

Mattie's Last Stand

by

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Ninety-two years is a long, long time to gather thoughts that keep you awake at night, so no promise of dawn yet shone over the still waters of Lake Monona when Mattie Bergstrom rose to another day, making her way to the bathroom to brush and floss. She would repeat the routine after her breakfast. Though Mattie was a modest woman, she retained many treasures—perhaps the most treasured of all being her immaculate, full set of teeth.

Slowed but unbowed by stiffness and cold, she slipped a blue robe over her gray flannel and moved to the kitchen, where she set the oven to two hundred and fifty degrees and opened its door. It drove Marlene crazy to know she did this. Her daughter could be such a pain in the keister! A gas fire was a gas fire, for heaven's sake, so why not just use a smaller one to warm the room you're in?

Arguing this or any other point with Marlene was a waste of time these days, as all conversations with her wound quickly to the same dead end—her daughter wanted to pack her off to a senior living arrangement across the lake. The sudden urgency of this plan confused Mattie—it had been quite a while since her daughter had taken much interest in her daily life. Mattie cut a few corners and got by, a process Marlene, parked downtown in her million-dollar penthouse condo, seemed incapable of appreciating. She might have given up the bungalow years ago, had Marlene agreed to keep it in the family. She wanted her granddaughter to have it.

The heat from the oven warming her hands nicely, she thought about Jeni. How had such a sweet, loving creature sprung from such an unlikely source? Jeni had spent nearly her entire youth on Yahara Place. Even in her teenage years, when Marlene and her husband owned a thirty acre spread in Cross Plains, complete with a stable and her own horse, Jeni had always found excuses to stay in the city with Mattie. After university, she'd wasted no time resettling on the East Side. She lived just a few blocks up Spaight Street from Marquette Elementary, where she taught fourth grade, just as Mattie had for forty years.

Mattie understood that Jeni and her husband couldn't afford to buy the bungalow outright. Marlene could easily work out some sort of deal—it's what she did for a living, after all—but she absolutely refused to help with any arrangement that might benefit Jeni's husband. The man had a few problems, there was no doubt, but Marlene's dissatisfaction with him was relentless.

The worst of the chill off her bones, Mattie rose to retrieve a mug and pour herself some reheated Swedish coffee. Even Jeni would scold her for reheating coffee with egg in it, but it hadn't done her in yet. Sipping the mild brew slowly, she gazed through the kitchen window at the tall set of swings standing lonely sentinel before the frozen lake. The days when Jeni walked Mattie's great-grandchildren down to those swings were becoming few and far between, but where better could an old woman live among so many memories? Where better could she spend the few summer evenings she had left but on her own front porch, listening to echoes of Helmer's bat launching lazy fly balls out to her Johnny? "Get right under it, now, Sonny!" Helmer would shout—always encouraging—never critical for its own sake with her Johnny. Helmer had been a patient father—instructive and kind.

Staring at the faint glow rising in the southeastern sky, she remembered meeting Helmer on that sunny Chicago afternoon. Her aunt had been quite cross with the way she'd carried on with the tall blond man behind the counter, but Mattie hadn't been able to stop herself—his was the warmest, most understanding smile her nine-year-old eyes had ever come across. Helmer had been twenty-six at the time. She'd been quite bewildered by her aunt's scolding, but certainly understood now. Imagine her own great-granddaughter flirting with some thirty-year-old butcher over at the Co-op!

"Goodness!" Mattie exclaimed out loud.

She didn't recall any impropriety on Helmer's part from those days, but it hadn't taken her aunt very long to make her own suspicions clear to Mattie's uncle, forbidding him to take Mattie into the butcher shop on any more errands. Mattie might have forgotten about Helmer, had she not been walking with a friend on a sultry summer morning several years later, taking advantage of the Belmont Harbor breeze.

She'd spotted Helmer fishing off the rocks lining the jetty between the harbor and lake. Her friend had agreed to sit with her for a while, but soon moved to the shade of a nearby tree. When she moved off altogether, Mattie had stayed. While Helmer offered few words, his smile to her occasional encouragement of his fishing efforts had seemed welcome enough.

Having little luck in the climbing sun, he'd set the pole down and unwrapped a pork sandwich, offering her half. While he read the wrapper—a day-old Daily News—she'd opened her copy of Ann Vickers, feeling utterly scandalous in bare-legged appreciation of the freshening lake breeze. The citizens

of Lake View were flocking to the lake by then, a few of them casting curious looks in their direction, but who could say the pair weren't father and daughter?

The gathering throng eventually drove them away from the lakefront. The temperature jumped twenty degrees between Lake Shore Drive and Broadway, so Helmer bought Mattie an ice from a vendor on the corner. The two of them leaning against the cool brick wall beneath an awning, he'd watched her devour the sweet treat.

What a mess she'd been when Helmer's hands scooped some icy water from the bottom of the vendor's locker and poured it over hers!

"I have to go now," he'd said gently, his topaz eyes floating above hers. "This was very pleasant."

"Most pleasant," she'd answered.

She'd watched him cross Broadway. Turning back for her aunt's house, that might very well have been that.

Within three years, they'd eloped.

Mattie's memories tumbled like too many apples from her arms, leaving only the stove's digital clock to shine through the void.

8:30.

Skit! She had to hustle it up. She had plans to meet Jeni downtown for breakfast. Jeni had the morning off before parent-teacher conferences in the afternoon, so they were going to take advantage of this rare opportunity for just the two of them to get in a nice chat. After breakfast, they planned to walk up to the Capitol to support the Solidarity Singers—the last remnant of protests begun a year earlier, when the State of Wisconsin had declared itself union-oblivious.

Unionism was religion to the Bergstroms. Mattie had spent half the 50s helping to organize Wisconsin teachers into a solidified force to be reckoned with—a force elemental to creating the finest public education system in the world, to her eye. All her years since, she had given her time freely to union activities.

As for Helmer, he had never forgotten the ragged conditions of his early years in the yards. Despite his improved situation, he'd spent much of 1937—the year Mattie married him—volunteering for

the CIO's Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee. The Committee organized black and white as one in defiance of movement old-timers, whose racism had in large part led to the failure of the strikes in the early twenties. As a result, many of those old-timers had been blacklisted for years. Helmer's boss had been one of them. So ingrained, his bitterness would not tolerate Helmer's efforts, so he'd fired him.

Shunned by his old boss, Helmer was left with no options in Chicago. They moved to Madison, where he went to work for Mattie's uncle, who tolerated Helmer's leanings just long enough to get everybody to World War II. Three years later, Helmer returned from the Philippines an even quieter man, working at odd jobs while Mattie took in the children of war widows and working couples. Money was tight, but just when things were almost bad enough for Mattie to go begging to her ever-disapproving family for help, lightning had struck. One of Helmer's customers, impressed with his hard work, decided to extend a favor. It was no ordinary favor, for this man was a politician, for whom favors are high art. Just like that, Helmer found himself at the wheel of a Madison Bus—the last job he would ever have, want or need.

Mattie Bergstrom felt the old anger rise. Unions were the mortar binding every brick of 1838 Yahara Place. They were the lath behind every swipe of plaster on its walls and the work into every turn of lattice above its doorways. Set square and true, this house endured in solidarity with the collective spirit of every working man and woman with the courage to put their livelihoods, and their very lives, on the line, while reaching a strong hand back for those needing encouragement to do the same.

The climb was getting awfully steep—she knew that. This very house had appreciated forty-fold since 1948. A Metro bus driver's wage, faring better than most, only twenty-five. Minimum wage ... ten. She tried to put it out of her mind. At her age, unfortunately, forgetfulness could no more be depended upon than memory itself.

Almost ready, she was picking up steam. She pulled on her electric blue ski parka—one of few purchases Marlene had ever approved of. At six below out there, she would be fine. Her ice-grip boots came next—most hiking boots were useless on icy city sidewalks. Her mini-wallet zipped into one vest pocket and ten-ride pass in the other, she slipped on her wraparound shades, gathered the hood around her face, put on her liners and gloves, grabbed her sticks, and stepped outside.

The day was brilliant as only a northern January day can be. The white sun shone brilliant in a cobalt sky, its rays scattering off billions of crystals of new-fallen snow, lighting the world from below as above with nearly unbearable intensity. Where Yahara Place ended at the mile of river connecting Lakes Mendota and Monona, Mattie followed a short path along the bank, the crunch of her steps nearly as astonishing as the light.

Atop the graceful arch of the Rutledge Street bridge, she stopped and looked southeast, where the Yahara emptied into Lake Monona beneath an arch of cottonwoods. A favored view on a misty summer morning, it was far too bright, so she crossed the lanes and gazed upstream. Doing no favors for the catfish the river was named for, its meandering course had been straightened and landscaped by architects and civil engineers at the beginning of the 20th century. It was a lovely view, but Mattie often thought of the desperate rear guard of Black Hawk's party who had once lain in ambush on the west bank, desperately hoping the militia pursuing them from the Rock River Valley would be foolish enough to try to cross the river at night.

When it didn't happen, they'd rejoined the rest of their party. Twelve days later, the infamous Bad Axe Massacre would be the end of this final act of organized resistance to white rule east of the Mississippi. Of over a thousand mainly Sauk and Fox men, women and children who had followed Black Hawk to reclaim their native lands, only four hundred exhausted and hungry souls remained that day, huddled on the east bank of the Mississippi, a militia on their heels and facing a gunboat on the river.

Black Hawk had expected allies from the beginning. When they hadn't materialized, he'd repeatedly petitioned for the party's safe return to Iowa, only to see the militia's pursuit intensify. He and a few of his seasoned warriors well understood the intent behind such deaf ears. Ignoring the insistence of their leaders that their only chance of survival was to flee to the north, the bulk of the weary party decided to attempt surrender once more. Hundreds were slaughtered on the spot, many of them further mutilated by the unleashed beasts of war. Most who tried to cross the Mississippi drowned. Nearly all who managed to escape were hunted down and killed by the militia and US-aligned Sioux allies.

Many were the nights when Mattie could feel a few of those brave spirits slipping past her, rustling with the bats beneath the Willy Street bridge.

The 38 bus snapped her out of it, the sound carrying easily in the dense winter air. Before moving down to the bus stop, Mattie watched from the bridge's crown for just a moment. There was something cartoonish in the way the bus jounced its unfussy way along Rutledge. Never failing to remind her of Helmer, that Gillig BRT's foolish grin always spoke to her heart.

The bus swung over to the curb and eased to a stop, doors dead-center and open to its smiling driver, Noreen, who waited patiently for Mattie to take off her outer gloves, pull out her ten-ride, and pay her way.

"Ever'one else 'fraid of the cold today, but I ain't surprised to see you out and about, there, Mattie girl," Noreen drawled.

There were two passengers. Noreen waited for Mattie to settle into the first seat on the right side.

"It's beautiful out here, Noreen," Mattie offered.

Noreen took a quick look around and shook her head some, laughing her big little laugh that reminded Mattie of Tugboat Annie, from the 50s TV show.

"Outta yer cotton pickin' head, Mattie girl!" she exclaimed. "Colder than a bucket of penguin shit out there! Where ya off to so all-fire important?"

"Goin' to meet Jeni today, Noreen," Mattie told her, slipping into the pattern.

On Spaight, they rolled past the school playground where Mattie had cleaned up so many scrapes and bloody noses over the years. There were times, when the wind was right, that the sweet collection of children's sounds from this place would drift all the way into Mattie's kitchen window. Today, there was only old Raymond on his John Deere, the hum of his sweeper just audible over the blowers of the bus's heater.

Her excitement growing, she began readying herself for the two block walk up to the State Street café Jeni liked so much.

"Ya'll mind them sidewalks, now, old gal," Noreen cautioned Mattie, who stepped carefully off the lowered platform of the bus before turning back to dance a little soft shoe.

"Heh, heh, heh!" Noreen laughed, closing the door. "Heh, heh, heh!"

The wind had picked up from the southwest, making the walk up State Street a little unpleasant, even blowing at her back. Mattie was happy to get inside the door of the little café, but there was no sign

of Jeni yet. Stuffing both sets of gloves into her bag, she pulled out her phone and checked for messages. Nothing. Waiting for Jeni wasn't unusual, so Mattie ordered a Sumatran half-caff and took a seat on one of the easy chairs. There were plenty available—it was too late for the working crowd, too early for students, and just about too cold for anyone but stubborn old ladies.

Jeni made her entrance five minutes later, livening the place considerably. Dropping an artist's portfolio and a fully stuffed backpack, she let out an enormous sigh.

“Oh, don't get me started!” she grumbled, half sitting on the arm of the chair to Mattie's right, where she began pulling things willy-nilly out of the backpack and handing them over—searching for something.

“So I'm headed out the door and I'm late,” she began, “cuz I have to get the Outback in for an oil change, and Jackson has his coat off again and he's pulled the stool over to the counter, going through the cabinets. So I go, ‘What the hell, Jackson’... well, I don't really say it like that,” Jeni assured her, almost depositing a very unappealing used tissue in Mattie's hand before having a second thought and stuffing it back into a side pocket of the backpack.

“So Jackson picks that moment to inform me that it's his day to bring treats ... what do we have? ‘Bupkis,’ I tell him. ‘We have bupkis,’ and I don't know, I guess it came out a little strong and he starts bawling right there, loses his balance, and takes a nosedive right off the damn stool!”

“Jeni!” Mattie scolded, checking left and right for offended souls.

“Sure, I'm sorry,” Jeni said, not skipping a beat, “so then Charlotte gets all freaked out with Jackson howling on the floor and starts howling along with him. That gets Buddy going, looking at Jackson and then at me, tail down like he's gonna go for my throat or something and I'm afraid to go help the kid ‘cuz, I don't know, Buddy's getting a little strange in his old age. So now I'm later than shit ... sorry ... but Jackson doesn't come out of it so bad, so we head over to the Market to get some muffins or whatever and where the hell is my purse in this rattrap?...”

Mattie waited, watching her closely.

“Oh, here it is! So anyway, here I am. You wanna split a scone?”

It stopped suddenly as it began, leaving an odd feeling in its wake, like that creeping, slow motion backspin that sets in after spinning oneself dizzy.

“Sure, that sounds good.” Mattie told her. Truth be told, she was thinking maybe something more substantial, but she would wait. Jeni would devour her half in no time and be looking for more, so no rush. They scanned the bakery case, settling on raspberry almond.

Jeni paid and they moved over to a seating group. Mattie took a side chair while Jeni took her half a scone and slumped diagonally into the depths of a comically overstuffed loveseat, slumping her head back and sighing again. The shifts were sudden. Too sudden.

“Roger’s in trouble again,” she said, lying back with her two feet on the floor, staring at the ceiling.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Jeni,” said Mattie, unsure how much Jeni wanted to get into it. Mattie didn’t mind listening and trying to help, though. It was regenerative. As time flew by, she was finding it harder and harder to feel useful, but every now and again it turned out that the old font of wisdom wasn’t so much dried up as it just needed a prime.

“He’s been holed up in his study since last Friday,” Jeni explained. “I can’t seem to get anywhere with him. I don’t know if he’s taking his medication. I put it on his desk and the pills disappear, but I don’t know if he’s just tossing them to keep me off his back. He’s pulled that before.”

“What about work?” Mattie asked. “Is he doing any, that you can tell?”

“I don’t know, Grams,” Jeni answered, yanking herself up just enough to take a sip of coffee, ignoring the little bit spilling on her blouse. It was so unlike her to be dragging along so! Her husband’s bouts with depression were occasionally severe, but she’d always handled them. What was different here? It sounded like Roger was just being Roger. What was different with Jeni?

“Are you sure you’re up for this, today, Jen?” she asked.

Jeni squirmed upright to the edge of the chair and reached for her coffee.

“Sure. I got this far. I’m ready to go.”

Mattie was worried. She’d come across wildly differing opinions on whether depression is contagious. It was probably a matter of semantics more than anything else, but she was very afraid her Jeni might eventually spiral down some drain alongside Roger—who knew about these things?

Mattie checked her phone. Ten forty-five. The singalong began at eleven, but they didn't need to be there for the beginning. She didn't relish the idea of standing too long on those hard marble floors. If allowed, she could sit on the steps. It was impossible to know what the rules were on any given day.

Bundled up again, Mattie and Jeni stepped out into the cold shadows of State Street, turning left toward the capitol, its massive white granite dome crowning the street above them. How clever it seemed!

Soon they were standing on the marble rotunda floor beneath the dome, being approached by a smiling but obviously concerned Officer Ben Taylor of the Capitol Police. Ben had been one of Mattie's playground lambs—she'd never forgotten his young tears after he'd ambushed a favorite girlfriend with a snowball never intended for her left eye. "Ben," she'd told him gently, "we all throw snowballs, but she had no idea you were there. That isn't fair, Ben. You should tell her you're sorry."

He had apologized. Twenty-five years later, he was still apologizing to the same girl.

"Hi, Mrs. Bergstrom." he said, nervously looking over the portfolio under Jeni's arm. "I don't suppose those are landscapes, are they?"

Mattie knew Ben had no real beef with the protestors. They were loud and a little messy, is all, but those were high crimes in white society, so he was stuck in the middle. A couple of weeks back, the powers that be had become irritated enough by the protestors to declare the holding of signs in the Capitol to be an assault on public safety. Ben had already written a few souls up, but enough was never enough. New orders had come down, insisting the Capitol Police actually zip tie the offenders and march them downstairs to the station desk, which was just about the last thing Ben wanted for Mattie and Jeni.

"I expect you'll do your job," Mattie told him with a wide smile. "Be true to your commitments, Ben."

Ben's partner, Officer Russkind, passed by, yelling a little too loudly, "C'mon there, Taylor. Time to go can some canaries!"

"What an asshole!" muttered Jeni.

"Jeni!" Mattie scolded.

The singers began a Dylan song and Mattie watched the signs come out. There were suddenly quite a few people around, though ten organized into a group was the legal limit without a permit. Some press had appeared as well, alerted to the change in orders. Mattie watched Ben roll a speaker out from

behind the information desk. Stopping in front of the group, he pushed a button. A recording ordered the crowd to put their signs away or face arrest.

Over and over it looped—more noxious than the actual protest, but fairly effective. Some folks complied and some left. Two hundred dollar fines were putting a dent in solidarity, but Jeni and Mattie held fast.

Russkin, though, was losing his patience. Mattie saw him readying his ties, enjoying his creepy self a little too much as he eyed the two of them. She cringed at the thought of his mealy hands on her Jeni. Ben also watched closely, positioning himself between the two women and his partner.

Russkin approached, but when Ben faced him down, he paused, unsure of his next move. With a shrug, he moved off to the side, where a middle-aged man offered his wrists. As he bound the man, looking Ben's way in expectation, Ben knew he had no choice. Reluctantly, he pulled some ties and turned to Mattie, who had balanced her big sign in front of her, still visible, and offered her own wrists to the cause. While she smiled up at Ben, he tied her as loosely as possible. Remaining close to Mattie's side, he bound Jeni's hands as well.

Mattie had figured Ben and Russkin would just take three or four protestors downstairs and that would be that, but Russkin was on a roll, zip tying anyone even near a sign, and not very carefully. It wasn't long before someone flinched at this ham-handed operation. His day made, Russkin dropped the slight Hmong man down to the marble floor and applied a knee to his neck.

With the agitated crowd beginning to encircle the pair, Ben had no choice but to go find a solution to the mess his partner had made for them, while a very angry Jeni continually screamed at Russkin to take it easy.

In all the chaos, someone bumped Mattie's left side. "Oh, no!" she thought, feeling herself pass the tipping point, her hands helplessly bound before her. Falling face first, she twisted instinctively to her side. When her hip struck the marble first, she felt it pop. Immediately after, her shoulder hit with more of a crunch. A second later, she was relieved to be conscious. Another second later, the pain exploded.

"Grandma, Grandma!" Jeni cried out, spreading a couple of offered coats across Mattie as she knelt at her side, terrified to watch the most constant beacon in her life slipping into feverish shock. Ben, afraid to touch Mattie, knelt behind her head. His words failing to describe how sorry he was, he lapsed

into giant, wracking sobs. Jeni, satisfied for the moment with Mattie's pulse, moved behind him and slipped her still-bound hands over his neck, as much to comfort herself as him.

But Ben had not forgotten who he was. He looked up quickly. Sure as hell, Russkin was unsnapping his weapon.

Looking his partner straight in the eye, he shouted, "No!"

He shouted it very loudly. Up to the great dome it soared, resounding into chaos above the stunned crowd.

"No!"

Past massive, locked wooden and iron doors it rushed, reaching the limits of corridors built toward the north, south, east and west of Wisconsin, where it turned back on itself.

"No!"

In time, it subsided. In its wake, an approaching ambulance could be heard.