



PAINTING BY HERB DAVIDSON



READ from the oil-company travel guide: "Blackrock is the northernmost community on the peninsula. Here you get the feeling of a true fishing center among the anchored fishing boats and nets reeled out to dry. Off Blackrock lies the Porte des Morts, a strait six miles wide separating mainland Wisconsin and Nicolet Island. In 1679, about 300 Potawatomi Indians drowned in a sudden storm while crossing the water to engage the Winnebagoes. The tragedy was witnessed by explorers La Salle and De Tonti, who named the strait Porte des Morts, or Death's Door. Today it is said the strait contains more shipwrecks per square mile than any other area in the Great Lakes."

I folded the travel guide and put it in the glove compartment. Sitting there in my car, on the last leg of my journey, my immediate impression was that the waters were a lure for the local chamber of commerce to attract visitors, a thrill for these station-wagon travelers at seeing so sinister a place, a pool for skindivers in which to explore old wrecks. Porte des Morts: Death's Door. It seemed very commonplace this late afternoon: a desolate little landing deep in the snow, a weather-beaten smokehouse whose door

*maybe it was just what it seemed—
an old jalopy tooling across the
ice in the misty night—but why
the dead-end reticence that blocked
his innocent inquiries about it?*

DEATH'S DOOR

fiction By ROBERT McNEAR

moved open and shut with the wind, a timber dock where a veteran ferryboat—the R. L. Ostenson, Nicolet Island, Wisconsin—creaked patiently on its hawsers. Beyond that was the bleak strait—sky the color of worn steel and bay the same, hinged by the horizon line and identical except for the dark channel of water out through the ice. I like forgotten, half-populated places, almost-deserted cubbyholes of the world. I suppose that's one of the reasons I stay on as a reporter for a small-town newspaper instead of going to Chicago and becoming a well-known journalist.

I'd been waiting in the car for about five minutes when the hunchback deck hand turned up. He came half skipping from the dock, thumb up, to motion me out of the car. I got out in the ankle-deep snow, saying, unnecessarily, "You'll take her on?" He swung into the driver's seat and slammed the door for an answer.

Great! I liked every bit of it. Only in some out-of-the-way place like this would you find a hunchback deck hand who—I had got a good look at him—had fine golden hair and an almost-

perfect Botticelli face. He took the car carefully across the planking and onto the deck while I, bothered by the usual curiosity, had to walk across the road to the smokehouse and look inside. No fire had burned there for months, but the ghost of smoke and fish possessed the place completely. It was so dark that I could see little except the small drift of snow that had come in through the door. Now, one of my itches is about doors—I can't stand to see them open when they should be shut, or idly swinging, like this one: so I closed it tight, for this winter, at least.

Then I took myself aboard the ferryboat, climbed the stairs and came to the door of the passenger saloon. I'd felt almost alone until now, but there were about ten people sitting around in the cabin, smoking, drinking coffee, waiting. It looked like a roadside diner, with plywood booths along the walls and a couple of scarred tables in the center. It looked stifling in there, so I turned away from the door and made my way along the railing to the pilothouse door.

Inside the pilothouse, leaning on the wheel and smoking a cigarette as he gazed at the car deck below, was a youngish, long-jawed man with pepper-and-salt hair, who, in spite of the ordinary windbreaker and dungarees he wore, was obviously the captain. On his head he had an old-fashioned officer's cap with a brass plate above the bill. It read: CAPTAIN. I watched him douse the cigarette, straighten up and signal down to the hunchback on the deck. A floodlight went on down there. The hunchback and a teenage boy moved around quickly to cast off. The captain tugged twice at a cord on the compressed-air horn, bouncing two blasts off the snow-shrouded face of Blackrock. Then he pulled the engine telegraph to reverse and I could feel the deck plates vibrate as the ferry backed away from the wharf. The skin of ice crushed under the black-steel hull as we moved out to swing around slowly into the channel. *Bon voyage*, R. L. Ostenson.

In those few minutes, the pale daylight had gone completely; and now, looking out across the strait, I saw an early moon laying a yellow path almost directly alongside the channel through the ice of the Porte des Morts. At the end of the double line, I could see the low fishback of Nicolet Island. "Strange place, the island," Ed Kinney had said back in Green Bay. "Isolated, ingrown, maybe two hundred people, fifty families. Swedes, Icelanders, Germans. They don't warm much to strangers. Lots of superstition." Kinney has been a feature editor for a long time and he can't help talking like that. Still, he used to summer on the island and I didn't doubt the truth of what he said. "Trouble is,"

he'd added, "there's nothing to be superstitious about. In winter, the island's about as exciting as the lobby of the Northland Hotel at two o'clock of a Sunday morning. You'll see 'em all come out of hibernation for that basketball game. Then they go back into it for the rest of the winter."

Blackrock had slowly receded into the distance and the last lonely peninsula pine had faded astern. I realized that the sharp wind had got through my overcoat and that I was beginning to shiver. Just then, the wheelhouse door opened and the nasal voice of the captain said, "So softhearted I can't stand to see even a damn fool freeze to death. C'mon in, friend."

I stepped inside. "Thanks, Captain. It was like the fresh and gentle breeze of May. You are speaking to a man who has covered the Packers Sunday in and Sunday out for four winters."

"Hey, a reporter!" he said, smiling. We shook hands. "I'm Axel Ostenson."

"Now, why d'you figure Vince had to go and retire?" he asked. "Those boys ain't been the same since."

"Even the iron men wear out in time," I said. At this point, the radio squawked and he went over to say something into a microphone about position and time of arrival. I looked around.

All was neat and newly painted—up front near the window, the wheel and the engine telegraph, the captain's high stool. A padded bench ran the length of the pilothouse. Framed on the walls were some Great Lakes shipping charts, a safety-inspection certificate and a plaque informing me that the Sturgeon Bay Shipbuilding Company had created this noble vessel. Ostenson finished with the radio.

"You remember Ed Kinney?" I asked. "He's my editor on the *News* down in Green Bay."

"Sure do. Used to have a summer place on the island. I taught his boy Gene how to sail."

"Ed thought I ought to cover the Door County championship game this year. First one on Nicolet Island since 1947. Ed thought there might be a good feature story in it, along with the play-by-play. I thought maybe you could help me, and so I thought I'd ask you a few questions—"

"Nuremberg, Germany," he said.

"What's that?"

"Missed it. I was in Nuremberg, Germany, with the Tenth Division in 1947."

"But you must have heard a lot of talk since about—"

"I'm sorry, mister, but you know the Great Lakes maritime regulations say that I'm not supposed to have anybody who don't belong in the pilothouse. I'm gonna have to ask you to go along to

the saloon. You get yourself a Coke or a cuppa coffee." He didn't look at me, but kept staring straight ahead as I went out.

Queer how suddenly the Great Lakes maritime regulations got enforced.

I moved along the rail to about mid-ship. The wind was like a cold blade on my face, but I wanted to give myself just a few more minutes before I had to go into the stuffy, smoke-filled cabin, where I knew that, in spite of myself, I'd drink at least three or four cups of bad coffee to pass the time. So I'd cut the taste of that with something better. I groped in the inside pocket of my overcoat and found the oblong shape of my flask. The bourbon built a comfortable small fire in my throat and my innards.

I stared down at the black edge of water alongside the hull and the thick shelf of ice. In the moonlight, the strait was one vast skating rink. Every now and then, a chunky little berg came scraping along the hull as we passed. I wondered what might happen if the R. L. Ostenson didn't go back and forth from Blackrock to the island twice a day. How long would it take before the channel froze over solid? But, I supposed, even at that, the island could hardly be cut off. With this kind of freeze, the iceboats—those craft with runners and sails or a motor—could make it back and forth without the slightest trouble.

Speak of the Devil, I thought. It was just about then that I heard the motor. I took another sip and peered ahead into the dark. Funny that somebody would be running one of those things this time of evening. There was more spray now than there had been and it stung my forehead and fogged my glasses. There seemed to be an area of low-lying mist on the ice ahead. I took the glasses off and gave them a good wipe with my handkerchief. The motor noise got no louder; it was still a low chugga-chugga-chugga, like something I remember out of my boyhood. I leaned over the rail and strained my eyes toward the sound. I saw one red eye in the gray cotton fog.

Then, gradually, as we overtook it, the thing took shape just at the far reach of glimmer from our deck lights. No iceboat, by God, but a black, sign-bedecked Model-A Ford, bumping along at maybe ten or fifteen miles an hour. Running boards, spare tire on the rear, dim yellow headlights on the ice. It looked just like the one my dad used to own back when. Only Dad would never have let anybody violate the glossy black finish with signs like, HOLD ME TIGHT, BABY AND BEAT FISH CREEK and THERE AIN'T NO FLIES ON THE N.I.S. Bent backward in the wind was a radio aerial from which flew a green pennant that read in block letters, NICOLET ISLAND.

(continued on page 200)

DEATH'S DOOR (continued from page 126)

I leaned as far over the rail as I could and, as the old car came abreast of me then gradually began to drop astern. I tried to make out the faces of the kids inside. It was too dark for much more than silhouettes. However, I did raise my arm and wave to them. And I swear that I saw somebody waving back from the rear seat. Then the yellow headlight beams grew dimmer, the chugga-chugga dropped back out of earshot and we'd lost them.

Funny, I thought. I'd hate to have any kids of mine out on the ice on a freezing night like this one. But I supposed that people up here had different ideas. They probably drove over to Blackrock—when the ice was thick enough—as casually as we'd go down to the drugstore in Green Bay.

Anyway, it was an interesting little incident, probably not the usual thing to the average Wisconsin newspaper reader. I thought I'd pin it down a little more and use it someplace in the feature. "Up around Nicolet Island, some strange things are taken as a matter of course," my lead might go. "As I was crossing over on the ferryboat last night, I saw. . . ." I made my way along the railing until I'd come back to the pilothouse door. Ostenson was still at the wheel, as if he hadn't moved since I'd left. I went on in. He glanced at me.

"Captain, I guess you saw those kids out on the ice in the old car back there just a bit. Heading over to the island. Is that a fairly common thing up here? Couldn't the kids get into trouble?"

He didn't reply. He swung his whole head around toward me, his face perfectly immobile and his gray fish-scale eyes staring. Then he looked back at his course and was silent for nearly a minute.

At last he said quietly, "It happens." Then, in a louder voice, he commanded, "Come here!" I walked over. "Open your mouth and breathe out," he said. He waited a moment. Then he said, "Liquor drinking on this ship is against the law. I could file a complaint against you and get you fined. You hear that?"

"Come off it, Cap," I said. "It's just a drop to keep the old blood flowing."

"Maybe," he said in a cold voice. "But I could testify that you barged into my pilothouse once and I had to order you out. Then you spent some time drinking liquor somewhere. Then you came back into the pilothouse against my orders. Mister, this may be just a dinky little Great Lakes ferryboat, but the captain is still the law on it. Now, you go back and sit down in the passenger cabin and shut up."

I made my disconsolate way back to the cabin. What in the world had gone wrong with that moron in the pilot-

house? He'd seemed perfectly friendly until. . . . I couldn't figure out what came after the "until." I sat down at one of the tables in the middle of the cabin. A burly man with a blond mustache and wearing a thick mackinaw looked up from across the table. He pointed at a half-full bottle of Seagrams and a paper cup. "Drink?" he asked.

I looked around. Just about every table had a pint or a fifth on it. Obviously, not a temperance ship. Just when I was going to ask mackinaw-mustache about the captain, I decided better. If Kinney's two paragraphs were any guide to the island, this chap was probably the captain's older brother, or at least a first cousin. Probably just Ostenson's quirk; he must have suddenly decided that he didn't like my face.

I was on deck again to observe our landing. The dark form of the island was very close now and I could see lights farther up the channel. They seemed to outline the dock. We passed a channel buoy frozen in the ice at a drunken tilt and wearing a snowy beard. The wind swept in from the lake, even harsher and stronger than before, then calmed a little as we came in. The engine went half speed, then silent, and came on loud again in reverse. I saw the wooden pilings of the dock, illuminated by a hanging string of yellow bulbs. I heard a shoe scrape on the stairway behind me and I turned.

It was the hunchback, just starting down to the deck. "I seen 'em, too," he said in a low voice.

"The kids in the car?" I said. "Yeah, what about it?"

"It's the old team," he whispered. "It's the old team still tryin' to make it." He was suddenly scuttling down the stairs to his duty with the ropes.

Clannish, inbred—but Ed Kinney had forgotten to tell me that I might run into some slightly loony ones, too.

. . .

Comfortable, warm, old-fashioned and presumably by the side of the lake. Lakeside Cottages struck me as a good omen. I was the only guest, yet a neat path had been shoveled from the lodge down to my small cabin (number nine) and a boy named Roger Nelson carried my bags. He turned the lights on and showed me where the radio was.

"Are you visiting up here?" he asked. "I wouldn't want to be nosy, but we almost never get an overnight guest in the winter."

"No. I'm a reporter. I came up a day early, but I'm really here to cover the big game tomorrow night."

"That's great," he said, smiling. "You from *Life*?"

"No, just from Green Bay, I'm afraid." He handed me my key.

"I'm one of the assistant basketball managers," he said. "Means I carry stuff around a lot—though you'd never guess it from the important-sounding title."

"I won't tell a single soul in Green Bay what you *really* do," I said. He started to leave. "Well, good luck against Fish Creek," I said.

He smiled and shook his head. "It's Ephraim," he said. "The game's against Ephraim. Fish Creek wasn't even in the running this year."

"Of course. How could I be so forgetful? Good luck against Ephraim," I said. He smiled again and closed the door behind him.

Sure, it was Ephraim Bay. We'd even had a feature story on Kevin O'Hara, their six-foot-six, high-scoring center. Why had I said Fish Creek? I lay on the bed with a couple of fingers of whiskey in the bathroom tumbler, blowing fancy smoke rings. Then it came back to me. Simple.

The kids crossing the ice in the old car had BEAT FISH CREEK painted on its side. The slogan was probably a leftover from the baseball or football season.

After a while, I stirred myself and got the notebook from my jacket pocket. First I'd get something to eat, then I'd get in a little work on the background for the feature story. I found the page with my notes on the briefing Ed Kinney had given me. On the second page, with a star beside it, was the name "Edward Maier."

"Ed coach fr abt ten yrs. Now retired. One of best small-school coaches in state. Runner-up three, four years in row, then champion team around 1947. Small town wild abt basketball. Maybe 60 kids in the high school, 59 of em b. b. players. Tall Swedes. Local disaster sometime in 40s or 50s. School fire? Anyway, several children died, including team members. Quick check in our files draws blank, but ask Ed, who will know all abt it." There were several other entries, but I decided to try Maier first.

There were all of four pages in the phone book. Edward Maier's number was a quaint 32-B. Then I had to turn a crank on the phone to ring the operator. I was back in the 1920s. "Please give me 32-B," I said.

"There's somebody staying at Lakeside," I heard the operator say to somebody with her. "He's calling Ed Maier." Then I heard her say, "How should I know why he wants to talk to Ed?"

"Operator, honey," I said in my coziest voice. "My name is Charley Pope. I'm a sports reporter on *The Green Bay News*. I get a hundred and thirty dollars a week. I'm forty years old, six-foot-one, 185 pounds, married and the father of two. I'm here to cover the game tomorrow night. And now, operator, honey, please ring Ed Maier for me."

"Well, it's nice meeting you, Mr.

TIP IT...TAP IT...
ONE DROP FRESHENS
BREATH INSTANTLY!



Binaca®
CONCENTRATED
GOLDEN BREATH DROPS

Build Authentic Models of
Rev. Am. S. Bounty and other
History-Making Ships

Kits make Treasured Gifts
 A real collectors' piece, 22" long by 17" high fully shaped hull and parts, tapered masts, all fittings, detailed instructions. Build the ship made famous in story and movie. \$39.95 ppd.



WHITWORTH GUN



Build the British 12 pounder used by Union and Confederate Forces. Solid brass barrel 9 1/2" long. Only \$10.50 ppd.

MERMAID FIGUREHEAD

Rich color decoration and warm wood staining set this molded ship's figurehead off on its golden fiddlehead. Weather resistant. Includes wood bracket for wall hanging. 32" high. Price \$44.95 ppd.



MARINE PRINTS FOR FRAMING, SCRIMSHAW JEWELRY, BRASS SHIP'S LAMPS, MOUNTED FLINTLOCK PISTOL, COMPLETED SHIP MODELS, MANY NAUTICAL ITEMS & GIFTS
 Over 108 pages—ship and gun models, books, tools, accessories, filled with Nautical Treasures 75¢

NEW CATALOG

MARINE MODEL COMPANY, INC.

Dept. PC9, Halesite, Long Island, N.Y. 11743

bottoms up

Playboy Mugs set spirits soaring. White frolicking Femlin kicks up her heels on black ceramic. 10-oz. Coffee Mug, MM320, \$3; 22-oz. Beer Mug, MM319, \$6. Please order by product number and add 50¢ for handling.



Shall we send a gift card in your name? Please send check or money order to: **Playboy Products**, Department MZ06, Playboy Building, 919 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611. Playboy Club credit keyholders may charge to their Key-Cards.

Pope!" she said. "We don't get many visitors in the wintertime." I heard a whispered aside to her friend, "Newspaper man, and he sounds real nice. No, I don't know why he's calling Ed Maier."

When she finally did get the call through, there was an answer almost immediately at the other end. It sounded like a hiccup.

"Is this Mr. Ed Maier? I'm up here to cover . . ." and I went on through my introduction. There was silence for almost a minute.

I knew that Ed Maier was still conscious, though, because I could hear a deep and regular breathing over the line. "Listen, Mr. Maier," I finally said, "if it's more convenient, I can come over to see you tomorrow. But I'd rather make a short call this evening, if it's OK."

More deep breathing. Then he spoke one word in a hoarse voice. "Hurry!" And then he had hung up.

Thumbtacked to the wall of my cottage was a postcard-sized map of the island. I studied it until I thought I'd worked out my route from Lakeside to Town Line Road, where Maier lived. It was now almost seven. I'd talk with the old boy for about an hour and try to get back to get some dinner around eight. I went out to my car.

The map was probably OK, but the snow and the scarcity of signs tricked me, because the next one I saw read GUNNAUGSSON ROAD, which was a dirt road that didn't appear on the map at all. I wandered from that onto another road that turned out to be Detroit Harbor Road. This did appear on the map, running the length of the island south to north. My only trouble was that I didn't know which way was north. After a couple of miles of rough going through the snow, a red neon savior gleamed out of the dark. God bless Gus' Bar. Eats. Beer. Mixed Drinks.

And there they both were, just as advertised. The one, massive old-fashioned dark wood; and the other, behind it—massive old-fashioned barkeep. A jukebox was sobbing at the top of its voice when I went in.

"Ed Maier?" said the bartender, shaking his head slowly, as if this were just too much. He mopped the bar for a while. "Ed Maier," he finally said reluctantly, "you mean *coach* Ed Maier?"

"Yes. I mean *coach* Ed Maier on Town Line Road. Can you tell me how to get there?"

"Guess I could," he said. He started to polish some glass beer steins. "What do you want with him?"

"I want to offer him a job in the movies," I said. "Now, where do I find him?"

"Well," said Gus reflectively, "when you go out the door, point yourself right. Go about twenty-five yards. Then

What makes this Wyler Electronic forgettable?



A tiny battery does all the work. Pulses superlative electric time. No main-spring to worry about. And Wyler never forgets the unique shrinkproof crystal case which protects the movement against damage from water. Only the styling is unforgettable, tells the date, too.

Stainless steel \$110.00
 Others from \$89.50

Wyler
ELECTRONIC

Wyler Watch Corp., N.Y. 10010

go left on Town Line right down to the very end. That's where Coach lives."

As I was going out the door, he said, "If you're a reporter on the Green Bay paper and you get a hundred and thirty dollars a week, how come you tell people you can get them in the movies?"

"How come you sell poisoned beer?" I asked and left.

But the directions were right, anyway. I found Maier's ramshackle little cottage in a winter-bare birch grove. There was a pile of firewood outside the front door, a little drift of smoke from the chimney and a dim light inside the window. The door was opened even before I could get out of the car.

Ed Maier was one of those people who look about 30 from a distance of 20 yards. Blond hair combed straight back, very fair skin, athletic build and no pot. At half the distance, he had added 10 years, maybe 15. He wore high boots, heavy pants and a plaid windbreaker. You began to see the creases in his face, the jowls, the round-shouldered middle age in his stance.

When you got right up there to shake hands, you saw, by the lamplight in the doorway, the undertaker's next. Or at least that was the way he struck me at the moment. The blue eyes were glazed. The face was a Rand McNally of varicose veins. The flesh looked like puff paste. Ed Maier seemed to be the victim of one of those diseases that age a man too rapidly.

He invited me in and offered me coffee. He had two cups ready and one of those old conical coffeepots steaming on one of the hot flagstones of the hearth. On the littered table there was a plate with some thick slices of bread and cheese. I made myself a sandwich and sat across from him in a rocker near the fire. I meant to ask him why he'd said "Hurry!" that way, but I didn't quite know how to put it.

He began, "Well, you can quote me as saying we've had a great season. No, sir, I won't be coy about that. The boys have marvelous spirit and we've been getting near onto seventy percent of the rebounds. Thank Red Hockstader for that. Six-four and a natural for all-state. Best center I've ever coached."

"But, Coach," I said gently, "I never heard of Red Hockstader. The Nicolet Island center is a kid named Kris Holmsund."

"Think I don't know that?" said the old man. "I thought you said you wanted to talk about the championship team. That was 1947." I would have sworn that the brew in his coffee cup came more from Kentucky than from Brazil. He took a long swig.

"They really had her fixed up," he said. "The old American Legion Hall. Flags, bunting, more smorgasbord than you ever seen in your life. Couple bar-

rels of beer. Band all in new uniforms. Vee for victory. Big sign read, WELCOME TO OUR CHAMPS. Broke my heart." He drifted off into silence. "They were all my boys, you know. Just like sons."

I wasn't getting anywhere. We were drifting pretty aimlessly in the old man's memory, though we seemed to be skirting the edge of that disaster—school fire or whatever it was—Kinney had told me to check on. I made a guess and tried again.

"So they never showed up at the American Legion Hall for the victory celebration? Is that the way it was, Coach? Remind me just how it happened, will you?" I poured myself some more coffee and made another cheese sandwich. The fire burned hot in the fireplace, but so many of the windowpanes were broken and patched with cardboard that I kept feeling an intermittent draft.

"My wife Julia was alive then. The whole thing broke her up terrible. And Sally run off to Milwaukee and married a bum. Drunken bum, I heard. Not that I've even thought of her for twenty years."

Now we were really lost in the fog. Might as well give it up for tonight. I thought—but I decided to try once more. "Coach, tell me how it all came about. What happened first that led up to . . . ?"

He nodded. "Well, you know," he said patiently, as if repeating an oft-told tale. "You know we won by four points in the overtime. And when we got back to Blackrock, the ferryboat was late. No sign of her. And all the boys crazy mad to get back to the celebration. And me half out of my head myself, I guess. . . ."

"Well, anyhow, I said wait, by God. Red said no. *He* was going to drive it alone. I said he was a damn fool. He said it wasn't snowing. I said it was going to any minute and, though the ice was thick enough, still, there were probably weak spots in it here and there. So I took him out back of the smokehouse, where the others couldn't hear, and I talked Red out of it. Thought so. Then I went down the road to a house to use the telephone. When I came back, the whole damn team had left. It was beginning to snow then. . . ."

I suddenly understood the old tragedy of Nicolet Island. The champions were all dead, the triumphant team wiped out. But, of course, it was a lot more than that. Everybody on the island was related to one or more of the seven or eight boys on the team. But something was bothering me and I had to explode.

"Why in God's name, then, do the people of this place still let their kids toot around on the ice in old cars? You'd think they'd learn something from what happened. Why, just tonight, coming over, I saw another bunch in a car, chugging along across the strait."

As the old coach stared at me, the

merciful potion from his coffee cup began to take hold. The lids seemed to fall over his eyes like the lids of dolls' eyes, pulled down by gravity. His head slowly sank to his forearm and he was silent.

"Coach?" I said experimentally. He didn't move. I debated whether to haul him off to his bed, but then I guessed that he probably spent a good many winter nights in the old easy chair in front of the dying fire—and the ancient phrase was a perfect literal description—in his cups.

I got into bed early and opened my book. I'd brought along Alan Moorehead's *The White Nile*, which I'd been saving to read and which now seemed to me a good, faraway kind of thing to dissipate all the nonsense I'd encountered that afternoon. Because now, in a quiet moment, it seemed to me that the whole business was nonsensical. And, by the time I got sleepy enough to turn out the light, I'd succeeded. I was deep in Tanganyika with Livingstone.

I was shaving the next morning when I heard a knock at the cabin door. "Come in," I yelled, and Roger Nelson pushed open the door. Hearty good mornings on either side. I was feeling refreshed and hungry. "How are the pancakes up there at the lodge?" I asked.

"Great," he said. "But you've got an invitation to breakfast—out. Mr. Ostenson sent me down to ask you."

"Him?" I said to the mirror. "On the ferry on the way over, he took an intense dislike to my looks. Just about threw me in irons. What does he want now?"

"Oh, Axel," Roger said. "He was probably just in a bad mood because he was dying for a drink. Gets that way late in the afternoon. No, this is Nels Ostenson. He's the mayor here. Businessman. Rents out cottages and deals in real estate. He's a very nice guy, you'll see. I think he probably wants to make friends with the press. And you couldn't get better pancakes than they make at the Ostensons."

"Seduced!" I said. "Be out in a minute."

Roger showed me the way. The sun was so brilliant that it almost hurt; and under the bright sky, Nicolet Island looked as I'd hoped it would—the little street, snow-covered fields, sedate stone fences and plain white farmhouses off in the distance. The snow squeaked under our boots.

"Did you ever meet Paul Hornung? What's Willie Davis like in person? Boy, and that Bart Starr! Did you interview him after that game with the Cowboys? How many counts does he take in the pocket when he sees his primary receiver is covered?" Roger kept asking me questions faster than I could answer them. We'd covered a fair amount of the Packer

offensive game by the time we got to a frame office building with a sign reading, N. OSTENSON, BUILDERS, REAL ESTATE, PLUMBING & HEATING. Down the side of this, there was a cleared cement walk, between hedges, that led to a pleasant white clapboard house.

Nels Ostenson was a big, gray-haired man with a Kriss Kringle face and a ringing laugh. I liked him immediately. "By damn," he said, one hand on my shoulder, "my favorite author in person. I even read your tragedies—such as 'Colts Nose Out Packers Twenty-four to Twenty.' But we won't talk about that. I'm sure everybody you meet talks Packers until you're sick of it."

He showed me into a pleasant room, where the sun shone through the front windows and bookcases lined the walls. A table with a white tablecloth was set up and, almost as soon as we sat down, a teenage girl brought in some orange juice ("Daughter Karen, Mr. Pope").

And the pancakes were good—big and light and golden. After a decent pause to make a serious start on them, he said, "I'm going to apologize all over the place, Charley. I think you had a bad introduction to our little town out here, and I'm sorry. Wish I'd known you were coming. First of all, Axel was snotty to you on the ferryboat, I understand. Well, you've got to know Axel to know why. He's a good boy, but he's kind of on edge these days—family trouble. Wife had an operation last summer and she's never really recovered. One kid just about in college and lots of money worries. So I think you ought to forgive him for blowing his stack. He didn't know who you were. I guess he got into one of his moods." Nels said all of this with a sort of grandfatherly grin and some wide waves of his fork. He had a snowy-white napkin tucked in his shirt collar, under his chin.

"I'd already forgotten. I shouldn't have gone poking around the pilot-house, anyway."

"Good! Good! Now that's settled," he said. "Too bad you had to run onto two of our worst pieces of hard luck just when you arrived. I'm sorry about Ed Maier. I should say straight off that poor Ed is in terrible shape. You know, one of the things about a little community like ours is that we probably make a big mistake by being too charitable. Now, someplace else, Ed would have been put in a home long ago. But folks around here just can't stand the idea of shutting a man up if he's harmless—even if it would be for his own good. Ed's been more or less off his rocker ever since his wife died.

"Trouble is, everybody who knew Ed in the old days loves him. Why, he was practically the local hero for nearly ten years. Nobody kinder than Ed; nobody

better at handling the kids. And in a basketball-crazy place like this, somebody who puts out winning teams year after year just about owns the town. Sure, nowadays, he holes up in that shack of his, has the d.t.s. is full of crazy persecution delusions—but still it seems like nobody has the heart to commit him. Probably my responsibility, but I'm just as weak-kneed as all the rest."

"I gathered something like that," I said. "He gave me a disconnected story about his daughter running away. . . ."

"And about the team?" Nels asked. He paused for a minute, looking directly at me.

"Something about the old championship team he coached, yes."

Nels sighed. "It's his worst bugaboo. He had a real crack-up back about Forty-seven, just after we won the championship. Pardon me if you've heard all this—but you have to understand something about that freak accident to understand what happened to him. You'll hear some crazy superstitious stories, but the truth is that we had one of those terrible, foolish accidents that winter and a lot of stupid rumors got started.

"What really happened is this. The team was coming back one night from the championship game at Fish Creek. Bad weather and Ed knew it was going to be worse. They got to Blackrock and the ferry was late coming over for them. We had a kid on the team at that time, Red Hockstader—great player but a big, headstrong German kid. At Blackrock, he talked the rest of the team into driving over the ice in his old car. You know, cross the strait and surprise everybody by sailing into the welcome party on their own wheels.

"Now, Ed did his damndest to talk them out of it—and he thought he had. But he didn't figure on Red's being so stubborn. So, when Ed went up the road for a few minutes, the kids set out. Ordinarily, it might be quite possible to drive right across the strait, if you did it in daylight and watched out sharp for rotten spots in the ice. It's different at night. Well, the sad story is that they must have hit a rotten spot and the whole team went right down to the bottom of the strait. Not a trace." He stared out of the window for a minute or two. "Anything else people say is pure baloney."

I hesitated. Finally, I said, "I believe you. But there is one thing that bothers me."

He put down his fork and untucked his napkin. "What's that?"

"Well, since I've been here, I've heard some of these rumors, and one of them is pretty weird. People say that once in a while, somebody sees an old Ford out on the ice, trying to make it across to Nicolet Island. Wrapped in mist, chugging along. All that. The old team trying to get home."

Nels threw his napkin on the floor and stood up. "Those damn kids!" he said. "Those damn jokers. I'll have the law on them one of these days, even if I have to get Madison to send the state police up!" His face was red and he kicked at a doorstep as he walked up and down.

"Charley, I don't know what's got into this generation. You know about sick jokes and black humor and all. I suppose most of that's harmless, but it does turn my stomach. Anyway, it's awful ghoulish when a practical joke is played on people who've really had members of their family killed or drowned, don't you think? So, there's this bunch of smart-ass kids in Blackrock who thought it was funny to buy an old car someplace, paint it up with signs like the ones on Hockstader's old jalopy and give the ferry passengers a scare on dark nights by chugging out onto the ice and letting themselves be seen."

"Do you know who they are?" I asked. "Can't you catch them?"

"I will someday," he said. "Just wait. I had the whole of Blackrock searched last time, but they must have had the thing hidden pretty carefully. Not a soul in the vicinity lets on that he knows a thing. But we'll catch them!

"Cruellest thing is that old Ed really believes that car is out there. He swears that he hears it chugging along the shore by his house. Used to be he thought that only when he was drunk. Now he believes it all the time."

Before I left, Nels had calmed down a little and we talked about other subjects. Inevitably, we got onto the Packers, and I had to give him my personal impressions of Vince Lombardi.

. . . .

Silence. Free throw. The Nicolet Island guard leaned forward, feet placed in the middle of the circle, body straight. Up on the toes, leaning more, then the calculated throw, a graceful arc and the ball dropped through the basket, leaving in its wake a dancing net, a howling gym. Before the referee could place the ball back in action, the timekeeper sounded the buzzer. End of the third quarter. Score: Nicolet Island 51, Ephraim 51.

Ed Kinney thought the island's population to be approximately 200, and my educated crowd estimate placed the local rooters at nearly that number. Most had arrived early, well before gametime, and had invaded the gray-wooden bleachers, leaving cramped space for the half-hundred Ephraim fans who had crossed over on the midafternoon ferry.

Captain Axel Ostenson was there. So was Nels. I scanned the faces. Roger, carrying a bucket, gave me a big wave. Only Ed Maier was missing.

I'd spent the day poking around the

island, picking up bits of local lore and tramping over some snow-covered but attractive landscape. My ideas for a feature story with just a touch of the supernatural as a come-on had to be junked (OLD LEGEND OF A LOST TEAM STILL HAUNTS NICOLET ISLAND). Everybody had heard the tale, of course, and everybody had then said, "Poor Ed Maier," alcoholism was a terrible thing, and one of these days poor old Ed would probably have to be put away in an institution.

Only one thing stuck in the back of my mind and bothered me. When I'd seen Ed, he'd been garrulous and probably drunk. He'd rambled on about lots of things he seemed to want to get off his mind. But he'd never mentioned the "ghost-car" story.

The timekeeper's buzzer announced the fourth quarter. Both sides scored repeatedly, though the game remained close. Then, with two minutes remaining, the Ephraim center, six-foot-five and full of aggression, committed his fifth personal foul and was returned to the bench, giving the Nicolet Island five both home-court advantage and control of the boards. The game ended in a thunderous glory. Nicolet Island 71, Ephraim Bay 68. Door County champions again.

At that exact moment, the whole population of the island went slam-bang out of their Scandinavian heads with one great, hoarse, endless yell of victory. Now I know what the berserk Vikings must have sounded like. The siren on top of the volunteer firehouse began to blast the air. I made it down to the locker room holding my ears.

They were still yelling up there as I tried to interview a totally incoherent coach Ostberg and a bunch of soaking-wet lunatic kids. Never mind. I've been in this business a long time and I've got a whole notebook full of the clichés. "It was a team effort. I never could have done it without the whole team in there fighting all the way. A great bunch of boys," etc. I keep wishing somebody would say something different one day.

The American Legion Hall had just about all the red, white and blue you could possibly put in without going blind. From the rafters was hung a huge sign—obviously put into place that afternoon—NICOLET ISLAND BASKETBALL TEAM, DOOR COUNTY CHAMPS. The island's German band, in splendid befrosted blue uniforms, boomed out victory marches. The ladies of the American Legion Auxiliary doled out mugs of—not the watery punch you might expect but a hot, spicy and potent—*glögg*. The smorgasbord was delicious. Every kid in town was dancing.

Scenes of great hilarity and joy in which I don't share and large amounts of *glögg*, which I cherish but which affects me like a lullaby, sooner or later

drive me homeward. I came out into the bitter cold of the parking lot to the strains—for the tenth time—of *Hail to the Victors Valiant*, swiped from across the lake, and hoped my car would start without any fuss.

It took a little effort, but at last the engine turned over. Suddenly, I heard a noise, a sort of choking cough, from the back seat. I turned around. Huddled there, passed out, apparently, was old Ed Maier. He'd come to hear the sound of victory, it seemed, but he just couldn't force himself to go inside. Lucky I'd come out early, or he'd probably have frozen to death.

So I drove him to his house. I hauled him out and dragged him into the house—he was stiff in more ways than one, but he was still breathing and seemed in no danger. I put him to bed on the studio couch in his front room and coaxed his fire into a blaze. Under the old Army blanket, he breathed hoarsely. I guessed he was safe enough, but he'd have quite a headache in about 24 hours when he woke up.

I switched off the lamp and went to the door. Just as I got it halfway open, I heard Ed Maier's voice loud and clear in the darkness, "Now hear the truth, by God."

"Ed?" I said. "Are you all right? It's Charley Pope." I eased the door shut.

He seemed not to have heard me. He started to speak again in that clear, deliberate, unslurred voice, not like a drunk but like a man dictating a statement.

"Witness before God. Last night, before we went to Fish Creek, I made Sally tell me the story. Knocked up; at first, I

thought, well, hell, it does happen and this isn't the first shotgun match on the island. And then something funny about her and the way she was acting and crying and refusing to name the boy; and I guess I did slap her around a little, first time in her life since she was a small kid and had a spanking. But Julia hysterical down there and I guess I'm strung tight because of the big game, and so I did hit her. And so she did tell, did tell, did tell. Horrible dirty thing; how could they do it? In Holmgren's barn, Sally there buck in the hay and the whole team, the whole goddamn team, my boys, and I thought of them all as my boys, every one of them there with Sally, and she didn't care.

"And awful hard for me not to let on I knew. At Blackrock, by the smokehouse, Red didn't specially want to try the trip; they'd been joking about it and some said what a big sensation it'd be; but Red, no, he wasn't foolish. Was only after I gave him a big drink from my hip flask and called the whole bunch cowards. Cowards, cowards. 'You guys can beat Fish Creek, but you're scared to get out on the ice; I drove it myself a dozen times, once in a snowstorm. Cowards.'"

"No, they weren't. When I got back, they'd gone. . . ."

I waited for a long time. "Ed?" I asked. "You awake?" He was beginning to snore. He was out cold, as drunk as I'd ever seen a man, but the strange thing was that I believed every word of his story.

. . .

I woke the next morning to a semi-blizzard. It wasn't a really serious, driving Wisconsin storm; it was more like a



"Two consenting partners or not, get them out of there!!!"

boy blizzard having a snowball fight. It howled as if laughing and threw snow on the town. Momentarily, it would clear and there would be a faint haze of sunshine overhead; then it would rush in as if to smother us with a heavy blast of new snow. At those times, it made a kind of snow twilight. It was like that when I drove up to the landing—so dark that the lights of the R. L. Ostenson were shining.

Axel met me as I came on board. He had been waiting especially for my arrival, and he shook my hand. "Please feel welcome to ride either in the pilothouse or in the saloon, Mr. Pope," he said. "But *please* don't stay out on the deck in this gusty weather. The deck is slippery and you could have a bad fall."

"I won't bother you, Axel," I said. "I appreciate your invitation, but I think I'll just hole up in the cabin and read my book this trip." We smiled and he slapped me on the shoulder, then turned to go along the deck.

The hunchback drove my car aboard—that made only the third one. There seemed to be no more than half a dozen

passengers this time. I settled down in an empty booth in the cabin and tried to translate my mind to the shores of Lake Victoria and the upper reaches of the White Nile.

Successfully, too. When I next looked up, I realized that the engines were throbbing and that we had been under way for some minutes. I put down the book and walked over to look out the window.

The snow and wind were still playing their fitful games—nothing but whiteness all around us for one minute, then a sudden clear space, when you could see the dark channel and maybe even 100 yards or so out across the expanse of ice. I stood there, lost in a kind of meditation, for some time.

Chugga-chugga-chugga. I couldn't believe it. I opened the door and went out onto the deck. Not near, not far, stubbornly paralleling our course somewhere out there on the ice.

I was suddenly furious. Nels was absolutely right. It was the most senseless, ghoulish, idiotic kind of practical joke in the world. Those high school kids from

Blackrock ought to be caught, have their car confiscated, get thrown in jail—even get a good whipping. Not only were they harassing the Nicolet Islanders in this stupid way but they were risking their own lives every time—look what had happened once before.

I went down to the car deck, full of this kind of resentment, hoping to get a glimpse of the old jalopy. Apparently, nobody else had heard the sound, because I was all alone in the wind. I leaned over the rail and peered forward into the white confusion. The chugga-chugga seemed just a few yards away.

Then, suddenly, the breeze dropped; there was a clearing in the storm and I saw it. I saw every detail. The old car was painted black, but the body had a lot of rust on it. One running board sagged. The left-rear fender had been crumpled. A light trail of snow streamed off the layer of white on top of the roof. The battered old license plate was, sure enough, WISCONSIN, 1947. But it wasn't any of this that made me jump off the ferryboat.

I still don't know quite how I did it. I remember taking hold of a rope and swinging over the side. It was probably lucky for me that no more than a yard or so of black channel showed between the boat's side and the ice shelf, and I swung across easily.

A puff of snowy wind came up again and the car was only a dim form ahead of me. I ran. I seemed to hear some kind of shout from behind me, from the boat, but nothing was going to stop me now.

Ten yards, fifteen yards; I thought I'd never catch up. It was hard running, because the ice gave good footing one second and none at all the next.

When the snow suddenly cleared, I saw that the old Ford had stopped. They were waiting for me, heads in stocking caps poked out of the windows, faces of the boys grinning with mischief. The driver's red hair poked out from beneath his cap. They loved my startled reaction.

Ed Maier's body lay at the end of a ten-foot rope that had been tied to the rear axle. The rope was under his armpits, not around his neck, but I knew that he was dead, anyway. His face was partly covered with ice dust, partly bloody scrapes, but I knew him. I do not think that there was the least bit of astonishment in his expression.

I didn't hear the ferryboat's engine stop. The first thing I knew was that the hunchback was scrambling across the ice, yelling at me. It was he who had seen me jump overboard.

When he came up to me, he found me standing all alone, staring into the snowfall that was now coming down thick and steady over the wide, desolate ice expanse of the *Porte des Morts*.



"I'm just doing my thing."