

SOME LUCK



JANE SMILEY

PICADOR



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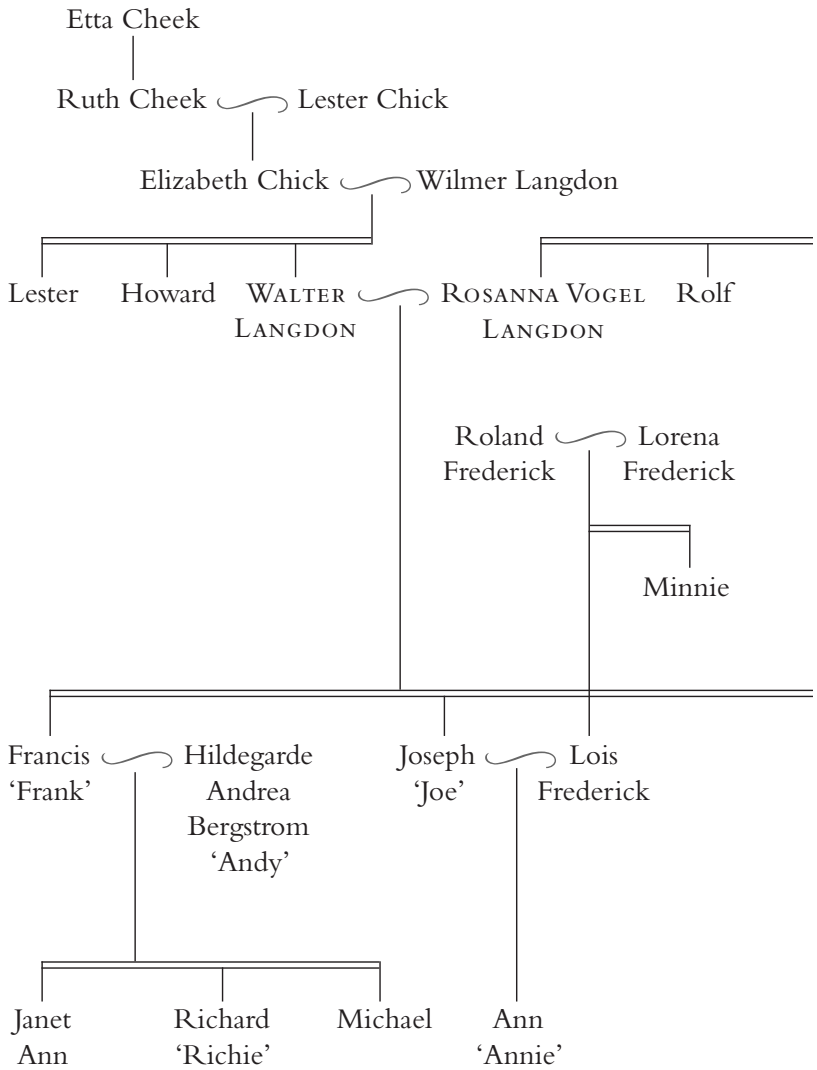
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*This trilogy is dedicated to John Whiston,
Bill Silag, Steve Mortensen, and Jack Canning,
with many thanks for decades of patience,
laughter, insight, information, and assistance.*



.....
 The Langdons



Charlotta
Kleinfelder

Hermann
Augsberger
'Opa'

Augustina
Augsberger
'Oma'

Otto Vogel

Mary Augsberger

Eloise

Julius
Silber

Gus

Angela

Kurt

John

Sheila

Rosa Sylvia

Sarah Cole
Manning

Colonel Brinks
Manning

Mary
Elizabeth

Lillian
Elizabeth

Arthur Brinks
Manning

Henry

Claire
Anna

Timothy
'Timmy'

Deborah
'Debbie'

Dean
Henry

Christina Eloise
'Tina'

1920



WALTER LANGDON hadn't walked out to check the fence along the creek for a couple of months – now that the cows were up by the barn for easier milking in the winter, he'd been putting off fence-mending – so he hadn't seen the pair of owls nesting in the big elm. The tree was half dead; every so often Walter thought of cutting it for firewood, but he would have to get help taking it down, because it must be eighty feet tall or more and four feet in diameter. And it wouldn't be the best firewood, hardly worth the trouble. Right then, he saw one of the owls fly out of a big cavity maybe ten to twelve feet up, either a big female or a very big male – at any rate, the biggest horned owl Walter had ever seen – and he paused and stood for a minute, still in the afternoon breeze, listening, but there was nothing. He saw why in a moment. The owl floated out for maybe twenty yards, dropped toward the snowy pasture. Then came a high screaming, and the owl rose again, this time with a full-grown rabbit in its talons, writhing, going limp, probably deadened by fear. Walter shook himself.

His gaze followed the owl upward, along the southern horizon, beyond the fence line and the tiny creek, past the road. Other than the big elm and two smaller ones, nothing broke the view – vast snow faded into vast cloud cover. He could just see the weather vane and the tip of the cupola on Harold Gruber's barn, more than half a mile to the south. The enormous owl gave the whole scene focus, and woke him up. A rabbit, even a screaming rabbit? That was one less rabbit after his oat plants this spring. The world was full of rabbits, not so full of owls, especially owls like this one, huge and silent. After a minute or two, the owl wheeled around and headed back to the tree. Although it wasn't yet dusk, the light was not very strong, so Walter couldn't be sure he saw the feathery horns of another owl peeking out of the cavity in the trunk of the elm, but maybe he did. He would think that he did. He had forgotten why he came out here.

Twenty-five, he was. Twenty-five tomorrow. Some years the snow had melted for his birthday, but not this year, and so it had been a long winter full of cows. For the last two years, he'd had five milkers, but this year he was up to ten. He hadn't understood how much extra work that would be, even with Ragnar to help, and Ragnar didn't have any affinity for cows. Ragnar was the reason he had more cows – he needed some source of income to pay Ragnar – but the cows avoided Ragnar, and he had to do all the

extra milking himself. And, of course, the price of milk would be down. His father said it would be: it was two years since the war, and the Europeans were back on their feet – or at least back on their feet enough so that the price of milk was down.

Walter walked away from this depressing thought. The funny thing was that when he told his father that he broke even this year, expecting his father to shake his head again and tell him he was crazy to buy the farm when land prices were so high, his father had patted him on the back and congratulated him. Did breaking even include paying interest on the debt? Walter nodded. ‘Good year, then,’ said his father. His father had 320 acres, all paid for, a four-bedroom house, a big barn with hay stacked to the roof, and Walter could have gone on living there, even with Rosanna, even with the baby, especially now, with Howard taken by the influenza and the house so empty, but his father would have walked into his room day and night without knocking, bursting with another thing that Walter had to know or do or remember or finish. His father was strict, and liked things just so – he even oversaw Walter’s mother’s cooking, and always had. Rosanna hadn’t complained about living with his parents – it was all Walter wanting his own place, all Walter looking at the little farmhouse (you could practically see through the walls, they were so thin), all Walter walking the fields and thinking that bottomland made up for the house,

and the fields were rectangular – no difficult plowing or strange, wasted angles. It was all Walter, and so he had no one to blame but himself for this sense of panic that he was trying to walk away from on the day before his birthday. Did he know a single fellow his age with a farm of his own? Not one, at least not around here.

When you looked at Rosanna, you didn't think she'd been raised on a farm, had farms all through her background, even in Germany. She was blonde, but slender and perfectly graceful, and when she praised the baby's beauty, she did so without seeming to realize that it reproduced her own. Walter had seen that in some lines of cows – the calves looked stamped out by a cookie cutter, and even the way they turned their heads or kicked their hind feet into the air was the same as last year's calf and the one before that. Walter's family was a bastard mix, as his grandfather would say – Langdons, but with some of those long-headed ones from the Borders, with red hair, and then some of those dark-haired Irish from Wexford that were supposed to trace back to the sailors from the Spanish Armada, and some tall balding ones who always needed glasses from around Glasgow. His mother's side leavened all of these with her Wessex ancestry ('The Chicks and the Cheeks,' she'd always said), but you couldn't tell that Walter's relatives were related the way you could with Rosanna's. Even so, of all Rosanna's aunts and uncles and cousins, the

Augsbergers and the Vogels, Rosanna was the most beautiful, and that was why he had set his heart upon winning her when he came home from the war and finally really noticed her, though she went to the Catholic church. The Langdon and Vogel farms weren't far apart – no more than a mile – but even in a small town like Denby, no one had much to say to folks who went to other churches and, it must be said, spoke different languages at home.

Oh, Rosanna, just twenty, but with the self-possessed grace of a mature woman! He could see her profile as he approached the house in the dusk, outlined by the lamplight behind her. She was looking for him. Just in the tilt of her head, he could see that she had some project in mind. And of course he would say yes to her. After all, no fledgling had it easy, farmer or crow. Hadn't he known since he was a boy the way the fledglings had to fall out of the nest and walk about, cheeping and crying, until they grew out their feathers and learned to fly on their own? Their helpless parents flew above them, and maybe dropped them a bit of food, but flying or succumbing belonged to them alone. Walter put his foot on the first step of the porch, and felt his customary sense of invigoration at this thought. On the porch, he stamped two or three times, and then slipped out of his boots. When the door opened, Rosanna drew him in, and then slipped her arms inside his unbuttoned jacket.



On the front porch, sitting up (he had just learned to sit up) on a folded blanket, Frank Langdon, aged five months, was playing with a spoon. He was holding it in his right hand by the tarnished silver bowl, and when he brought it toward his face, his eyes would cross, which made Rosanna, his mother, laugh as she shelled peas. Now that he was sitting, he could also drop the spoon, and then, very carefully, pick it up again. Before learning to sit, he had enjoyed lying on his back and waving the spoon in the air, but if he dropped the spoon, it was gone. This was no longer the case. One of the qualities Rosanna attributed to little Frank was persistence. If he was playing with the spoon, then it was the spoon he wanted to play with. If he dropped the spoon, and she happened to give him a sock doll (the sock doll that her sister, Eloise, had sewn just for Frank), Frank would fuss until she gave him the spoon. Now, sitting up, he put the spoon down and picked it up and put it down and picked it up. Although he much preferred the spoon to the doll, Rosanna always told Eloise and her mother how much Frank liked the doll. Eloise was now knitting him a wool hat. It was her first knitting project; she expected to have it done before October. Rosanna reached into the basket of pea pods and took the last handful. She didn't mind shelling peas.

Frank was a good baby, hardly ever fussy, which, according to Rosanna's mother, was a characteristic of all her side of the family. Speaking of peas, Rosanna

and her sister and four brothers were just like peas in a pod for being good babies, and here was Frank, another of the same breed, blond, beautiful, and easy, plenty of flesh but not a bit of fat, active but not fussy, went right down every night and only got up once, regular as sunrise, then down again for another two hours while Rosanna made breakfast for Walter and the hired man. Could she ask for a better baby?

Rosanna finished shelling peas and set the bowl on the blanket, then knelt in front of Frank and said, 'What a boy! What a darling boy! Are you a darling boy?' And she kissed him on the forehead, because her mother had impressed on her that you never, never kissed a baby on the lips. She laid her hand gently on the top of his head.

Frank still had his grip on the spoon, but his mother's face transfixed him. As it loomed closer and then retreated, his gaze followed it, and as she smiled, he smiled, and then laughed, and then he waved his arms, which resulted in the spoon's being thrown across the blanket – a first! He saw it fly and he saw it land, and his head turned slightly so he could watch it.

Rosanna laughed, because on his face was a bona-fide look of surprise, very advanced, as far as Rosanna was concerned (though she would have to admit that she had never paid one iota of attention to her brothers and sister, except when they were in her way or in her charge – no one ever said that she enjoyed

watching them or had a flair for it). Now Frank's body tilted forward, and all of a sudden he fell over on his side, cushioned by the blanket. Being Frank, he didn't cry. Rosanna sat him up again and handed him the spoon; then she stood up, thinking that she could hurry into the house and set the bread loaves, which should have completed their second rising by now, into the hot oven and be back out in a minute or two. Nothing could happen in a minute or two.

Spoon in hand, Frank saw and heard his mother's dress swish around her legs as she went inside, and then the screen door slapped shut. After a moment, Frank returned his attention to the spoon, which he was now gripping by the handle, bowl upward. He smacked it on the blanket, and though it was bright against the darkness of the blanket, it made no noise, so he brought it again to his face. It got bigger and brighter and bigger and brighter – this was the confusing part – and then he felt something, not in his hand, but on his face, a pressure and then a pain. The spoon jumped away from him, and there was noise – his own noise. His arm waved, and the spoon flew again. Now the spoon was small and didn't look like a spoon. Frank looked at it for a very long time, and then he looked around the blanket for something that was within reach. The only thing was a nice clean potato, into which Mama had cut two eyes, a nose, and a mouth. Frank was not terribly interested in the potato, but it was nearby, so his hand fell upon it,

gripped it, and brought it to his mouth. He tasted the potato. It tasted different from the spoon.

More interesting was the sudden appearance of the cat, orange, long, and just his, Frank's, size. Frank let the potato drop as he looked at the cat, and then the cat was sniffing his mouth and smoothing its whiskers across Frank's cheek, squatting to inspect the potato, pressing himself into Frank until Frank fell over again. Moments later, when the door opened and flapped closed, the cat was crouched on the porch railing, purring, and Frank was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling of the porch and kicking his legs – left, right, left, right. Mama picked him up, then arced him through the air, and he found himself pressed into her shoulder, his ear and the side of his head warm against her neck. He saw the cat one last time as the porch spun around him, and beyond that the green-gold grass, and the pale horizontal line of the dirt road, and the two fields, one for oats, a thick undulating surface, and one for corn, a quiet grid of still squares ('There's a little breeze,' thought Rosanna; 'I'll open the upstairs windows'), and around that, a different thing, empty, flat, and large, the thing that lay over all things.

Frank understood the kitchen better now. He had a chair with a table of its own where he sat several times every day, and this seat was perfect for surveying this room where he was never allowed to crawl about. He had just learned to crawl. Almost always, two men

entered the room while he was sitting there, Papa and Ragnar. Papa spoke to Mama, and Mama spoke back, and there were certain things they said that Frank felt he understood. Ragnar, however, babbled unintelligibly, and Frank could not understand him even when Mama or Papa was nodding. Nodding was good and was usually accompanied by smiling. Another thing Frank did not understand was that when he himself moved or made noise, there was pain where the noise should be. Pain and noise, both. Now Mama held out her hand. Frank held out his hand in just the same way, and Mama put something hard into it, which, since he was hungry, he brought to his mouth and bit into. When he did so, the pain and noise faded a little. Mama said, 'Oh, poor boy. The top ones are always worse than the bottom ones.' She slipped her finger under his upper lip and lifted it slightly. She said, 'I think the left one was grown out, but you can hardly see the right one.'

Papa said, 'Late teethers always fuss more, Mama told me. Les and I got ours at four months.'

Ragnar said, *'Ja, ja, ja. Slik liten tenner!'*

Ragnar and Papa lifted their forks and began to eat. Frank had already tasted what they were eating, though from a spoon – mush, some chicken, green beans. Mama set her own plate on the table next to Frank's seat and sat down. She used her fork to place a green bean on Frank's tray. When he carefully put the tip of his finger on the slippery bean, Papa, Mama,

and Ragnar laughed, though the bean didn't strike him as funny.

But it was no use. The pain enveloped him again, head to toe, and then the noise.

Ragnar said, *'Han nødvendig noe Akevitt.'*

Papa said, 'Don't have any of that poison, Ragnar.'

The noise increased.

Hands banged on the tray of Frank's seat, and the bean and the crust of bread flew away.

Mama said, 'We have to do something. My mother says—' But she looked at Papa and closed her mouth.

'What?' said Papa.

'Well, Ragnar is right. A clean rag knotted and dipped in whiskey. He chews on it and it eases the pain.'

The noise grew not louder, but more shrill, and came in little gusts. Frank kicked his feet.

Papa cocked his head and said, 'Try it, then.'

Mama set down her fork and got up from the table. She went out of the room. Frank's gaze followed her.

For every time Frank looked at Papa, he looked at Mama five times or ten times, even when Papa and Mama were both in the room. It seemed perfectly natural to him. Papa was tall and loud. His mouth was large and his teeth were big. His hair stuck up and his nose stuck out. When Papa's hands went around him, he felt trapped rather than cuddled. When Papa lifted him and put his face down to meet his, there was a distinct sharpness that made his nose twitch. When

Papa touched him, he could feel the roughness of his fingertips and palms against the bare baby skin. Papa shrank him. And when Papa was close, Frank had discovered, there was more likely to be noise. Frank had nothing to do with it. It just happened. Now, in the long moment when Mama was gone, Frank looked away from Papa toward the window.

‘All right,’ said Mama, ‘I found it in the sideboard. But you’ve got to put some sugar in the knot or he won’t be able to stand the bitter taste.’ She reached for a cup on one of the shelves, and poured something into it. After that, she lifted the tray of Frank’s chair, all the while anchoring him with her hand, and then she took him in her arms and set him gently on her jiggling knee. The noise subsided considerably. But even so, she did put a thing in his mouth, first burning and then moist and sweet, and anyway something to suck upon. Papa said, ‘Ragnar, the English for that is “sugar tit”.’

‘Oh, Walter,’ exclaimed Mama. ‘For goodness’ sake.’
Ragnar said, ‘*Sukker smokk.*’

Mama said, ‘I am sure you are telling Ragnar all the best dirty English words while you are cleaning the hog pens.’

Frank felt his mouth working, pulling the sweetness through the bitterness. Normally while sucking, he would be looking at Mama, the curve of her jaw and the fall of her blond hair half covering her ear, but now he stared at the ceiling. It was flat, and as he

sucked, it seemed to lower itself onto him. The last thing he heard was 'Did he fall asleep?'

The jiggling continued.

Now that he was crawling, Frank found that many doors were closed to him. Most of the time, in fact, he was confined to a space in the dining room that was nowhere near the woodstove in the front room, or the range in the kitchen. Many things were denied him that he once enjoyed, including the quotidian miracle of the flung spoon – he could have a spoon only when he was secure in his high chair in the kitchen (and he now had a strap to tie him in, since he felt no scruples about arching his back and sliding downward beneath the tray in his attempt to find the floor and take off). Things that he picked up, no matter how small, were removed from his grasp before he could give them the most cursory inspection, not to mention get them to his mouth. It seemed that he could never get anything to his mouth that he actually wanted to get there. Whatever he grabbed was immediately removed and a cracker was substituted, but he had explored all the features of crackers, and there was nothing more about them that he cared to find out.

The only thing he had left was standing beside one of the cane-seated chairs in his confinement pen and banging on it with his hands, sometimes one, sometimes the other, sometimes alternately, sometimes

together. The cane in the middle and the wood around it presented an interesting contrast. His fist smacked the wood and it hurt just a little, though not enough to matter. His fist smacked the cane and then bounced. He also laughed when he pushed the chair over, but that could backfire if he then fell down – his balance was improving, but he wasn't walking yet. These were seductive feelings, but no substitute for everything else in the house – the staircase, the windows, the basket of firewood, the books that could be opened and closed and torn, the rocking chair that could be tipped over, the cat that could be chased (though not caught), the fringe of the rug that could be chewed. He couldn't even go out onto the porch anymore – when that door flew open, a cold blast shot through it that made him gasp.

Mama and Papa came and went. When he made noise (he now knew where the noise came from and how to make it whenever he wanted to – you opened your mouth and pressed the noise out and there were a variety of noises that produced a variety of effects upon Mama and Papa), she appeared from beyond one of the doors – the kitchen door – and she had a cloth in her hands. She said, 'Frankie hungry? Poor boy. Two more minutes, baby.' The door closed and she was gone. He pounded his fist on the cane-bottomed chair. The noise he made was 'ma ma ma ma ma'. The kitchen door flew open. Rosanna said, 'What did you say, Frankie?' She stepped into his

enclosure and came down to him. She said, ‘Say it again, baby. Say “mama”.’

But he said something else, who knew what. It was just noise for now. When she stood up, he did another thing, which was to look up at her and raise both of his arms toward her. It had the desired effect: she said, ‘You are the most beautiful baby!’ And she picked him up, sat down on the cane-seated chair, then opened her dry, hard front to reveal the desired warm, soft object beneath. Frank settled himself into her lap.

It was not the same as it had been, though. There had been a time when her lap was enough, the crook of her arm was enough, the breast itself and the lovely nipple were enough to envelop him in pleasure. Now he was half distracted even while enjoying himself. His gaze rolled around the room, taking in the top corners of the doors, the moldings, the pale light floating up from the windows, the design of the wallpaper, Mama’s face, and then around again, looking for something new. Mama absently stroked the top of his head. Her body relaxed and she slumped against the back of the chair. In the quiet of the room (quiet because Frank himself was making no noise), other sounds manifested themselves – the howl of the wind curling around the corners of the house, the clattering of ice against the house (muffled) and the windows (sharp). Sometimes the wind was so strong that the house itself creaked. Just then there was a loud cracking noise followed by a longer, higher sound. Mama sat up. She lifted Frank

more toward her chin, said, ‘What was that?’ and stood. They went to a window.

There was nothing more surprising than a window, and you could not get to them on your own. You might have looked out a window many times, and even though the window was right where it was the last time you looked through it, each time there was something different. Sometimes, there was nothing, only flat blackness, but this time there was only flat whiteness. And its smoothness was terrible – when Frank reached out and laid his hand on it, Mama cupped his hand in hers and brought it back to her chest. She said, ‘Oh, a big branch off the hickory tree. Right into the yard, too. It must be ten below out there, baby boy, or worse. That’s cold for this time of year. I hate to think what it’ll be like when winter actually gets here.’ Her shoulders shook. She said, ‘And more sleet! I hope your papa and Ragnar got all the cows in, I hope they did!’ She kissed him again, this time on the forehead. ‘Goodness me, what a life – and don’t tell him I said so!’

They sat down again, this time on the other side of the confinement barrier, in the big chair, and Mama put him to the other breast, the one he preferred, the one with more milk. And then, the next time he knew where he was, he was in his cot on his back with a blanket up to his chin, and then he didn’t know where he was again.



After the union suit, Mama smoothed the socks she had knitted over his feet, sat him up, and lowered the shirt over his head, carefully avoiding his nose and ears. She buttoned the shirt. Then she straightened his knees and pushed his feet through the legs of his pants. The toes of his right foot were bent upward, and he gave a squawk. She pulled down the pant leg and pointed his toes. Soon she was buttoning the trousers to the shirt.

Frank felt strangely passive through all this. Once the pants were on, he went even more limp, so that she could barely slide him into his heavy, stiff snowsuit, first the legs again, and the suspenders, then, when she sat him up and he slumped forward, Papa said, 'It's going to take us an hour to get there, and it's nearly five.' Frank felt Mama's grip tighten around his shoulders. It was impossible to get his arms down the sleeves of the snowsuit, and when she did, they could no longer bend. She put on his mittens, then situated his cap around his head and tied the itchy straps beneath his chin. She slipped on his shoes and tied them. He began to whimper.

But they paid no attention to him. She folded the big flaps of the blanket he was lying on over his face and said, 'Jake is hitched up and ready, right?'

'He's got his own blanket over his haunches, and the buggy is full of blankets.'

'What's Ragnar going to do for the evening?'

'Stay right here. He's got tomorrow off.'

She put him, blinded by the blanket, into Papa's arms and, probably, left the room. A moment later, that blast hit him, and he knew they were out the front door and onto the porch. He didn't dare move, and he couldn't move, anyway. Papa paused, then went down, then paused, then went down, then paused, then went down.

'Oh,' said Mama behind him. 'Slippery.'

'Ran out of salt.'

'Be careful, then.'

'You be careful. You've got the pie.'

'I'm being careful. But there will be plenty of pie.'

'Hope so.'

'And Frankie's birthday cake. My mother is making her angel food.'

'Mmm,' said Papa. Now he set Frank in the crook of his arm and gripped him tight around the ankle, and said, 'Evening, Ragnar. I'll put Jake away when we get back.' Then the door to the buggy opened, and Frank was out of the wind and in Mama's lap again, but he still could not move his arms or his head. He could kick his legs a little. The constriction was strange, or maybe perplexing, in that it didn't require him to make noise of any kind. He lay there and they went on, up and down and forward – he'd done this before and liked it – and he watched things pass on the other side of the pane, everything dark against dark, until he fell asleep.

Now he was propped against Mama's shoulder,

looking at Papa as Mama stepped upward. He was still immobilized inside his suit, and hot now, his arms stuck out straight to either side and his head not nestled into her neck, the way he liked it, but sticking up. Papa looked down and said, 'Steep steps. Could you hold the rail?' And Mama said, 'I'm okay now – the porch is clear.' Papa's face was bright, and then they went through, into a bright, loud place, and he was pulled away from Mama, who said, 'What a night!'

There was a person here who always said to him, 'Here's my darling! Give Granny a smile! That's my boy. Smiles like my father, even without many teeth,' and someone else said, 'Your father didn't have many more teeth than this baby, Mary!' And then there was laughing, and he was kissed on the cheek, and Granny sat him on her lap and unwrapped him piece by piece.

Now he was sitting up on Granny's knee – she had her hands around him, and he was bending and bouncing and shouting, because all of the light and the smiles were so exciting that he could hardly contain himself.

'One year old!' said Granny. 'Hard to believe.'

'Just this time a year ago,' said Papa, 'I looked at Dr Gerritt and realized that he was drunk!'

'Oh, Walter,' said Mama.

'Well, he was. But, you know, he was like a horse that's used to plowing the same field year after year,

just did what he knew to do, and everything was fine.'

'That was a piece of luck, Walter,' said Granny. 'But what would we do without some luck after all?'

One of the faces, one he'd never seen before, said, 'My goodness, Mary, that is the most beautiful baby. Look at those big blue eyes! And already such hair. You don't see that with blonds very often. My niece Lydia's child is three, and her hair is still as fine as down.'

Granny leaned forward to kiss, but she didn't say anything. He walked toward some legs in overalls, and the legs stepped backward. He followed them. Some skirts swished around, too. When he sat down with a thump, hands grabbed him under his arms and stood him up. He headed toward a low table.

Mama had now taken off her coat and carried her pie to the kitchen. She sat down on the sofa, just where he could see her, and said, 'Really, he's a New Year's baby, not a New Year's Eve baby. He wasn't born until three a.m.' He sidestepped around the table, understanding perfectly well that he was making his way toward her – Frank had no problem with mapping. 'Dr Gerritt told me he came out and then went back in again. Must have been too cold for him. My boy!' She touched his cheek with the back of her finger.

A voice said, 'You ask me, any winter baby is a miracle. My sister—' but Mama picked him up as he came toward her and smothered him with hugs and

kisses. Another voice said, 'Spring fever makes winter babies,' and Granny said, 'Is that so? No one ever told me that.' Everyone laughed again.

It was a wonderful party. Faces leaned toward him and then retreated. Maybe he had never seen so many smiles. Smiles were good. In a rudimentary way, he grasped the concept of universal love. He was the only baby here. He was the only baby he had ever seen.

Now the couch was full of gravelly-voiced stiff ones, like Papa. One of them said, 'Karl Lutz lost two cows down that ravine he has there. Break in the fence, and two of them shorthorn heifers went through before anyone realized. Fell over the edge, I guess.'

Papa made a noise; then one of the others made a noise. There was head shaking, not nodding. Frank turned around. He had to balance himself with his hand on that little table, but he did it. The women were softer and looked at him more. Right then, Frank generalized from what had been mere habit, and decided that looking at women was just more agreeable in every way than looking at men. He lifted his hand off the table and precipitated himself in the direction of the women. One of them had to catch him a few seconds later, as his body outran his feet, which were slowed by his awkward shoes. He fell into her arms. He had never seen her before.

Granny called, 'Supper!' and all the skirts and legs

straightened up and moved. Mama bent down and picked him up, seating him in the crook of her arm. He was glad to see her. He put his arm around her neck.

There was no high chair at Granny's, so he sat on Papa's lap, sort of pinned between Mama and Papa. His chin rose just above the edge of the table, and he enjoyed looking around at the bright-colored and flashing dishes – he knew they were dishes of some sort, because there was food on them, and whenever he threw his plate off the tray of his high chair, Mama said, 'Frankie, no! Don't throw your dish. That was very naughty.' However, sitting in Papa's lap, he could not get his hands on a dish to save his life – Papa's long arm was pinned around him, holding him away from the table. Mama put a green bean in his hand. He held it while she then put a spoon full of something to his lips. He hesitated, but then let it in. It was mush. He was hungry enough to take it.

'Try the pork on him,' said Granny. 'I cooked it all day. He might like it.'

Mama used the thing that was not her spoon or her fork, the thing he could never have, and pressed her plate over and over with it. Then she brought it to him on her spoon. It smelled so good that he opened his mouth, and in it went. 'Down the hatch,' said Papa, and Frank opened his mouth for more.

'What's in that?' said Papa.

‘Just the usual. Some onions and a little fennel seed. Not much of that. Cooked forever.’

Mama said, ‘He likes most things, I have to say. He took a bit of liver the other day. Made a face, but swallowed it.’

‘Never had a picky eater in our family,’ said Granny. ‘You yourself ate asparagus when you were eight months old. Never saw a child just take a stalk of asparagus and gobble it down like that. Slaw. Boiled cabbage. Everything.’

‘It’s the German in ’em,’ said a deep voice. ‘*Ja*, it is. I myself liked sauerkraut better than anything when I was a boy. The others were bellying up to the apple pie, and I would ask my mama for another spoonful of sauerkraut.’

‘Ah, well,’ said Granny, ‘what else was there to eat in those days? Got old pretty quick, you ask me.’

All this time, Mama was giving him bits of things on the tip of her spoon, many different things, and he was a good boy. He recognized the applesauce and the sweet potato and the crust of bread. He took more of the pork and another green bean. The air was full of conversation, and many words he was already familiar with, though he had no idea what they meant – oats, corn, hogs, steers, barley, harvest, sale barn, threshing, crib, snow, freeze – as well as words that he did understand – sleet, cold, sunshine, spoon, aunt, uncle, no, good, bad, Frank, more, eat, thank you. His eyes roamed from face to face, and then Granny

said a word, 'Cake,' and it went around the room – 'Look at that cake!' 'Lovely cake, Mary!' 'My favorite cake.'

All the dishes were cleared from the table, and Papa set him right in the middle, but holding him all the time, and the faces made a noise together – not a bad noise, 'Happy Birthday to You!' – and then Mama took him back on her lap, and handed him something soft, and he tasted it, and then he ate it, but only because he was a good eater, and a good boy, and ready for anything. Then Mama took him away into a dark room, and nursed him, and, for goodness' sake, they both fell asleep on the bed, her arm over him and his mouth around her nipple, because, although he wasn't really hungry, his chances to partake of this pleasure had gotten fewer and fewer.