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## Ebenezer

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# Ebenezer

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*Howard Schaap*

Lick your teeth after rock picking and you could feel how fine the Wisconsin glacier could grind dirt. Rock picking was the family job every June. Hitch up the cabless 3010 John Deere to a wagon of some sort and pull it up and down the fields of newly sprouted corn, the young plant grassy and weak and leaning over from the wind in a way that made it look like a lazy green spider that would surely get squashed before it could suck its stalky strength out of the soil and the sky. Our job was to look for rocks, the new crop of assorted nameless varieties that were unearthed by the belching frost below and the scraping implements above. Up and down the fields, maybe twenty rows at a time, walking and spying rocks, fetching them and humping them to the wagon. From softball size to skull size to the kind of slab it'd take two adults to walk over, to, occasionally, one so big Dad would need the Bobcat to dig it out. Hit that kind of rock with a cultivator or run even a small one through the combine header, and you'd be in the shop for a while, and there would go your number one commodity on the farm: time.

I came to consciousness rock-picking. Opened my eyes, and there I was, slight sweat around the hairline already catching the fine dirt, walking over the still-loose loess, dirt like an uglier kind of sand, finding white, gray, and cheese-textured rocks to retrieve. Throwing them from a distance. Grabbing ones more the size of baseballs because you could throw them and make a game of it. Skipping them off the wagon and onto the other side, where Mom was bent over with both hands to pull out a basalt still mostly buried. My rock glancing off her head.

"Oh shit."

Mom survived.

So did I.

\* \* \*

Grampa Hank was second generation—first generation born here, if you want to do it that way. Henry's Dad, Jan Schaap, who made himself the first American John, emigrated from the small town of Leens, in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands, where he worked as a farmhand, to Orange City, Iowa, in 1893, married a wife in Sioux Center, Iowa, in 1899, and settled on a farm outside Leota, Minnesota. That's where Henry was born, in 1901, the second son after another John, the namesake.

I'm not sure what the Dutch thought they were getting into when they bought into southwest Minnesota. No doubt clan reports made their way against the current of settlement and back across the pond, reporting on Holland, Michigan, then on Pella, and then Orange City, Iowa, where the Dutch had stumbled upon some of the purest loess—black dirt—in the world, and then, finally on Leota, Minnesota, only sixty miles north, surely similar in soil to that Sioux County loess.

Except it wasn't. It was rockier. Once the Wisconsin knew it was the glacier version of the *Titanic*, it dumped its cargo of rock all over southwest Minnesota.

Third wave immigrants often bought farms that others were thinking better of. That's what happened to the American John Schaap, who bought a partially broke farm in Moulton Township, Murray County, Minnesota.

By the time American John realized what kind of farm he'd bought, a rocky knoll perched above a trickle of water called Champepadan Creek, he must have decided it was a great joke. American John may have been thrilled just to have rocks to call his own, because he stayed put, settled down to have ten children on that rocky Moulton Township farm.

In general, the third wavers around Leota Township got the joke. The pure black gold the

Dutch settlers had found around Sioux County was indeed too good to be true. The land up around Leota was riddled with rocks.

But the Leota settlers seemed intent not on recreating their homeland or wishing for something they didn't have, but on making Leota home. Thus, they kept the name that came with the place, Leota.

Thus, they looked around at all the rocks they hit with plows and piled up at the corners of the fields; and when they built a church, they named it Ebenezer, "stone of help." They knew their Bibles, did the Leota settlers. When Samuel set up the original Ebenezer, he had said, "Thus far has God helped us." The Leota settlers could certainly use God's help to pick all the rock he'd left in their fields. Ebenezer was the right name for a church out on the glacial till where its families would be forced to rock pick for generations.

\* \* \*

Henry Schaap bounced around a bit, trying to catch on somewhere. First, he rented a place by Lismore where Gramma Mary brought two girls, Irene and Freda, and a boy, Howard, into the world, all by 1929. The depression may have put Henry into a holding pattern, because when depression-baby Milton comes along in 1937, clearly an oops, the family is renting a place a mile northwest from the Schaap farm. Hank must have been steadily building his dairy herd, for when Dad opens his eyes on a farm closer to Leota, he opens them to milking. Hank's dairy herd included twenty-six cows by that time, including Frances, Bertha, and Audrey. Dad's eyes open at a 5:00 a.m. milking and to Hank's badgering: "Quit yawning your head off!" This is part of a chorus of mixed Dutch-English lines from Hank that Dad often recounts for me that include, "Aren't you done yet?" and the ubiquitous "Hurry up *een beetje*."

It isn't till the end of World War II that things started to break right for Hank, the second-born son. First, in late 1947, Grampa snags a nice, slightly less rocky 200 across the road from his Dad's. Then, in 1949, he hits the flax jackpot: he sows the whole farm in flax and hits the market just right, paying off the farm in one year. He was 48 and feeling fine, feeling blessed. Thus far, had God helped him.

Then, rocks.

In 1951, Howard is drafted to fight in the

Korean conflict. While Grampa's fortune may have been made, the situation inside the Schaap household crystallizes in one event for the thirteen-year-old Milt: he witnesses Howard reduced to tears at the kitchen table, begging for a new suitcase with which to go to the army.

Private Howard Calvin Schaap would be killed by mortar fire on October 7, 1951, in what was probably his second stint on the front lines as litter bearer, near Mundung-Ni, as part of the battle for Heartbreak Ridge. Almost a year from when he cried at that table, Howard's body would come back home by train in a box.

What happens next is curious. Daughter Freda hatches a plan for Hank and Mary to come to Chicago, where she lived, to get away from everything for a while. Thirteen-year-old Milt would be left behind to do chores with a neighbor boy who had been enlisted to help. When that boy snuck away to the Twin Cities to himself secretly enlist in the military, thirteen-year-old Milt did all the chores, as well as grieving for his brother, entirely alone.

One would think that losing one son would soften Grampa's character a little bit, put things into perspective, but somehow Howard's death seems to have reinforced Grampa's view of work and his remaining son, Milt. Dad seemed made for work to Grandpa, a little man. Out of the body of his wife and out of her line—Bolluyts, with French and Irish strains—plus an added generation of robust garden-grown diets, he'd gotten a 6'0 boy thick through the chest and arms, a boy who could stack hay bales all day and then earn extra cash at the neighbors at night. A body to harness. So he harnessed him.

"Aren't you done yet?"

"Hu' 'p *een beetje*!"

And Dad leaned into the harness. During the summers he stacked ten thousand bales. The hardware man in town, a cousin, Conley, tells me a story from this era.

"I rode over his legs once."

I have never heard this story.

"Well, Milt always had to stack the rack so doggone high, you know right up to the front. And I was driving. And, yeah, we hit a bump—I couldn't help it—and Milt fell off the front and before I could stop, I had ridden over his legs."

So did he break his legs?

"Nope. Uh-huh. Rode right over them and he

was fine—maybe a little sore the next day. He was always such a brute.”

\* \* \*

When I enter his room on the neurology floor, Dad is resting, and Mom and Carmen sit on a couch in front of the window, with Heidi not quite perpendicular to them in her own chair. Mom is happy to see visitors, especially her children. With Lisa on the way, this will be a family reunion we don't have often enough, and Mom is almost upbeat, energized by these reinforcements.

Hugs all around.

I just wish we could leave Dad alone, that he could sleep until he's better, that he could sleep his way out of Hashimoto's encephalopathy. However, with the steroids that have been prescribed we're headed, no doubt, for all kinds of rocks turning up in the upheaval of his mind. Normally, Dad's stories about growing up, about Grampa and his brother Howard and characters

from Leota Ebenezer, are a mixed bag. They laugh at Grampa's foolishness; they paint him as an immovable tyrant. We learned to expect rocks in the soil is what I mean, but that's just reality. There will necessarily be rocks in good soil; that's just the curse, that's just life. But the work remains. You just keep going.

And sometimes, when we've done the work of picking them up, we set one up, as our Ebenezer.

Dad's sleeping, which is a relief.

Thus far has God helped us.

Then Mom gives me the gift I don't really want.

“Milt—hey Milt. Open your eyes. Look who's here.”

Dad lifts his head a little. His eyes open, begin their search. He's surfacing from deep water.

“Who is that?” she quizzes again.

A light comes into his eyes.

“Howard,” he says.