

THE ROAD OUT OF HELL

Sanford Clark and the True Story
of the Wineville Murders



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ANTHONY FLACCO
with JERRY CLARK

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Foreword

By Dr. Michael Stone
host of the Discovery Channel's *Most Evil*

Anthony Flacco's splendid book about the Wineville murders in the mid-1920s manages to be both chilling and uplifting. How is this possible? The reason is this: Though it is one book, *The Road Out of Hell* is two interlaced biographies—one of an uncle and the other of his nephew. Gordon Stewart Northcott, the uncle, is one of the worst human beings you will ever encounter—even in true-crime literature, which does not shy away from evil acts and evil people. Sanford Clark, the nephew, is one of the most heroic persons you are likely to read about, due to his steadfast adherence to what is good and noble during the months he was subjected to unimaginable torture from his uncle—and for the remaining sixty-two years of his life.

When he was twenty (just seven years older than his nephew), Northcott lured Sanford from Saskatchewan, where they both lived, to an isolated chicken ranch near Los Angeles. There, effectively cut off from the outside world, Northcott subjected Sanford to systematic torture, anal rape, degradation and humiliation, and—in some ways, worse—of all—forced participation in the cover-up of Northcott's more than twenty murders of other boys and young men.

Since I already mentioned evil acts and evil people, let me say a few words about evil. Evil is not something instilled in a few unlucky persons by a malicious Lucifer. If we are to understand “evil” at all, we must think of it as a word—an emotional word—we use to describe actions performed by other humans that we experience as breathtakingly horrible, shocking, and, often enough, nauseating. We learn of evil actions aplenty through the papers and the six o'clock news. But it is extremely rare to learn of a person whose actions are evil *all the time*. This is truly an “evil person.”

The Road Out of Hell is the 633rd true-crime book I have read in the past twenty years. Alongside my work in forensics and as host of the Discovery Channel show *Most Evil*, this extensive reading has made me familiar with thousands of men and women who have

committed murder in peacetime. (Wartime is a different story.) Northcott is only the sixth whom I would describe as an *evil person*.

All six killers I've identified as evil have certain features in common: All are men guilty of serial sexual homicide; all are psychopaths; all are sadistic. The psychopath is quintessentially callous, manipulative, deceitful, and a stranger to compassion and remorse, though not necessarily violent or cruel. It is sadism that adds the quality—and this is its key feature—of *enjoying the suffering of others*.

Most readers will be familiar with the iconic Jeffrey Dahmer, also a homosexual pedophile serial killer like Northcott. But Dahmer anesthetized his victims with “knockout drops” before killing them, and then had sex with the corpses. No such delicacy in Northcott. And no such luck for his victims—those murdered as well as his nephew Sanford, who endured almost two years of his uncle's sadism in its full panoply and extreme severity. One of the nastiest elements of sadism involved forcing Sanford to choose between participation in an evil act (smashing the skulls of the victims and scattering the fragments over the fields, to avoid detection) or being killed himself.

A mere teenager at the time, Sanford did the right thing: He chose life, albeit at the price of doing things utterly repugnant to him, things that he knew were wrong—under any but the bizarre circumstances in which he was held captive. Understandably, yet unnecessarily, he carried guilt about his participation to his grave. Sanford had nightmares and flashbacks for the rest of his life about the atrocities he had witnessed and he had self-recriminations for the things his uncle had forced him to do. (In psychiatry, we push all that into the pigeonhole of “post-traumatic stress disorder”—a pretty pale label for all that Sanford suffered.) The consistently good, caring, and charitable life Sanford led after his uncle's arrest was never enough to put his mind at ease, no matter that he served honorably for six years on the European front in World War II, was married for fifty-five years, and raised two sons. His story reads like one of redemption—though, as author Flacco points out, redemption somehow isn't the right word, since Sanford had done nothing wrong to atone for.

What I find fascinating about *The Road Out of Hell* is not only the hell that Stewart created, but the road that Sanford was able to take out of it. In the last few years psychiatry has come to understand more about the factors that nudge certain people into committing the outrageous acts we label “evil.” By no means are they all psychopaths and sadists. Some are self-centered schemers who plot to kill a spouse for insurance money; others are paranoid loners who lose a job or a lover and then explode into a massacre. We know about heredity and birth complications, about bad families and childhood head injury, and even about some of the brain abnormalities that spell trouble

in certain cases. So oddly enough, Northcott—as rare an exemplar of evil as he is—is less mystery than his nephew Sanford, whose goodness is almost inexplicable.

Both uncle and nephew, in addition to having a fourth of their blood in common, had abusive, unscrupulous mothers who were abusive, unscrupulous viragos. Both had fathers who were tyrannized by their wives and indifferent toward their children. And yet, one ended up evil and the other transcendently good. Why? I don't know. Most people are compassionate, have empathy, and live their lives without succumbing to violence or cruelty. A certain measure of goodness is, so to say, our default position. Most of our brains are wired for being morally upright and good. Only a few are wired for wickedness. For the super-goodness of Sanford, we have no word in the language and little understanding. But we're also wired to feel *awe*, when we hear of either the terribly bad or the astonishingly good. That's what makes Flacco's book what it is: awesome.

Preface

By Anthony Flacco

The events and characters in this book are real. All speculation and dramatization is bounded by the known facts and is employed to hold the story together without harming the truth of it.

Because the cruel deaths of kidnapped children are at the bottom of all this, the telling must be honest and fair. However, as with any infamous murder trial implicating multiple defendants, there were people lying, guessing, and speculating all around this case back in those times, and some of those conflicting accounts survive today. Anywhere I encountered incompatible versions of something, I let the accumulated research guide me as to which one to accept. Any guessing of my own regarding the portrayals of the people in this story is done within the parameters of documented evidence. As often as possible, the manner of each character's speech is taken from transcriptions of the spoken words in court records, police records, and newspaper records dating from the year 1926 and forward. Imagination and extrapolation fill the gaps.

The research base for this book includes relevant portions of the case record from the arrest and prosecution of Gordon Stewart Northcott. His twenty-seven-day trial ended on February 7, 1929, and the facts that convicted him are widely available in the public record. Thus the various deposition documents and evidence photographs that are referenced here are used as they apply to Sanford Wesley Clark and his personal condition, not to the particulars of the criminal case against Gordon Stewart Northcott, which has long since been settled.

Access was provided to me for a number of Sanford Clark's private family documents, photographs, letters, and notes by Sanford's adopted son Jerry Clark. Jerry's firsthand observations of Sanford's personality form the primary basis for his portrayal as an adult long after the public record goes silent about him. I traveled to the former Whittier Boy's School, where Sanford was rehabilitated. It is now closed to operation but still stands. The current occupants of the former Wineville murder ranch allowed me to visit the

property. The patch of land felt tiny. It was painful just to imagine a little boy poking around on that flat piece of earth while trying to stay out of the way of a psychotic sadist. The ranch house originally built by the Northcott family also still stands, although it has been modernized and somewhat remodeled so that the dwelling that Sanford once knew is concealed.

These sources were vitally augmented by the advantage of having a firsthand observer of Sanford Clark in his adoptive son, Jerry, who is joined in his celebration of the man by Robert Clark, Sanford's other adopted son. Family members and friends were also kind enough to each provide a piece of the answer to the riddle.

Introduction

By Jerry Clark

I had just turned seventeen when my father revealed his past to me, terrible in its gruesome details. His words completely altered my life. The descriptions were strong enough to burn the scenes into my memory and to leave them there, forever clear.

The night was a cold one. We were riding in the car, supposedly on our way to a local hockey game, when at some point he pulled over to the side of the road and said that he needed to have a talk with me. I wondered if I was in trouble for something. He left the engine idling, but the windows soon fogged over while he revealed that he had taken me out by myself that night because there were things that he needed to tell me, things that my adoptive brother was too young to hear. From that moment on, the only sounds were my father's voice and the car's low background rumble. I quickly stopped noticing the time and never thought about it again for the rest of the night.

He began with a sigh that made it clear that he was about to say something that he did not want to put into words. When he finally spoke, it was in a halting and defeated voice that I had never heard him use. "I need to tell you some things."

By now, my sense of alarm was in overdrive. "Okay," I said, hoping I sounded calm.

He sighed again. "You heard about that nurse in our neighborhood who disappeared, eh? Her body was found not too far from our place, close enough to where we live that the newspapers might, you know, make some comparisons to other cases. And if they do, they're likely to pull up their files on a relative of ours named Gordon Stewart Northcott and me."

He then laid out a story of two years of madness and murder that had been visited upon him, beginning when he was a boy of thirteen. He explained everything. There was no way that he could give me a sanitized version. To soften this story would be to paint in a lie. That was why he wanted to make sure I heard it from him first.

Before long, I was too stunned to ask any questions. I just sat and let him unwind the details, while he put an end to my boyhood by revealing the series of events that put a

end to his.

JERRY CLAR
SASKATOON, CANADA
APRIL 200

One

Thirteen-year-old Sanford Clark felt his stomach lurch when he realized that his mother was really going to send him away. He stared down at the floor and fought to control his breathing while his brain reeled from the news. Everything about it felt wrong. The atmosphere in the room took on a poisonous feel, as if a thin mist of acid had just rolled in through the window. He knew that his mother and uncle were telling him a pack of lies. It was all so off-kilter and strange that the moment belonged in a bad dream.

There was his mother, Winnie, doing more of that wink-and-grin whispering that she and her younger brother Stewart always fell into whenever they thought nobody was around. Today, for some reason, she didn't appear to care that Sanford was standing right there—or even that her husband was in the room. She seemed determined to end Uncle Stewart's visit with all the closeness that she could get from him. Sanford wondered how his father could fail to see it. But when John Clark was at home, he just kind of floated around in their lives. He had gotten himself bitched into silence at some point in the distant past, back when Sanford was too small to remember. Now he only knew his father's ghost.

He strained for a way to get his father involved, even though that was generally not productive. While John did have enough strength to explode for a minute or so when life stresses became too much for him, he also burned out as quick as a match head. Nowadays, he seldom bothered with anything enough to lose his temper over it. On the rare occasions when he did slip, Winnie made sure he paid for it, sometimes for weeks.

But today their whispering—it almost seemed more like flirting—had the terrifying purpose of giving Sanford away to Uncle Stewart. It was clear that no one could stop her. Their story was that Uncle Stewart would be taking Sanford on a road trip in his big Buick roadster to visit the city of Regina, about 150 miles southeast, the capital of Saskatchewan. “It will be a grand trip, Sanford!” Uncle Stewart enthused. “And I know you'd love to see the Regina Pats on their home field, right?”

“They're junior league.”

“Sanford,” Winnie added, “Regina is our capital city and you need to know about it. It's a beautiful place and you're going to let Uncle Stewart show you around.”

“We’ll make a game out of it!” Uncle Stewart chimed in, lying like a crooked salesman.
“We’ll drive around town, looking for any leftover signs of the Regina Hurricane.”

“Wasn’t that before I was born?”

“Not that far. It’s been fourteen years—so if they haven’t fixed everything back up by now, we’ll write to the newspapers! An exposé! Think of it: two hicks from Saskatoon criticizing the capital. It’ll be a *scandal*, ha-ha!”

Sanford figured that the only scandal here was that his mother was going to give him away while she and her brother lied to him with such conviction. Sanford was no stranger to his mother’s skills at deception—he had spent much of his life in listening to her lie to anybody who had anything to give up.

He had forgotten how much his mother and her brother shared the trait. Prior to the two-week visit from Uncle Stewart, Sanford had not seen him or his family since they had left Canada in a hurry two years before. Nobody ever told Sanford why the Northco family wanted to leave the country, but their whole family knew that Uncle Stewart had managed to infuriate certain neighbors with his treatment of their children. No doubt he could lie well about that too. But Sanford had sneaked up on his mother and uncle earlier that day while they were giggling in the corner, making their plans for him. Now he knew full well that nothing about this Regina story was true.

He sneaked another glance at his mother. Winnie was in one of her detached moods, not really recognizing anything that was going on around her. The only time she looked at anybody in the eye while she was in this mood was to rage at them. He figured that was why she could discuss shipping him away like it was nothing. He struggled for his voice.

“This is a bunch of baloney!” he finally blurted. “I know we’re not going to Regina! He’s taking me all the way down to the States! I *heard* you talking about that stupid chicken ranch!”

Winnie aimed that stare of hers directly into his eyes. He saw it then: she would sooner take a bite out of his skull than acknowledge the truth of anything he said. Her eyebrows pulled inward. “Why, you selfish, self-centered son of a bitch! What about *momma*? Huh? What about *me*?”

“... About you?”

“Do not answer my question with a question, you little shit!”

“Hell, Sissie—go ahead and tell him.”

“Oh, now you *want* me to tell him?”

“Might as well.”

“You want to listen to his whining?”

“He’s not gonna whine.” Uncle Stewart now directed a menacing gaze at Sanford. “An

you, sport?"

Sanford tried to ignore the question. "I don't want to go to—"

"He's not gonna whine!" Uncle Stewart barked. Then he continued in a menacingly soft voice: "Are you, sport?"

"I wasn't whining."

Winnie snorted with disgust. "God damn it, you spoiled bastard! You don't know what *work* is. You don't know what *struggle* is."

"That's something every boy should learn, Sanford," Uncle Stewart added.

"It's not fair to just—" Sanford began, but Winnie cut him off.

"*All right!*" she shouted. After a pause to stare into space and slowly shake her head, she took a deep breath and spoke, giving the appearance of weighing every word which she delivered her considered thoughts. "Son. There is truly—and I *mean* this—truly something wrong with you. I think that you are missing something that a normal boy is supposed to have. It's this selfishness of yours, the way that you only think about yourself. There are words for people like that. Bad words. So all right, then, you want to know what's up? Fine and dandy: here it is! You're going down to California with Stewart. I was *trying* to make it easier for you, but no, you won't have it.

"Any normal boy loves adventure. Once any *real* boy gets out onto the road, you know with the wind in his hair, it's only natural for that boy to want to keep on traveling as fast as he can, as long as he's got plenty of sandwiches. A mother knows these things."

"Why would I want to keep on trav—"

"But it's a waste of time to think about you. A show of courtesy is lost on you!"

Winnie ticked her way through the old list of his sins, one finger at a time. She could take two or three minutes per finger, use up every one of them and add in a few of her own toes before she got it all out of her system. He took a deep breath while the familiar damnations began trundling before him: A foolish daydreamer too misty-headed for his own good. A loafer who devoured popular fiction but who could barely sit through a class and seldom passed an exam. A dolt who responded too slowly, got her orders assigned backwards, or just went about everything wrong. He had always been more trouble than he was worth.

"That's why you need this new life," she summed up. "You can go to school down there and help take care of Uncle Stewart's place the rest of the time."

But to Sanford, this "real story" sounded every bit as ridiculous as their lie. *Breeding livestock with Uncle Stewart out in the desert?* Sanford's Uncle Stewart was a delicate twenty-year-old aspiring pianist. He had lived all of his life in Canada until two years ago when he and his parents had left for the States. The would-be chicken rancher had always

been tremendously proud of the fact that he played the piano with enough skill to appear professionally with local orchestras and silent film houses. Uncle Stewart had played up here in the province and supposedly down in the States as well. The whole damned family knew about his dreams of becoming a concert pianist. And as for living in the desert, Sanford had never thought about it before, but why would anybody move from a city like Los Angeles to live in the middle of nowhere unless they had to?

He chewed his lip in consternation and pushed his brain for an answer: what could there be about such an isolated location that would hold Uncle Stewart's interest? Nobody was mentioning anything about that. But it stood to reason that a bunch of cooped-up fowl would be filthy and have an overpowering smell in that heat. Taking care of them was a guaranteed grind of disgusting work that went against everything Sanford knew about his uncle.

A stinking chicken ranch.

He threw a sideways glance at Uncle Stewart, who was staring at him with a mixture of impatience to get going and disappointment with his cargo. Uncle Stewart had made clear for the entire two weeks of his visit that he really wanted Sanford's younger brother, Kenneth. He had raved like a trial lawyer, trying to persuade Winnie to let go of that boy. It was a surprise to everybody when Winnie flatly refused. She had always been willing to give her brother anything he wanted, so much so that Sanford fully expected that he and his brother would both have to go. Young Kenneth was Winnie's favorite son, however. She never made a secret of that. So to Sanford's amazement, she actually told her brother that he was asking too much of her. She stopped his objections before he could even get started by holding up her hand and announcing that she would "only say it once." All talk of taking her favorite boy was over. Stewart would just have to make do with Sanford.

"But all my friends are here," Sanford began again.

"You'll make new ones," Winnie replied with a shrug. "You're a kid."

"And you need to get away from your trouble-maker friends," jeered Uncle Stewart.

"They're not—"

"*Sanford!*" Winnie's voice shot through the room like a gun blast.

After a pause, Uncle Stewart began to console him with talk of enrolling in a local Scouting program down there "to offer you some boyhood adventure and also to help with your character development." Winnie added that it might be just what he needed.

Sanford desperately wanted to produce an argument in the strongest possible terms against going, but he had no idea how to stand up for himself against these two adults. He had no available examples. The most that he could do was to stuff his outrage back down out of sight. After that, all he could do was to grit his teeth and look for the chance to

jump in on the conversation like a kid who has to pee. Meanwhile, two of the adults planned his future while his father studied the daily paper.

Now that the pose about going to Regina was over, Winnie and her brother dropped as if it had never existed. Neither of them displayed any trace of embarrassment over being discovered. Ordinarily this shared trait was the only thing that Sanford liked about dealing with either of them, because when they decided to bury something, it just disappeared. The pattern was that they got mad, flew into a rage, then got over it and moved on. Sanford noticed how easily they meshed that way; they didn't even have to check with each other first. There was a degree of certainty in that. Winnie's fires flashed quickly and burned hot; smoldering was something left to her husband. This time however, Sanford found that the topic of his forced trip was disappearing much too quickly. He felt himself being flushed away with it.

Uncle Stewart noticed Sanford's distress and broke into a broad grin. "Winnie! I got the feeling Sanford doesn't appreciate how the ranching experience is going to mold his character. I'm really going to toughen him up!" He laughed out loud at that, then winked at Winnie like a guy who has just made a very fine joke indeed.

This one time, Sanford's mother did not laugh along with him the way she always did. That struck Sanford as very odd, combined with the way her expression changed when her brother spoke of toughening him up. Even though Winnie was in that detached mood of hers, she looked away from Sanford as if she could not meet his eyes. That was so out of character for her that it instilled a sense of dread in him. Restrained silence was the domain of the male in that house.

"Ahem!" John Clark surprised everyone by speaking out this time.

For one flashing moment, Sanford's hopes soared. His father came to life like a man snapping out of a nap. His gangly form rose from the chair and stood tall with an anger set to his jaw and determination in his eyes. He nodded to his son, then stared back and forth between the other two. "Might as well say it right now—I don't care for the sound of this plan at all. I have not heard *one* single solitary thing about it that shows me any common sense!" He glared at Uncle Stewart to emphasize that he didn't trust him one little bit. It was glorious.

"Oh, my!" Winnie replied at the very top of her voice, acting like she truly was impressed. "Aren't you the smart one, John! Aren't you the manly parent! So tell us: what is your new job that's going to bring home the extra money to make up for what it would cost us to keep him here? Knock-knock, anybody home? Oh, what's that? No answer! Bastard! Figure out *that* one, if you get to feeling cocky—instead of just standing there with your cock in your hand!" She and Uncle Stewart both snorted like horses.

That was all it took for Winnie Clark to beat John Clark back into his silence and his newspaper. Sanford could almost see the puncture marks in his father's face. The machinery of their relationship groaned into action while his father clenched his jaw and blushed an angry color, then sat back down without looking at his son. He shook his head and stared into space. Sanford could hear him grinding his teeth.

Sanford would have bolted from the house if he had had any idea of somewhere safe to go. He tried to think of a workable destination, but it was no good. At his age, what could he tell people that would keep them from sending him right back? And *then* how angry would Winnie be?

The only real glimmer of hope left to him was his older sister Jessie. She was already seventeen and would be able to leave home soon. Then he might be able to run off and live with her. Somehow improvise a new life. He would be willing to try almost anything else besides living out in the desert, just him and Uncle Stewart and hundreds of caged birds.

A stinking chicken ranch.

Uncle Stewart gripped him by the back of his neck and announced that it was time to get going. It would take days to drive all the way through the States to southern California. Uncle Stewart announced that their first stop in California was going to be a visit to his parents in Los Angeles. Sanford remembered his grandparents well enough from when they had lived up here nearby, but he barely knew them. His naturally shy nature gave him no comfort in the idea of their home.

Uncle Stewart snatched up Sanford's small duffel bag with one hand and kept the other on the back of his neck while he walked him out of the house. The hurried good-byes passed in a blur. Sanford noticed that his father's handshake felt extra firm. He figured that it meant his father was sorry that he couldn't do more to help. The thought felt good.

He felt better for a moment when Jessie hugged him. The hardest thing was to leave Jessie behind. She had been his protector often enough, but there was nothing she could do in a situation like this. It struck him then, getting back to his previous thought, that she could hardly be expected to take him with her and support them both. And Jessie was far too protective of him to ever agree that he could quit school and work, just to escape their family home.

"You'd better write to me," she whispered into his ear.

"Don't let 'em do this, Jessie!" he blurted out and immediately regretted it.

"What? Come on now, Sang."

The nickname always got his attention. Nobody else called him that. Her voice was s

soft that she practically breathed the words to him.

“I know you’ll make the best of everything. Why, I’ll come and get you myself if I have to, soon as I’m able to do it.”

Then she let go of him. He hated the feeling of helplessness and could not imagine how grownups managed to get used to it.

By the time they hit the United States border at Montana, they had been driving for nearly twelve hours over some pretty poor roadbed. Sanford was glad for the chance to stretch his legs at the border, so he hardly bothered to pay attention when Uncle Stewart told him what to do next.

“All right, now: no matter what, you keep quiet. I do the talking. It’s legal for me to cross back over, but to get you into the States we have to claim you have dual citizenship.”

“How do I do that?”

“You don’t. That’s why I’m telling you to shut up. We have to make sure your story works. You need to let me take care of it. The way you do that is, you keep quiet and you say nothing to nobody. My goodness, you really can be thick sometimes.” He placed his hands on Sanford’s shoulders and focused his gaze on him. “Stand. Stay.” Then he went off to get some lies going.

Sanford felt so intimidated by the foreign-looking American uniforms that he didn’t even know his mind hanging back. He stood in the corner and watched the whole process, marveling at the energy that his uncle invested into lying to these people. The part of the story that Sanford overheard had something in it about Sanford being born in the United States but they lost his papers and somebody was dying down in the States at this moment, in a hospital. “God, it’s a saga,” Sanford muttered under his breath. Meanwhile, Uncle Stewart kept up a nonstop patter at the guards while he wove one excuse into another until it seemed that in the end the officials waved them across into the States just to get them out of the way.

As soon as Sanford and Uncle Stewart cleared the border, they fell into a pattern of driving through the daylight hours and then camping near the road at night. Uncle Stewart staked claim on the car seat, so Sanford slept in blankets on the ground. He didn’t mind. It felt good to stretch out straight. Otherwise, the long ride was mostly an ordeal of boredom. He passed the time by studying sudden wild shifts in his uncle’s moods.

For most of this trip, Uncle Stewart was wide awake and excited, nearly frantic. But then there were those periods when he would slide down into foul moods and glower for

a couple of hours. Sanford found that the strangest part was the way he always pulled back out of it. He would start talking up a blue streak again, whether or not anything had actually happened that could logically make him feel any better or worse.

The weather got noticeably warmer while they moved south, and that was nice for a while. Uncle Stewart put the convertible top down so that they rode with their hair flying while he shouted over the sounds of the engine and the onrushing air. Sanford figured Uncle Stewart liked shouting over the wind because it forced Sanford to work harder in understanding what he was saying. So far, the only thing that had made his uncle happy was all was for Sanford to pay complete attention to him.

At the moment, Uncle Stewart was half an hour into the topic of Hollywood movies. His tone was beginning to take on a strange urgency, as if he had a solemn duty to figure out what should be done about the current state of American movies and that he needed to have the answers ready by the time they got down to Los Angeles. "It's typical! I am telling you. *Completely* typical procedure for Hollywood movies! So when you do something stupid like putting that nasty old queen Greta Garbo in the female lead—*and* F.Y.I. here, *The Paradise Case* is only going to be the biggest picture that David O. Selznick has ever done. Are you listening? Good! This is important! Anyway, this fool, this idiot, this hopeless moron puts her in the lead of his biggest picture even though she is supposed to be some kind of crackpot who treats everybody like garbage and even though he *could* have cast Jeanette MacDonald."

He reached over and poked Sanford. "Jeanette MacDonald! Do you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you!" Sanford yelled to keep him from poking again. Stewart's fingertip felt like a knitting needle.

"Okay, then, do you know who she *is*?" Uncle Stewart jeered. "No?" He playfully slapped the back of Sanford's head, as he had already done several times that day. "Well, I am telling you this and you had best hear me loud and clear, buddy: *on top of* beauty that drives men crazy, Jeanette MacDonald has *talent, humility, and brains!* Can you say that?"

"Sure," Sanford replied into the wind.

"Then let's *hear* you! Talent, humility, and brains!"

It took Sanford a moment's worth of blank staring before he realized that it was an actual request. *All right*, he thought, *if this will do it for him*, eager to give him the expected answer and get him to relax, maybe even stop and take a break. "Talent, Beauty!" Sanford bellowed in Uncle Stewart's direction. But before he finished, Uncle Stewart reached over and struck him in the back of his head with the flat of his hand. The time the blow was so strong that Sanford's chin bounced off of his chest. He bit his tongue and felt a mouthful of fire.

Uncle Stewart glanced over at him and broke out laughing, as if the two of them were famous friends. “You look like you just shit yourself!” He dropped the friendly mask before he continued. “It’s talent, *humility*, and brains! Didn’t I just say that?”

“Yes,” Sanford shouted back, maybe a little too fast.

“Well then, what are you trying to do, piss all over me?”

“What?”

“Are you saying that you are willing to repeat two-thirds of what I tell you but you intend to just ignore the other third, then?”

“What are you talking about?”

Uncle Stewart hit him in the back of the head again, and this time Sanford saw stars. He stared straight into a swimming school of twinkling lights, trying to get his vision into focus. As a small-framed boy with a passive nature, Sanford had already learned how to tense any part of his body just a split second before the impact of an oncoming blow, but the skill was useless with a strike to the head. It took too long to get his arm up there. Uncle Stewart kept catching him unprepared.

Meanwhile a rush of guilt flooded through him. The truth was that he could have avoided that last blow altogether. Uncle Stewart was correct that Sanford knew what he meant. He had to admit to himself that he tried to play dumb and Uncle Stewart saw straight through it. Sanford made an indelible mental note: *Do not lie to Uncle Stewart unless you are prepared to really put one over. He’s an expert and he will catch you.*

Uncle Stewart laughed. “That last little love tap got your attention, didn’t it?” Sanford looked in his direction and nodded. He couldn’t see him clearly yet, and he was still too surprised and frightened to speak. “Good,” Uncle Stewart continued. “So try it again. Jeanette MacDonald would be a far better choice for the female lead in Mr. Selznick’s next picture, because of her ...”

“Talent, *humility*, and brains!” Sanford immediately chimed in.

Uncle Stewart’s face lit up so brightly that Sanford realized he had scored a point. “Exactly! *These* are the values that ought to drive American movies today. But when you think about the sheer size of the audiences who see these things, you have to realize that they represent *money*, my friend! Money creates phony goodness and reveals all women for the whores that they are!”

“You mean like with prostitution?” Sanford asked, being thirteen. This time the blow to the back of his head snapped it forward so hard that he landed against the passenger door, fighting dizziness while his ears rang. Outrage filled him, and he instinctively turned to glare in shock at Uncle Stewart—who burst out in good-natured laughter.

“You should see your face! Don’t worry about it. Just don’t interrupt me. Because

fact, I was going to tell you about *values*, all right?"

They slowed down to cross a set of railroad tracks. On the other side, he pulled off to the side of the road, put the car in neutral, and set the brake. Sanford felt a rush of fear and fought the urge to jump out and run. *Run where?* He didn't know any men who behaved like this, but he sensed that it was a variation on his mother's explosiveness. That meant that if he ran, it would only enrage Uncle Stewart in the same way that it enraged her. Winnie's violence could be endured by making a game out of dodging her, but Uncle Stewart would be able to chase him down. It would not matter how fast he ran. Uncle Stewart hit a lot harder than Winnie did.

Even in that moment, Sanford automatically kept his distress to himself. He knew better than to cower before his uncle. *When they see that, it makes them want to hit you again.* He turned to look at something safe like the floor while he kept his left arm ready to whip upward and cover his face.

But Uncle Stewart did not strike out at him this time. Instead he turned and looked straight ahead through the windscreen, then inhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and slowly let the air back out. His eyes remained closed for another few seconds until a smile crossed his face. His features softened and his expression turned coy, like somebody who has a secret. When he opened them, the anger was gone from his face. He regarded Sanford with bored amusement. When he spoke, his voice sounded so different that it reminded Sanford of a flirtatious teenaged girl. "Your mother told me how much trouble you are to her. Dreamer. Can't pay attention. Don't like to go to school. But that was back there, and you're not back there any more. I'm the adult and you're the kid. You do what you're told. You don't give me grief. This is how we get along. Together. In life. Correct?"

Sanford picked up his cue and tried to respond, but his throat caught. Nothing came out but air. He got the immediate sense that it would be a dangerous transgression of some kind for him to misspeak, even though he was not sure why. He tried a second time. "Yes." This time the sound came out.

He was almost too late. Uncle Stewart's eyes flashed with annoyance as if the familiar anger was about to return. But a moment later the relaxation came back over him. When he spoke, he was still using that odd girly voice. "So as I was about to say, about the values, is that you take all of the children of the world who have talent, humility, and brains, and you nurture them. You cherish them. You ... well. Then you get *rid* of all the rest! And there you have the making of *Utopia*, buddy! Simple as pie."

Uncle Stewart was looking at him as if he expected a response, but Sanford had nothing. The best he could do was to mutter: "Um, all right."

His uncle gave him a strange smile. Like a nasty girl. Sanford had never seen him use it

“You can say that again,” he said with a solemn nod. He put the car in gear and released the brake, then pulled onto the road and accelerated with a heavy foot. “All we need is the *willpower* to do it!”

“Do what?” Sanford asked, guessing that further questions were allowed.

“Get rid of all the rejects!” Stewart shouted over the growing headwind.

Sanford figured he should work at keeping the conversation going. Anything to keep him happy. “How does somebody do that?” It seemed as if he would somehow treat lighter with Uncle Stewart if he avoided asking how he would do it.

“How? What do you mean, ‘how’? Somebody needs to just stick out his chest and get the job done, that’s how!” He steered the car to avoid a dead skunk. “Woops! Get that smell on your tires, it’s there for miles. Anyway, Hollywood is pitching in with this helping us to get rid of the rejects! And you have to admit, it’s brilliant. Really. Do you know how they do it? Say no.”

“No.”

“I’ll tell you. They do it by *making ugly people sorry to be alive!* Ha! And they accomplish that by showing the ugly people everything that they’re missing out on, just by being fat and twisted-up looking and generally inferior. And so when the ugly people see that, it depresses their spirits, naturally. And get this—it’s brilliant—that inhibits their urge to breed! American movies are going to make the whole world ten times smarter! Ingenious, no?”

“... I guess.”

“No, you don’t ‘guess.’ When you are dealing with a sure thing, there is no ‘guess’ involved.”

“Except the kids are here already. They’re going to be in this world as long as we will, right?”

Uncle Stewart regarded him with clear disappointment, then turned back to the road. He stared straight ahead and took another deep breath, slowly letting out a long exhale before he spoke. “There’s never a good man around when you need one.”

Sanford had no idea what to say to that, but he got lucky—Uncle Stewart appeared to be done for the time being. It looked like there might even be a little peaceful time before his energy built back up. In the meantime Sanford decided to avoid all unnecessary conversation. See if that might do any good.

Two

At the age of twenty, Gordon Stewart Northcott had the almost-handsome looks of a B movie actor and enough verbal skill to be charming and persuasive when it suited him. And so whether or not he was skilled enough to play the piano in a major concert or u on the movie screen, he possessed the right personal appearance and gift of gab to wa onto any movie lot in Los Angeles and pick up a job. The movie business was already s well established that the name “Hollywood” was known around the world. Less than thre years earlier, a real estate developer had erected giant capital letters that spelled o “HOLLYWOODLAND” across a hillside facing the city. (The sign was later changed to rea just “HOLLYWOOD,” in 1949.) Each letter was covered with hundreds of light bulb visible at night for many miles and symbolizing the promise of the movie business itself.

The growing city was wide open with work opportunities. The entire region wa riding a wave of social expansion as a tourist destination, and local labor unions were st weak. Stewart Northcott could have found good work if that had been his plan. H Canadian background would do nothing to hinder him from blending into gener society. As for Sanford, a boy of thirteen could get into school with some casually fake papers, or earn decent wages if he could work like a man. Either one of them could hav gotten a job on the gigantic construction force building the brand-new Los Angeles Cit Hall. It was to be a towering structure of white stone reaching high over the palm tree an Aztec temple metamorphosed into a corporate tower, and it required workers o every skill level. All over the city, a healthy young guy needed nothing more than his ow willingness to outwork the competition. Nobody needed to venture into the desert t raise chickens.

In spite of all the bustle, the overall level of social innocence remained high. Societ may have been entertaining itself with moving images of light, but mass communicati was still limited to the local newspaper and rare telephone calls. Most people had n understanding of the depths of depravity to which human nature can descend. There wa no way to circulate the kind of information that would allow anyone to anticipate th twists of behavior that such dark places could produce—unless an individual shared thos ruinous traits.

By the time Uncle Stewart and Sanford arrived at the home of his grandparents, 62-year-old George Northcott and his 54-year-old wife Louise, Sanford was hoping that a couple of new people would brighten up Uncle Stewart's demeanor, which had steadily soured over the past few days. But from the moment they walked into the Northcott home, it was apparent that nothing would be brightened up on Sanford's account. Nobody was bothered with introductions.

Grandma Louise ignored Sanford altogether while she fell all over herself to greet her son when they walked in. "Stewart!" she cried out. Then she burst into tears and smothered Uncle Stewart in her arms, repeating "My precious boy, my precious boy" over and over. It caught Sanford completely off guard. He had forgotten how melodramatic she was. Loud, too, as if they were in a crowded room and she needed to be certain that everybody could hear.

She waited on her son hand and foot, taking his coat, his hat, smoothing his hair, straightening his collar. She assured him that his favorite tea was already brewing in the kitchen, passed him a bowl of his favorite hard candies, and continued to hover over him like a musty gray cloud. Sanford could not recall anybody over the age of three or four who got catered to in that fashion. Grandma's tone of voice was familiar in a dreadful way, like the syrupy voice Uncle Stewart used with Sanford's mother. Somehow her demeanor put the same tightness into the back of his spine that he got from watching his mother and Uncle Stewart together.

Her precious boy dismissed her and even made a display out of being annoyed by her attentions, although Sanford noticed that he did nothing to stop her. Grandma Louise continued to blandish loving affection on Uncle Stewart in spite of his indifferent responses. She ignored her husband altogether until it was time for Stewart to sit. Then she reached over and casually pulled Grandpa George out of the best chair in the room and instructed her son to sit there. Uncle Stewart looked at his father and gave a mock helpless shrug, then laughed out loud and sat down in the big chair. He leaned back and put up his feet before taunting his father with a sour smile.

It was plain to see that Louise was another billy club of a woman, possessed of a high degree of crude personal force. Though George Northcott gave the impression that he would not be beaten into silence as quite easily as Sanford's father, it became clear within the first few minutes that this couple's relationship worked in about the same way. Sanford's eyes were already sharpened to that style of behavior by his life at home, and over the past several days his close-up observations of Uncle Stewart had freshened his sense for it.

Grandpa George seemed to be angry that his son had showed up with Sanford in town

The wiry little man's face was set so hard, it could have been chipped from a chunk of flint. He behaved the same way Sanford's father did when he was unhappy: detached and glowering, parked under a dark cloud.

The hostile atmosphere hung in the air. Sanford made himself as small and quiet as he could. It was not enough. The attempt to conceal himself failed before the first half-hour passed, when Grandma Louise decided that she needed to walk in front of Sanford so closely that she stumbled over his feet—even though there was plenty of room for her to step around him. It seemed to Sanford that she had aimed right for him. When her foot clipped his, she quickly recovered her balance, but the damage had been done. She whirled to her son in anger.

"Stewart, what is the idea of bringing a *clumsy oaf* into our home?" she demanded again sounding like a bad actress shouting her lines. She turned to Sanford. "Is this how you repay a lady's hospitality? Trip her as she walks by?"

"I didn't—" Sanford began.

"Shut up!" Uncle Stewart bellowed at him. "My mother will not be contradicted inside her own home! What's the matter with you?"

"Jesus Christ," muttered Grandpa George. He stomped off into the kitchen, rubbing both of his temples as if his head was hurting.

Grandma Louise wasn't done. "I went down to the telephone office yesterday and called the telephone office all the way up to Saskatoon to talk to Winnie, because she wrote and arranged the call. So she told me all about you. What to expect and what not. Useless. And here is my boy, giving you another chance at life! Although I can't think of any reason that he should." She peered into Sanford's eyes. "Can you think of any reason that he should?"

Sanford racked his brain. "We're family."

"You are not 'family' that anybody needs!" She yelled so loudly that her face went purple. "You are only here because Stewart needs help in getting this place started up and running. So now you listen to me: you are going to do all of the dirtiest work, because I want Stewart's hands free of calluses for playing the piano. We will be delivering one out to the farm so that he can practice, and every time I come out there I am going to check his hands. If I find any calluses, if I find *one* callus, it will be your hide that pays."

"I can't stop him from doing anything."

"You got that one right, pal," Uncle Stewart chimed in.

"I don't expect you to stop him. I expect you to make it unnecessary for him to do that work in the first place. I expect you to do the work before he even *notices* that it needs to be done! My husband and I put good money into buying this land. The farm needs to sta

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