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# ***ABRACADABRA***

*A Coming of Age Murder Mystery*

***ROBERT EMMETT MUELLER***

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## CHAPTER ONE

Nobody expects a murder in the family. You can take it as an odious trick played on you by life, or as a gift of excitement in an otherwise routine existence -- that is if it is a murder in somebody else's family! I say routine, but I do not believe that our family's march of events, filled with fun and excitement, was stuck in a rut. Oh, no. But neither do I mean to imply that we were extraordinary as a family; only that we were not the usual, conventional American family because we lived in a bakery with the world marching back and forth on doorsteps. But I guess a family is uncommon when murder most foul spoils family harmony.

Thinking about the events that led up to the murder I have to begin the day my Uncle Jack came into the bakeshop in one of his typically boisterous moods. I don't know why, because it had nothing to do with the murder; but that's where it all begins in my mind. Here and there throughout the next few weeks are events that in retrospect were clues; but they went in one ear and out the other without anchoring in my mind, as dad puts it. After only one more week at Roe elementary school I would be able to get down to the serious business of summer fun.

On that day, homework free and without any chores, I sat in the shop next to Sam and my dad, two white-clad bakers with powdered faces who looked like fugitives from a flour factory. Neither of my brothers was at home to spoil my hegemony: August Junior, older by ten years, had a job in Chicago; Tom, five years ahead and soon college bound, was at his singing teacher's place, crooning away like Bing Crosby. Samuel Kimchick, my dad's helper, was decorating a cake in his inimitable way. Sam is a real artist, or should I say sculptor? He was deftly wielding a handful of multicolored icing-cones up and down the many levels of wedding cakes creating elegant steps of rainbow colors.

Suddenly, unannounced (and unexpected), my Uncle Jack burst in, singing, "Hello, hello!" in his booming bass voice (which is where Tom obviously got his). I loved my Uncle Jack; it was always a delight to see his vigorous, appealing face. Expecting him to single me out, as usual, he turned instead to Lettie Larson, a new young clerk who walked nervously into the shop. "Well, who are you, cutesy?" he observed, pinching her cheeks. She squealed and jumped away from him like a frightened bird, frowning for all she was worth. "Where have you been all my life?"

"Jack!" my dad exclaimed, obviously upset. "I said I'd meet you at the bank. Why'd you come here?"

"How's the Pretzel Bender's Society today?" he asked, and pulled at the cuffs of his shirts to reveal two golden links, a habitual tug at the symbols of his stature. The very incongruity of Uncle Jack's clothes set him apart from us, like a king in full regalia among paupers: he had on a honey-colored, shaped straw hat; a dark green suite; a shirt with a stiff collar; and a long, delicate pink silk tie that seemed to fall down to the floor, met by the shiniest patent-leather shoes I ever saw twinkling in the flour-sprinkled floor like stars on the sun.

My father remained sullen, up to his elbows in a tub of viscous pastry dough; frowning he pulled his arms out, slid a cupped forefinger and thumb from his bulging biceps down to his

wrists, skimming off the dough like it was a removable skin, and wiped himself as clean as possible on his flour-encrusted apron, tied around ice-cream pants. "Thought we agreed -- don't want anybody to know about our -- especially -- " He twisted, rolled his eyes at me, and smiled, spreading his moustache across his face, sparkles of gold glinting off his teeth, like nuggets in a hair forest.

Nodding understandingly Uncle Jack, immediately realizing his goof, equivocated with, "God, it's hot in here," twisting a finger around his starched collar his eyes bulging apologies like a hurt puppy.

Father laughed sardonically. "Always hot in here," he continued, sweat streaming down his face like rain; "Satan's furnaces captured in St. Louis summers," he joked, indicating the oven whose radiant energy seemed to intensify around us as he talked; it was clear he wanted to be nice. "Pull up that barrel for Jack, Sam," he ordered his assistant Sam, who obliged reluctantly, appearing like a flour-faced clown not eager to serve any master; dad continued: "You've been working in an office too long, Jack. You loose sight of reality."

"You still got that Rolls?" Sam asked, expertly rolling a wooden barrel of flour on end like a hoop of a circus performer; "That's sure some piece of auto, I'd say all right," he drawled. The lid of the barrel fell off in front of Uncle Jack, spinning on the ground like a coin; he automatically caught the lid in midair before it had simmered down (he was conditioned for this, having worked in the shop years). But flour flew onto the front of his immaculate pants. Cursing he brushed his front frantically. He smiled as if culpable of some error and sat neatly on a clean bench nearby. "No," he said to the witless Sam; "Been through three cars since then."

"Well," my dad said laughingly, "at least it ain't three wives!" He beamed at Sam and quipped, "He's got a sixty-foot Pierced Sparrow now." Automatically dad lunged back at the dough again; flipped and chopped it into what seemed like large spaghetti noodles, perspiration pouring over them as if an intended ingredient in the pastry he was forming.

"You better hurry up, August," Uncle Jack said, glancing at his diamond-studded gold watch. "Lieberwitz -- my Jew-lawyer -- will be waiting. It's nearly two. The bank won't wait either -- "

"I said don't talk about it here," my dad snapped at Uncle Jack in a low threatening voice. "You don't seem to understand -- mom is about," he said by way of explanation. "And -- " he nodded at both myself and Samuel Kimchick.

I was in attendance at Sam's request; I am not usually in the shop, my activities always take precedence; but Sam liked my critical eye when he decorated a wedding cake. I was, however, enjoying the added attraction of Uncle Jack.

Dad then, unexpectedly, grabbed Uncle Jack by the arm without thinking, his floured fingers printing a white ring around the sleeve of Uncle Jack's immaculate green suite. "I don't want mom to hear you. And Charlie," he indicated me with a penetrating glance, "has diarrhea of the mouth. Come into the office --"

"For crying out loud!" Uncle Jack exclaimed, wrenching himself away; the ring of dough looked like a white arm band. "Shit!" he said, rubbing at the flour, "what the fuck ya doin'?". But then he remembered me; he turned and addressed me in what I thought was a rather contemptuous tone of voice: "So how's the prestidigitator today? High school next year, eh? You're getting to be a big boy. How old are you now? Still doing magic?"

"Thirteen. I always do magic," I said, confused because he knew I did; it was not like Uncle Jack to talk to me that way either. "Doing a show at the Boy Scouts' Parents' Night -- want to come?"

"Boy Scouts? I don't think -- well, maybe. We'll see ..."

When he didn't ask me where or when I knew his 'We'll see' meant never; but my impulse was to try and exploit the present situation with my father. "I'm trying to get my dad to take me down to see The Great Blackstone. He's at the Lowes."

Uncle Jack gave me a consoling look. "Got tickets to the Card's game next Sunday. Want to go?" he asked clearly by way of apology.

"Sure!" I exclaimed, feigning excitement because baseball was not my idea of fun. Yet any trip with my Uncle Jack was worth the sacrifice. "That OK dad?"

"Yes, son," my dad said, "but you can't go to both."

"Aw, gee ..."

"Go over to Piss-a-lots-ski's and get Uncle Jack a bucket of brew," he continued, handing me a tin pail and a quarter. "We'll be in the office..."

## **CHAPTER TWO**

Adults are twice children; children never adults; yet we are smarter than our parents think. I knew something important was up, and wanted to be included. I was angry and disappointed when I left for the beer at Piscatelli's Bar (Piss-a-lots-ski's is my dad's invention, but everybody but us boys use it). I jerked my body around, petulantly; I banged the tin pail against doors and fences and garbage cans as I skipped behind the bakeshop; I stopped at the vent, hot air blowing in my face, delightfully full of concentrated sugary baking smells. I was very confused because of the way Uncle Jack was acting toward me. And what was he up to with my dad? Dad too was upset; dad seldom got upset (unless mom bawled him out). And besides, dad usually treated Uncle Jack more ... I don't quite know how to express it -- more contemptuously. Yes. He never did quite cotton to mother's brother as long as I can remember. Although I idolized Uncle Jack, my dad frequently called him *Eine ashlock* -- asshole, when talking about him to mom -- I never really understood why. I think Uncle Jack had something to do with newly promulgated rules the Union proposed that dad didn't like. He expected Jack to change them, beings how he was an official of Bakers' Union No. 4 of Greater St. Louis -- and he always let you know that he had power in that capacity -- power over dad, most certainly. In the first place dad does not like people with power; so there must be some strange reason he was being

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