not his wife?* Since the senior Mrs VanHousen rarely leaves hearth and home anymore, that was unlikely.

Lydia spun on her heel and, seconds later, her cheerful announcement echoed through the store: "Clean-up in aisle six!" Willie approached silently, armed with broom, dustpan, and a pail that bounced against his leg. He waved aside both my red-faced apology and sincere offer to help.

I steadied myself on the cart and stared down at Willie's unevenly parted hair . . . so unlike Derek's head, since I closely monitor my family's appearance. (I feel it reflects on me as much as my own.) *Derek!* His name slashed my diverted thoughts like a lightning bolt: *Does Derek know Sanna is coming home?*

Jolting me again, Lydia's next comment only prolonged my agony: "Remind me, Brigetta . . . Sanna left home in 1945, right?"

I wrapped my fingers around the cart handle so tightly that eight fingernails bit into my palms. *Yes, Lydia; we all know the legend of how*

heartless Muriel Dykstra snatched Dutchville's beloved Derek VanHousen away from heartbroken Sanna de Boer.

Willie's suggestion that I empty soap-grit from my shoes into his pail drowned out Brigetta's reply, but not Lydia's next query: ". . . and where will they live?"

"It works out so well! When Hans turned ninety the same week as Rebecca's stroke, they decided to move to the Pioneer Home."

"What a *transition* for them!" Anyone hearing Lydia talk with such passion could assume she was an integral part of the de Boer family. My jaw tightened until my molars scraped like sandpaper.

"It is, but they're eager to be there. The Pioneer Home staff expects an opening soon, so Sanna and Fred will stay with us until they can move into their grandparents' little house out on our farm."

"Amazing! *Everyone*," Lydia gushed, "will be so *excited* to have Sanna home. And Fred, too, of course. I'm so looking forward to getting to know him. Oh, I *do* hope he enjoys living in Dutchville!"

As Willie exited the now-clean aisle, I mouthed a mocking "*Everyone will be so excited*," in Lydia's direction, adding a little wiggle-waggle head-and-shoulder motion for sarcastic emphasis. Something about Lydia brings my most wretched manners to the surface.

I yanked a second box of Tide off the shelf and swung the cart around with such force that I risked another hazard, this time involving Ajax cans and bleach bottles. *Calm down, Muriel; why do you let Lydia irritate you every single time?*

My alienation of Derek's affection—*no; call it what it was, Muriel: my attack on Derek's love for Sanna—*anyway, my destructive actions in December 1944 severed any pretense of a continuing relationship between two girls who had been best friends until one (that would be me) launched a purposeful, devious, self-serving crusade against the other (that would be Sanna). My plotting swept away our friendship as completely as Willie had removed evidence of the spilled Tide.

And now, in 1964, Sanna de Boer was coming home to Dutchville.