

"An affectionate pastiche of small-town
Mennonite life, replete with duty,
folly, irreverence, and joy."

—David Bergen

Once Removed



a novel by

Andrew
Unger

author of *The Daily Bonnet*

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*for Erin
and
for the historians, writers, and preservers of memory*

The following words—every jot and tittle—are a work of fiction, or as my ancestors would say, this book “is complete and utter *dommheit*.” As such, it would be a foolhardy and futile endeavour to scour these pages for allusions to real people, places, or events—even the history referenced herein is treated fictionally. Any resemblance to your Uncle Henry or Aunt Martha is a coincidence and should not instigate nasty emails or excommunication proceedings.

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Somma

One

They cut down twenty trees by the Co-op this week. Elms. They claimed they were diseased and marked each one with a red dot just hours before the Thiessen boys came with their chainsaws. The whole time I sat there in the truck with the engine idling and the radio tuned to the funeral announcements, waiting for Mr. Vogt to pound on the hood a couple times and say, “*Na*, Timothy, looks like you’re good to go.” Then I hauled it all off to the dump to be burned.

It wasn’t a pleasant scene, all those trees coming down and the barren land left there afterwards, but I did have some reason to be optimistic. The last time a whole row of trees went down like this, there was a liquor store on the cleared lot within months. It’s our first one and, rumour has it, the busiest in rural Manitoba. Now we don’t have to

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sneak off to Ste. Adèle for booze. We can get our wine-in-a-box right here in Edenfeld. Another patch of elms was declared diseased to make way for a dollar store. Progress is progress. Katie and I have a beautiful mature tree in our backyard too, but thankfully it's behind the house and therefore in an undesirable location for commercial enterprise. I worry about those tall ones on Wilshire, though. They're oaks, remnants of a large stand that predates European settlement in this area. There's a plaque nearby stating as much, which appears to have protected them from the ambitions of local land developers and/or mayors who also happen to be land developers.

I asked Mr. Vogt about the land by the Co-op, if he knew what was happening to it, but all he said was, "Mayor's orders," and he left the rest to my imagination. I'm not sure that was a good idea, because I can envision some pretty awful things cropping up on that lot. Probably another donut shop with inadequate drive-through space. Mr. Vogt says it's better not to ask too many questions.

Edenfeld prides itself on our aggressive disease prevention program, which requires the swift removal of trees that are past their prime and buildings that, in Mr. Vogt's words, "attract vermin if left to their own devices." These are the very same trees and buildings that other towns might try to preserve for environmental or historical reasons. According to the sign on the highway, Edenfeld was founded in 1876, but good luck finding anything older than about 1990. There are some exceptions, of course, but the Parks and Rec department is rapidly making them a thing of the past.

Once things seemed under control at the Co-op, Mr.

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Vogt tasked me with picking the dandelions at BLT Wiens Memorial Park. BLT Wiens is actually still alive and still our mayor, but the town figured it would be more economical to include the word “Memorial” right away rather than waiting to add it in later. I was told to pick the weeds by hand, and with the three Thiessens busy felling the last of the trees, the job was mine alone. Chemical herbicides are banned in our province, a recent law that greatly upset Edenfeld politicians who feel that “weeding is a strictly civic matter.” BLT explained all this in an angry memo that, for some reason, also specified that we couldn’t even use citrus juice to kill the weeds, but I think that had less to do with the environmental impact and more to do with maintaining our thriving local potluck scene, which has always relied on an ample supply of lemon meringue pie, among other varieties. The new weeding process is much more labour-intensive—such that the mayor’s eponymous park is the only one in town that receives this level of attention.

Mr. Vogt said I should bring my chainsaw.

“Not for the dandelions, of course,” he clarified, “but if you see an elm that looks iffy, go for it!” He always speaks a little louder than necessary, which makes him a suitable candidate to run a demolition crew, but not someone to chat with for prolonged periods in the church lobby.

I didn’t get all the dandelions picked, but by the end of the work day I had more than enough to fill a pail for Mr. Harder. I was supposed to meet him after work at Ernie’s Diner above the gas station. I figured I could spare a pail of dandelions, since Mr. Harder’s wine-making supply is always running low and he’s one of my favourite clients.

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I've been working on his family history book for a while now.

Katie and I are hoping that eventually I can transition to writing full-time, but at the moment the Parks and Rec job pays the bills. My friend Randall says my life is "fraught with cognitive dissonance." He admits his is too, only for reasons that he never fully articulates, but which I assume have something to do with the fact that he's unmarried and well into his thirties and the pressure is on from his mother to do something about that situation.

I'm a ghostwriter—or trying to be, anyway. This means I write books for other people. So does Randall. We're guns for hire, so to speak, though around here gun analogies are generally frowned upon. As much as I'd prefer to spend my days preserving the memories of Edenfeld's senior citizens, rather than demolishing heritage buildings to create space for yet another strip mall, I simply can't afford that luxury. I have a mortgage to pay and a wife who's finishing her master's in contemporary philosophy and there isn't enough ghostwriting work to keep both Randall and me employed full-time.

"Not yet," Katie always says.

Mr. Harder is into trees too. There's one right outside the manor where he lives that is said to be a descendant of the Great Oak of Chortitza. It was planted by Edenfeld's pioneers using seeds they brought from the old country. Sometimes, when the weather is nice, we sit on the porch swing at the manor and he never fails to point it out and say, "That tree over there, Timothy, is *frindschauft* of the famous Great Oak." He asked me to dedicate an entire chapter to the Great Oak of Chortitza. I felt it was

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a bit much for only one tree, but he insisted. He travelled to Russia and Ukraine in the nineties on one of those Mennonite history tours where he took dozens of photos of the famous Great Oak, including at least a couple that weren't completely out of focus. He wants to include about thirty pages' worth in his book. "It'll be the most comprehensive visual documentation of the Great Oak ever put into print," he boasted. I assured him that even at one or two pages he'd still have the record.

"When I went there," said Mr. Harder, "there weren't more than a handful of branches that still had green leaves on them."

He showed me a snapshot that confirmed his assessment. "It looks dead," I observed.

"Oh, it's not dead," he assured me. "Just dying."

I told him its prospects were about as good as any of the trees here in Edenfeld. He laughed. He gets me. I guess that's why he hired me to ghostwrite his latest book for him. It's tentatively titled *The Harder Path: Problems and How We Overcame Them from Molotschna to Southern Manitoba* by Dietrich F. Harder. The book is the third in a series after *Working Hard and Praying Harder: Life on the Farm* and a slim volume that documents his father's declining years called *You Know, Quite Frankly, It's Never Been Harder*. Randall wrote that one.

A large chunk of Mr. Harder's new book is based on the notes he took during that trip to Eastern Europe twenty-five years ago, only his recollection of the facts is rather suspect and his spelling is all over the place. However, checking facts and correcting spelling are just two of the many services a ghostwriter can provide. That's

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what Randall and I always tell clients anyway, you know, to drum up business. Our mysterious ability to boot up a computer also seems to impress the locals, and we're some of the only people around here reasonably proficient with a word processor. This is a great embarrassment for the mayor, who considers himself a real progressive. For a while, he even offered a course at the library called "Computer Usage for Mennonites and Other Beginners," but only six people signed up and most of them were just in it for the free cheese curds and rolled up slices of processed ham the town provided for attendees. The event wasn't entirely useless; BLT used a photo of his students peering with bewilderment into their computer monitors for one of his campaign mailers.

I enjoy working with Mr. Harder, but it can be confusing at times. Over the centuries, the Harders lived in three different countries in three successive villages each called Edenfeld, a name that refers to the Garden of Eden, and one that's more blindly optimistic than accurate. Given the large number of villages Mennonites have christened with that name, I often have to clarify, "You mean Edenfeld, Russia, not Edenfeld, Canada, right?" and Mr. Harder isn't always sure, so sometimes we look at the photos and guess based on what people are wearing or how much snow has accumulated in front of the houses, but even then, it isn't always conclusive. There were Edenfelds all over the place in the old country, each one of them abandoned a long time ago. There used to be more than one here too. There was another Edenfeld on the other side of the river that was labelled on old maps as "Lower Edenfeld," probably because it was a few miles closer to the American border.

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The whole town escaped to Paraguay long ago, where they hacked out rich farmland from dense jungle. Our Edenfeld is closer to the city, which means on weekends we escape to the mall and hack our way through dense crowds to get deals on yoga pants.

Mr. Harder also tends to mix up the Bolsheviks and Makhnovists and has real difficulty recalling what particular torture device was used against our people in what particular time period. “I don’t think they used tongue screws in the Soviet Union,” I recall telling him. But he replied, “Oh, yes, yes they did, to silence the heretics from preaching while they were being burned at the stake.” His timeline is often way off.

When five o’clock rolled around, I took my dandelions and went over to the diner for our meeting. I have an ongoing arrangement with Ernie to save the table that overlooks the street so I can observe the locals and document their idiosyncrasies for future writing projects. Since Ernie very much appreciates the volume of *plautz* I consume, he’s willing to reserve this prime spot for me. He even puts one of those triangular signs at the edge of the table that says “Reserved for a Valued Customer,” which is usually covered in grease and always makes me feel appreciated.

When I arrived that day, however, the greasy sign wasn’t there and I saw that Ernie had given my spot to City Sheila, who has lived in Edenfeld for two full decades, but has maintained this nickname due to her English surname and liberal use of eyeliner. Ernie apologized to me and said he would ask Sheila to move. It was a simple oversight—no big deal—but Ernie seemed quite eager to move Sheila to

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another spot. I imagine he didn't want her well-made-up face, with her fiery red lipstick, greeting customers as they approached the building. She sells cosmetics from the trunk of her car, and the fact that her ostentatious pink convertible was parked in Ernie's lot was probably not to his liking either. He spoke to her in Plautdietsch and she had no clue what the man was blathering on about, but with me standing there awkwardly and Ernie flapping his arms, she must have gathered there was an issue.

It was an issue for Ernie anyway. I told them both that it was fine and I'd find another table, but by then City Sheila was already standing with her cutlery in hand, ready to move, and I felt terrible about the whole situation.

I asked her for a catalogue and promised I'd order a few nail files and a cuticle trimmer for Katie.

"I feel awful about this," I said in English. "I really didn't need the table."

City Sheila sighed. "It's no problem," she said. "I know how Ernie can get."

I sat down and ordered a coffee and piece of rhubarb *plautz*, my favourite. I left the menu open in front of me in case I wanted to order more, the whole time wondering what on earth was keeping Mr. Harder. He was already twenty minutes late and that didn't even factor in the twenty minutes by which he was usually early. We were supposed to discuss his older brother David and the time he spent in the World War II Conscientious Objector camp out west. He claims David single-handedly built nine miles of the Trans-Canada Highway with nothing but a pickaxe and a shovel, including a stretch that went right on through the heart of the Rocky Mountains. Mr.

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Harder even showed me a piece of rock that he'd kept as a memento all these years. "Blasted straight through that mountain, he did." This was yet another story that could probably use a fact check.

I glanced down to the street below, anticipating Mr. Harder's arrival. The server with the tongue piercing came to warm up my coffee, even though I'd hardly touched it. She's new; one of Ernie's nieces he's trying to persuade to stay in Edenfeld by offering her a few hours at the diner and turning a blind eye to her perforated tongue. When she saw that the cup was still full, she raised an eyebrow and asked if there was something wrong with it. I said it was fine and smiled, trying to be pleasant. For a moment, I considered making a comment about her mouth jewelry, but quickly thought better of it. The urge to make small talk with strangers is something I have to suppress and, thankfully, at my age I still can, but I'm sure in twenty or thirty years I'll be the guy chatting up the server. "So, Rebecca," I'll say, leaning in to read her name tag. Then I'll tell her how her piercing reminds me of our distant ancestors who were tortured for their faith, and I'll ask her how it feels to have a piece of metal in her tongue and if it prevents her, in any way, from sharing the gospel. For now I kept quiet, though, and instead peered out the window to the street below, watching Edenfelders go about their daily lives.

It was hot that day, well above thirty, or what Mr. Harder would call ninety, but despite the near-suffocating temperature, Ernie was too cheap to turn on the AC. "Once it hits a hundred, then we'll talk." The windows were wide open and I could hear cars honking and cattle lowing in the distance. Is that the right word? Lowing? Whatever

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it's called, they were making the noise that cows tend to make when they're in distress or mating or whatever and, though I could not confirm it with my own eyes, I imagined that the two sounds, that of the cars and that of the cows, were somehow connected. The cars, I assumed, were honking *at* the cows, or the cows, perhaps, were expressing their displeasure at the traffic. Whenever a cow breaks free from its pasture, the Parks and Rec crew has to go out there and scoop manure off the street.

The corner of Sunset and Main is the commercial hub of town, or it once was anyway. However, since almost everyone does their shopping in the city these days, at one of those massive stores where they load the puffed wheat onto the back of your truck with a forklift, Edenfeld's Main Street is not nearly as bustling as you might expect. BLT is desperately hoping to attract exactly such a facility to Edenfeld, which will keep some of that puffed wheat money in town, he says. He's even constructed a new road called Megamart Way, which tends to confuse out-of-towners when they discover that it's nothing but wishful thinking at the moment. It does, however, lead to a very attractive ditch.

Down on the street, a jogger ran past, his head high and smiling like his favourite Phil Collins song had just come on through his headphones or he'd beat his personal best for most laps up and down Main Street. He ran on the spot for a while, waiting for the light to change, then carried on past a woman in a long floral dress who was rollerblading in front of the café. I wrote all this down. The rollerblading woman stopped to chat in Plautdietsch with another woman in a similar dress who was wearing white sneakers

instead of rollerblades and so seemed very short in comparison. Both were wearing headscarves. The rollerblading one seemed upset about something and was speaking sternly and using her height advantage to tower over the other woman. I wasn't sure what exactly they were arguing about, but I gathered from the frequent use of the word "*heena*" that it had something to do with chickens. I didn't want to lean too close to the window, though, because even though my Plautdietsch isn't that great, I didn't want them to know I was listening. Instead, I gazed into the distance, like I was looking past them at that huge stack of cabbages across the street at Frugal Frank's Groceries and More, but I kept writing what I could glean from their interaction. I record details like this in my notebook hoping that if I ever write my own book, and not just other people's stories, this material might be of some value.

When the server in the kerchief, not the one with the pierced tongue, came up and asked me what I was writing and if I'd like a hot bowl of *borscht* or maybe a lovely *schnetje* with strawberry jam, I said I was fine and that I was writing an obituary notice, which was the most plausible answer I could conjure at the moment. I didn't want to reveal my penchant for eavesdropping on the locals.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Was it someone close to you?"

I nodded and she offered to pray for me even though I said it wasn't necessary. She kept it brief, reciting something from memory, presumably because there was a table full of elderly women in red hats who needed her attention.

When Mr. Harder finally showed up, I greeted him

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from the window, then readied my notes as he made his way up the stairs. I had brought along a stack of history books and a few issues of *Preservings*. I figured this stuff would be useful source material for our project. I'd done a lot of research. I even got my hands on *The Harder Book*, which was packed with genealogies and baptismal records and maiden names of each and every person in the family tree since the mid-eighteenth century. Each Harder family has their own book because, as I'm sure you know, not all Harders are closely related. Some came in the 1870s fleeing the tsar and some came in the 1920s fleeing the people who replaced the tsar. Some are *jantsied* Harders and some are *ditsied* Harders and some are from the mysterious Scratching River settlement. There are even the Mexico Harders and a few branches of those too. This particular volume was thick and brown and embossed with gold lettering that said "Descendants of Heinrich B. Harder and Anna R. Funk (1723-1980)." It was the hardcover edition.

You can tell a lot about the relative stature of an Edenfeld family by examining the quality of binding used in their family history books, a practice that has continued despite stern admonishment from local churches. According to Reverend Broesky, hardcover bindings are a symbol of worldly pride. "How presumptuous!" he exclaimed. "These books are not the Bible. There is no need for these stories to be preserved for all eternity. No, brothers and sisters, in most cases a simple Xerox on the church copier will be more than sufficient." Despite the warning, many Edenfeld families continue to showcase their status with hardcover bindings. The Harders, the

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evidence would suggest, are among our more prominent citizens.

It took Mr. Harder a while to get up the stairs, even after Ernie went down to give him a hand. When they entered the room a few minutes later, Mr. Harder had Ernie firmly gripped at the elbow and they were muttering to each other in our language and it seemed that neither man was too pleased with how the other one was handling matters. I stood to greet Mr. Harder. He was well dressed, as always, with a clean collared shirt, pressed pants, and a brand-new pair of black suspenders. He waved enthusiastically, buoyed by Ernie's ability to keep him upright, then shuffled towards me. I shoved the bucket of dandelions out of the way with my foot so he wouldn't trip over it.

"*Jo, oba*, how are you?" he said. "Sorry I'm late."

He reached for a can of Orange Crush from the cooler and raised his index finger at the server. She added it to his tab. There was a tray of *plautz* in the cooler as well, each piece individually wrapped in plastic, which he scanned very skeptically before saying "*jauma*" loud enough for the serving staff to hear.

"Good idea," I said. "They're not so fresh."

He noted that City Sheila seemed to be enjoying hers, but then commented that she'd only lived in Edenfeld for two decades and probably hadn't yet developed a sophisticated enough palate for such things.

Mr. Harder motioned for me to sit down. He even put his hand on my shoulder briefly and I found the physical contact to be rather out of character. Again, he apologized for being late and said I could charge him for an extra half hour. He shook his head.

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“What passes for *plautz* these days ...”

I cleared a place at the table, brushing aside my crumbs, and put *The Harder Book* in front of him. I was excited to hear what he thought about my new discoveries.

“This should be useful, shouldn’t it?” I asked. “Found it at a garage sale. They wanted ten dollars, but I got it for half that. Can you believe it?”

He inched his chair forward, opened the book, and paged through it indifferently, glancing up at me from the top of his glasses. Then he pushed the book back into my hands without bothering to close it.

“I’m familiar with *The Harder Book*,” he said, pausing for a moment in an unsuccessful attempt to open his Orange Crush. “Listen, Timothy, I think we need to make a few changes.”

“To *The Harder Book*?”

It was a stupid question. *The Harder Book* was already in print and had been for decades. It was hardcover. It was on the shelves of every Harder family in town. There simply was no changing *The Harder Book*.

“I don’t think you quite understand me,” he said.

I sure didn’t. I closed the book. Perhaps he’d be interested in the article I found about his uncle who’d been in the *Selbstschutz* back in Russia. I had the page ready to go and marked with an insert from the church bulletin. Before I could show it to him, though, he reached out to stop me. His hand was cold. Mine was a little damp.

“Listen, Timothy ... I hate to tell you this, but ...”

At this point, the server checked in and, noticing that Mr. Harder had still not opened the can, offered to pour it into a glass for him.

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“Need a straw?” she asked.

“No, I won’t be staying long,” he said. “I’ll take it with me.”

“Well, anyway,” I said, “I was thinking about chapter four where David is standing before Judge Adamson and—”

“You’re not hearing me,” said Mr. Harder.

“Was it Judge Adamson or Judge Embury?”

He shook his head, slowly and with great difficulty, then rubbed his neck as if he wished he hadn’t been quite so vigorous with the head-shaking.

“No, I mean you don’t understand. We can’t continue like this,” he said. “The book you’re writing for me.”

I leaned back in my chair and motioned for more coffee. I thought maybe another cup would put this conversation back in a more productive direction. She arrived promptly and topped me up, but Mr. Harder didn’t even look in her direction.

“I’m sure you don’t want to be bothered with this project anymore, do you?” he asked.

“What do you mean? Of course I do,” I said, then clarified myself. “It’s not a bother. I’m enjoying it.”

He stood up, which took quite some effort, and turned his attention to the window. His wife was waiting in the car below, the seats packed full of watermelons.

“Well, Timothy, I wish we could continue, but we have to consider other factors,” he said. “Today will be our last meeting, I’m afraid.”

“Seriously? Why? I thought things were going well.”

I couldn’t figure it out. Had my Iron Maiden T-shirts finally set him off? Perhaps he’d found a more affordable option, a willing relative who could hunt-and-peck their way through a manuscript.

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“What should I do differently?” I asked. “I’d be glad to hear about any changes you’d like me to make. Your feedback would be very useful.”

Mr. Harder didn’t answer, but handed me a cheque.

“I think this should cover the work you’ve done so far,” he said, then rummaged around in his pocket for a five-dollar bill. “And this is for the Orange Crush ... and the coffee.”

I slipped the cheque into my wallet without looking at it. Mr. Harder took his unconsumed beverage and ambled over to the door where Ernie helped him down the stairs. I glanced out the window and saw his wife slide the watermelons over to make room for her husband. I waved as he left, but I’m not sure he noticed. By that time, the women in the floral dresses were gone too.

I waited for a while, finished my coffee, and paid the bill. I hadn’t been able to give Mr. Harder the bucket of freshly picked weeds. As I made my way out of the building, I told City Sheila that she could take the table, and keep the dandelions too, if she wished.

Two

After being let go by Mr. Harder, I didn't feel like going out anywhere for a while, let alone attending the next Preservation Society meeting. I figured there were other things I could do with my Tuesday evening besides sitting in a church basement drinking decaf while chatting about history with people twice my age. Katie said I needed to adjust my attitude. She pointed out that we hadn't missed a meeting all year and I'd already spent enough time licking my wounds. When I said we couldn't afford to bring the cookies, Katie pointed out that we weren't on baked goods duty for at least another month. She also reminded me that we'd be watching the classic 1978 documentary *A Plane People: The Story of Mennonite Aviation* and she knew I didn't want to miss that. She always has a way of reminding me of the things I like.

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“Besides,” Katie observed, “it’s a lovely evening for a walk.”

This comment, she clarified, referred only to the weather and was no indication of her more conflicted views about strolling down Edenfeld’s Main Street.

“It’s got more gaps than Reverend Broesky’s theology,” she noted as we wandered hand-in-hand past vacant lots filled with dust and garbage. A few stained mattresses and a tractor tire that had not yet made its way to one of the local playgrounds leaned against the side of the credit union building. Yes, there was still a credit union, a couple churches, a gas station, and a mostly vacant strip mall with a Chinese restaurant, but all these buildings were separated by gaping holes, like the whole town had picked a fight with that mean, hulking Kroeker boy from over there in Bergthal.

According to some, however, our horribly disfigured Main Street is all part of a grand and cunning plan. “Soon,” the mayor regularly proclaims, “we’ll have a space large enough to fit that megamart.”

After a few blocks of dusty lots, we passed the yard of the famous Lepp homestead which, if I’m being precise, is more ashy than dusty after the midnight fire that brought down the historic housebarn about a year ago. Now all that remains is a burned-out carcass that awaits some great repurposing, and a singed plaque that reads:

EDENFELD HERITAGE SITE. EST. 1881.

The town had been using the Lepp housebarn to store herbicide and backhoes and the fact that all the town’s

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equipment was at a job site a few blocks away on the night of the fire only fuelled local conspiracy theories. “It’s like Pearl Harbor,” Randall observed. “Most of the ships weren’t even there when the Japanese attacked.” He said he read all this online somewhere.

A temporary fence had been put up around the Lepp property, meant to keep gawkers and scavengers at bay. *Danger, Construction Zone*. Katie didn’t want to stand there very long.

“It’s depressing,” she said, so we kept on walking.

We walked a few more blocks down Main. When we got to Rodeo Drive, I squeezed Katie’s hand and stopped briefly in front of Koop Convenience on the corner.

“The Heppner barn used to be right here,” I said. “Lived there the first twenty years of my life.”

Katie already knew this, of course, but gripped my hand appreciatively like it was the very first time I was disclosing this information. She said she wished she had known me back then so she could have paid me a visit, but I said I didn’t think she would have been too impressed with the adolescent version of myself.

“I’ve shown you my junior high photos, right?”

Katie laughed and said my bowl cut and oversized Chicago Bulls jersey were absolutely adorable.

The street was even called Heppner Strasse for decades before BLT came up with the “revolutionary idea” to ditch the German and remove all the pioneering family names that were “no longer relevant.” According to our mayor, the community is much better served with street names lifted randomly from a map of southern California. For a while, Main Street was supposed to be renamed

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Hollywood Boulevard, but everyone thought that might be going a bit too far.

The Heppner family housebarn was demolished, along with about seven others, in the early 2000s, an era that Mayor BLT affectionately calls The Great Leap Forward. After I left home and my brother moved to the northern Alberta oil sands, my parents sold the property, saying they wanted “a nice modern house with heated floors and air conditioning,” which they found way out on the west coast where it rains ten months a year. Now, in its place, stands the Koop convenience store, which is mostly used to provide twenty-four-hour access to sunflower seeds, and another two empty rental spots, one of which was briefly home to a sushi bar—a fascinating place to watch inexperienced Edenfelders drench carefully made nigiri in soy sauce with their fingers. The moment the Heppner barn went down, though, I was sad that I hadn’t done more to save it. Soon after that, I joined the Preservation Society.

We stood there for a while at Koop Convenience. A Holdeman family was selling corn from the back of a pickup truck and I promised Katie we’d stop and buy a few ears on our way home later. I could smell the distinct bouquet of the feed mill in the distance. Katie pulled me close, moved by the beauty of empty lots and the smell of pellet production, and kissed me on the cheek.

“It’s like all the Heppners were raptured a decade ago,” she said, looking down our very sleepy version of Rodeo Drive. “I’m sure glad you got left behind.”

Then Mrs. Koop came out wielding a broom and scooted us off the property. “*Rüt met die!* No loitering!”

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By the time we arrived at South Edenfeld Mennonite Church for the meeting, everyone else was there and already a few coffee cups in. We'd missed the Mennonite aviation movie altogether and Mr. Wiebe was eager to move along with the proceedings. He pulled up a couple chairs, handed us each a butter tart, and told us to take our seats around the table.

I sat between Mrs. Friesen and Mrs. Ens while Katie wedged herself between Mr. Wiebe and Brenda, the only other active member under fifty who, due to her position at the local credit union, is more commonly referred to by locals as "that Brenda from the loans department." She has an encyclopedic knowledge of Anabaptist heroes from centuries ago which is entrenched in her memory and plastered all over her body in the form of tattoos.

"Good," said Mr. Wiebe. "Looks like we've reached quorum."

I counted. There were six of us.

Mr. Wiebe stood up and pulled the cap off a thick black marker, the scent of which immediately had me feeling a bit woozy.

"I assume you've all brought your pamphlets with you," he said.

We had. Katie poked around in her purse, then reached across the table and handed it to me. *A Historic Walking Tour of Edenfeld*. It had a map and a description of all the heritage sites in the area. Mrs. Friesen put it together one summer in the 1980s before BLT was mayor, and it's been photocopied and re-photocopied to the point where it's almost completely illegible.

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Mrs. Friesen glanced at my map and bemoaned the unappreciated hours of work she had put into it.

“Took me nearly a year to put it together,” she said.

Mrs. Ens, who I think joined the Preservation Society primarily so she could showcase her baking talents and keep her friends in line, interjected that, as she recalled it, Mrs. Friesen had spent most of the summer of 1985 snatching up bargains from the basement at Eaton’s.

Mrs. Friesen waved off her friend’s comment and told me not to believe a word of it. “I’m afraid that Mrs. Ens has a tendency to exaggerate,” she said, “especially about the level of bargains that were available in the 80s.”

Mr. Wiebe called for our attention.

“Time for the annual revision,” he said, holding up the pamphlet.

He unfolded it, revealing the map on the inside, and put a big black X through the Lepp barn, the Rempel store, and a few other places that had met their demise in the last year, and then held it up for us to follow his example. He passed around the marker.

“Please update your maps,” he said, “if you haven’t already done so.”

Mr. Wiebe is a retired science teacher, but his real passion is local architecture. He spent many a summer working on a book about our building practices called *Longing for Housebarns: Blueprints and Poems*.

“The humble housebarn,” Mr. Wiebe said, as we inhaled black marker fumes and updated our maps, “more than any other example of Mennonite architecture, represents our pragmatism, our work ethic, and our connection to the land. I can think of no more vital representation of our heritage.”

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He said these buildings were something we should be proud of, though there was some debate about whether we should be “proud” of our housebarns or simply “appreciative” until Katie said the difference was merely semantics and perhaps we were getting sidetracked.

“Regardless, we have to save the ones we have,” said Mr. Wiebe.

“The *one* we have, you mean,” Mrs. Friesen reminded him.

She was referring to the housebarn owned by Randall’s parents. It’s known as the Hiebert housebarn, after Randall’s father, and is right next to the empty lot on Mulholland (formerly Klippenstein) Drive, where they hold farm equipment auctions in spring and build a skating rink in winter, complete with a shack where you can warm up with hot chocolate or get your skates sharpened for a nominal fee. “The property hasn’t yet reached its potential,” BLT often says while casting a side-eye at the Hiebert barn. In Edenfeld, there’s nothing more dangerous to your health than to sit in close proximity to an empty lot.

Despite the fact that we both grew up in preservation-worthy buildings, I haven’t been able to get Randall to come to these meetings. He says he prefers to spend his Tuesday nights making home-brewed beer in his garage and scouring the Internet for eligible life partners. I tried to convince him that he might find a woman at the Preservation Society meetings, but he reminded me that I usually refer to the group members as my “grandparents.”

Mr. Wiebe said the plaque outside the Hiebert

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housebarn could use an update. Maybe it could be modified to include some information about its original owners, the Klippensteins. He said he was willing to write the text if Katie and I would give it a proofread, a task which everyone affirmed by show of hands. None of us wanted to repeat the fiasco they recently had over in Neu-Kronsberg where they spent two thousand dollars on a huge commemorative cairn honouring the town's pioneers, only to find it had been autocorrected to "Nude-Kronsberg," an error that disappointed dozens of frat boys who drove in from the city one weekend to find nothing but a dull prairie town and its fully clothed inhabitants.

There are dozens of these plaques all over town, installed during Edenfeld's centennial celebrations in 1976. There is one in front of each of our five churches, some businesses, a couple trees, a few private residences, and even next to a "heritage boot scraper" out on La Brea that contains the petrified boot-scrapings of early Edenfeld pioneer and world-famous cheesemaker Johann B. Peters. That's what the sign says anyway. This was all long before BLT became mayor. Not a single plaque has been put up since.

Mr. Wiebe also mentioned that someone should go over to the Lepp barn and at least straighten out the signage because the Parks and Rec crew had accidentally backed over it when they were cleaning up the property. He looked at me.

"I'm afraid I can't," I said. "BLT banned it."

"He banned sign-straightening?" said Brenda from Loans.

"Well, not in those exact words, but the Lepp barn is

on civic property and Mr. Vogt says it's a waste of taxpayer dollars and that the money could be much better spent on snow clearing and when I pointed out that it was still summer, he said I wasn't thinking ahead, which was 'typical for my generation.'"

I'm amazed that the Preservation Society members tolerate me as much as they do. Thankfully, they don't judge me for the fact that I'm one of BLT's "henchmen" on the Parks and Rec department, though whenever the name is recorded in the minutes, Mrs. Friesen always writes "Parks and Wreck." They understand that there aren't any other viable employment options in Edenfeld for a man my age who's not so great with livestock. I think they also decided that having an "insider" on the committee might be of use someday.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," Katie said. "Just go over there and do it. I'll do it myself if you won't. We also might as well straighten out the Hiebert sign while we're at it. It looks like an accidental victim of the Thiessen boys too."

"I'll go with her," said Brenda from Loans.

She turned in her seat and stood up as if to go right then, and when she did, we all got a clear view of a tattoo on the small of her back. It was the image of a man, though her skin was so thoroughly spray-tanned that it made his precise identity difficult to determine.

Mrs. Friesen bit into a butter tart and, speaking with a couple raisins clinging to her upper lip, piped up, "Is that new, Brenda?"

"Yeah. Got to cover it up at work, though," she said. "They're not too keen on tattoos. They say it's unprofessional."

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She hiked up her shirt a few inches and spun around for us all to see. Mrs. Friesen raised her eyebrows. Mrs. Ens looked down at her plate of cookies. Mr. Wiebe immediately excused himself to the bathroom. Brenda from Loans looked right at Katie, who smiled cautiously, then over at me. She wanted us to guess.

I picked legendary church elder Klaas Reimer. Katie said John Holdeman. Mrs. Friesen thought that it was Conrad Grebel.

“*Na*, I don’t know about that,” Mrs. Ens said, but offered no guess of her own.

We were all wrong.

“It’s Johann Cornies,” Brenda from Loans proclaimed. “The nineteenth-century agricultural reformer!”

I complimented the tattoo, just to be nice, although secretly I doubted Mr. Cornies’s sideburns were as bushy as the artist made them out to be.

“That’s remarkable, Brenda,” said Mrs. Friesen. “It really shows your commitment to the values of the Preservation Society.”

“I’ve got a few martyrs too,” Brenda from Loans continued. “Real heroes who died for their faith, so I can be reminded of them all the time. You know what I mean? You should see the one I’ve got of Dirk Willems crossing the icy river ...”

We told her we’d examine Dirk Willems another day.

“You know who my favourite martyr is?” Katie said. “Elsie Dyck. It’s really too bad what happened to her. Being run out of town like that. I really don’t think she poisoned all those people.”

Mrs. Friesen agreed that she didn’t believe that story,

but everyone else said there was no other plausible explanation for why Edensfeld's most celebrated writer had left town twenty-five years ago and never returned.

You've heard of Elsie Dyck, I'm sure. Her third novel, *Scandalous Quotations from a Mennonite Diary*, was released to rave reviews in the mid-nineties. For a lot of Edensfelders, she was a real source of pride. "Our Elsie" had made it big. Not everyone was a fan, however. Some powerful folks around here were pretty quick to denounce her, pointing out that she hadn't been to church in years and it had been even longer since she'd touched an udder. Despite all the accolades she garnered from the outside world, the only recognition Elsie Dyck ever received in Edensfeld was a brief blurb buried deep in the local paper. "Former Edensfelder Releases New Book. Don't Read It. You'll Regret It. Trust Me." Something like that. As far as I know, the book was never sold here in town. Katie and I do have a copy, but then, we drive into the city every once in a while to purchase forbidden items like Elsie Dyck novels and PG-13 movies.

I've wanted to be a writer ever since I first read Elsie's books as a teenager. The fact that her books were unofficially banned in town and I had to hide them under my pillow at night was at least part of the appeal. Beyond that, though, her writing was brilliant and truthful in a way I'd never experienced before. She didn't idealize our past, but she wrote about Edensfeld, which she cleverly renamed Gardenfield, as a place of nuance, where behind the headscarves and manure-encrusted rubber boots were real people with desires and passions for slightly nicer headscarves and slightly less

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manure-encrusted boots. These were modest desires, sure, but they were desires nonetheless. BLT despises her books. He says we need not dwell on the past or stir up “unnecessary passions,” for that matter. We certainly don’t need to be putting our regrettable history on display for the whole world to see. “Her book is an embarrassment,” he said at one of his modestly attended council meetings. “It’s not conducive to economic growth. Simply put, Elsie Dyck is bad for business.”

I explained all this to the others, revealing my “unnecessary passion” for the work of Elsie Dyck, but by then Mr. Wiebe had returned and said it probably wasn’t such a wise idea to go around proclaiming my undying love for Edensfeld’s most recent martyr. He feared for the safety of my fingers.

“BLT’s a powerful man.”

Mrs. Friesen said that was nonsense and that no finger-breaking had ever occurred to her knowledge.

Mrs. Ens shook her head and displayed her fingers, which did look a little crooked, but Mrs. Friesen attributed her friend’s slight disfigurement to rheumatism and excessive quilting and told Mrs. Ens to stop fearmongering.

“He may not have broken her fingers,” Mrs. Ens admitted, “but remember that artisanal bakery she ran to supplement her writing income? I heard that BLT was so upset over her writing that he had her shut down and fined by the health inspector, who happened to be his nephew. All on account of some supposedly undercooked cookie dough. They claimed eleven people were hospitalized after a church luncheon.”

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“And she wasn’t allowed inside a church after that, either,” added Mr. Wiebe.

“That’s probably just as well,” said Katie.

“It’s hard to make it as an Edenfeld writer in the best of times,” continued Mrs. Ens, “let alone when you can’t sell sugar cookies on the side or broker business deals in the church lobby. She might have even faced prison time for making all those people sick, but BLT agreed to drop all charges and destroy the evidence so long as she agreed to leave town forever and cease writing about it. Of course, I heard all this from Mrs. Barkman, and you know how reliable she is, but anyway, that’s the story.”

Mrs. Friesen reminded us that stories in Edenfeld were often embellished with great success and rapidity, and that those coming from Mrs. Barkman were especially suspect. She said not to worry, that Elsie Dyck was living in the city and doing just fine. She claimed it wasn’t so long ago, actually, that she’d seen her at the Snow View Mall food court cheerfully hoisting an A&W root beer. She said she’d shared an order of onion rings with her more than a few times.

I had serious doubts about Mrs. Friesen’s supposed Elsie Dyck sightings and was about to express them, but Katie looked at me and kicked me under the table, which was always the signal that perhaps I should keep my mouth shut.

“You all know that 553 Melrose is going up for sale, right?” said Mrs. Friesen.

The Preservation Society has been trying to get a plaque at 553 Melrose for years but there’s always been strong resistance. Nobody thinks that Elsie Dyck’s childhood

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home is worthy of a plaque and the people who live there now don't want all the extra attention it would draw. They might have to mow the lawn more often or put on a shirt before peering out the living room window. The house might even be photographed by city people on occasion. All of this is considered a great nuisance. "Besides," they argue, "is this Elsie Dyck really so important anyway?"

At this point, Mr. Wiebe indicated that neither Elsie Dyck nor the Elsie Dyck house were on the agenda for the evening, after which Katie shot up her hand and made a motion to have these topics added so that we could continue our discussion.

"All in favour, say 'aye.'"

We all said "aye," although Mrs. Ens shouted "*oba jo*" and Mr. Wiebe made her re-vote in English to make it official, even though we already had more than enough ayes without her *oba jo* to carry the motion.

After further discussion, we concluded that we'd probably never have the funds to purchase 553 Melrose and turn it into a museum like they did in Neepawa once the locals decided they actually liked Margaret Laurence, but we figured at the very least the new owners might be receptive to a historic marker. As far as we knew, the building, and all the houses around it, were owned by some out-of-town investment company, but Mrs. Ens said she'd talk to her daughter, a realtor, and see if she could sell it to people who were "well-informed of the house's historic and literary significance." Not that she expected her to in any way jeopardize her potential commission. "But maybe it would be a selling point," she said, "if people were aware that Elsie Dyck once lived there."

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Brenda from Loans said she'd talk to the credit union to see if they'd be willing to sponsor the project. "Even if they don't give us the money outright, at the very least I think I can score us an affordable interest rate."

We were all very grateful to have someone like Brenda from Loans on the committee.

"It's nice to see some young people taking an interest in our history," said Mr. Wiebe.

Katie, Brenda, and I were all approaching forty, and none of us thought of ourselves as particularly young anymore, but we had no other way of interpreting this comment than to assume it was directed at us.

"Thanks," said Katie. "I wish there were others."

"Me too," Mr. Wiebe said. "Especially around the mayoral election." He reminded us of BLT's slogan from the most recent election: *Values of the Past. Strip Malls of the Future.*

"That was on all his signs," he said.

"Those signs were always straight," I noted.

"Oh, don't worry," Katie said. "We'll get the Lepp sign looking great."

I wasn't worried as much about the plaque as I was about maintaining my job at the Parks and Rec department. I told them I'd try to be involved in other ways, but was deliberately vague on the details.

Mrs. Friesen said the Preservation Society had gone long enough without a slogan of our own, and if BLT was going to have one, then so should we.

"Buildings of the Past. Values of the Future," she suggested.

Mr. Wiebe said the slogan was a bit derivative, possibly

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alienating, and that we should stick to preserving buildings and need not say anything about progressive values. Mrs. Ens agreed, though when we put it to a vote, she sided with her friend Mrs. Friesen and the motion to adopt the new slogan passed by a count of five to one and even Mr. Wiebe, who was the lone vote against the motion, said he was okay with it and would continue to attend the meetings.

“We’ll start by straightening signs,” Katie said, “and go from there.”

“In the dead of night, I hope,” warned Mr. Wiebe.

Katie nodded.

“Well, I think we’ve made some real progress here,” said Mrs. Ens.

However, I wasn’t entirely sure whether she was referring to the signs, the Elsie Dyck house, or the fact that Mrs. Friesen had finally baked some butter tarts that met her standards.