

SARGENTO

Treated Like Family



*How an Entrepreneur and
His “Employee Family” Built Sargento,
a Billion-Dollar Cheese Company*

TOM FALEY

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and His “Employee Family”
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STREET

NEW YORK NASHVILLE

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For my parents, Francis and Maxine Faley, who taught me the
value of family.

Your legacy lives in your children and grandchildren.

Prologue

Chavannes-les-Grands, France
March 1892

JOSEPH GENTINE PLANNED to commit the ultimate act against his family—against his father, his grandfather, and the many generations before them.

Standing among rows of grapevines in the predawn morning, he paid no heed to the weather or his discomfort as mist speckled his face and wind drove the cold drizzle deep into his clothing. His stomach tightened. His breathing labored. His shoulders tensed.

This is it, he thought. *This is the last day*. The thought rang with a somber finality, and he felt the rats of guilt gnawing at the edges of his conviction. Today, he and his family would pack the wagon, hitch the horses, and leave this province of France: Alsace, his birthplace, the birthplace of generations of his family before him. The Gentine family, for as far back as he could remember, had lived in this small town of Chavannes-les-Grands.

His grapes grew from French soil. His family was French, but they no longer lived in that once ennobled country. Germany stole the land—Alsace-Lorraine, along with his family's vineyard—after the

TREATED LIKE FAMILY



Back Row: Thomas and Leo
Middle Row: Josephine, Jules, Louis, and Joseph
Front Row: Joseph Jr.

Franco-Prussian War. Kaiser Wilhelm II spurned the people of Alsace, and in return, the Alsatians shared the same contempt for the Kaiser.

Joseph had brooded over his options during the prior winter. In the end, he and his wife, Josephine, grew to accept a distasteful solution: Leave Chavannes-les-Grands with their five sons, and start their life over elsewhere. As the winter winds howled in the evenings, they plotted.

There were friends—German friends he had come to know—that had left behind their homes, forsaken their family's past, and found a new life in a German community in the United States west of a city

called Milwaukee. Just months earlier, in the fall, he had sent a letter to them. Late winter, their response reached him. “Come,” they wrote. They would house his family until land could be purchased for their farm.

That would be their destiny, he and Josephine agreed. Unlike their intolerable life in Chavannes-les-Grands, they would begin a new life in America, a country that—unlike Germany or France—respected its citizens, a country that found no value in prejudice and hate, a country free from onerous taxes. With them, they would bring their valued possessions, their French traditions, and their family history. Just as important, they would bring cuttings from the family’s vineyard, securing their sons’ future.

Mentally, Joseph calculated the number of cuttings needed from their vines to reestablish a sizable vineyard at the end of their journey. With determination, he plodded through the mud, toward the oldest vines—those closest to the house. These he valued above all. They symbolized the roots of the generations before him, the history of their family.

He bundled the clippings in a damp cloth, tucked them into a lidded wooden box, and entered the house. The room, lit only by the flickering flames of the fireplace, caused his family’s shadows to jump and dart furtively along the walls.

“I’m all set, Jo,” he said. “All the vine cuttings are wrapped and loaded in the wagon. Have you packed everything we need?”

As Josephine turned toward him, the orange-copper glow from the fire revealed only part of her face, leaving the rest in shadow. A tear tracked silently over the crest of her cheek. She didn’t answer. Just nodded.

He studied her as Josephine took a slow look around, as if she were etching details of her home in her mind. Pulling her into him, he wrapped his arms around her, giving a long, reassuring hug.

She had borne him a family of six children: five boys and one girl. The oppressive weight of melancholy nearly crushed her years ago when Marie passed away as an infant. Josephine's emotional wound healed as she reconnected with her family once again. But the scar remained, along with a residue of sadness at the corners of her eyes.

Josephine took a long, shuddering breath in his arms as if she once again recalled the reality of her sacrifices. Of the family she was leaving behind and the only life she had known for forty years. Of her daughter and the small grave she was abandoning, to be left unattended, overgrown with weeds and forgotten by generations that would follow.

They stood embracing in the middle of the room. "Are you OK, Jo?" he whispered in her ear.

"I'm fine," she said, pushing away from him. "We must do this for the children..." Then, meeting his eyes, she repeated, "I'll be fine."

They stood in silence until a loud rap on the door trespassed the moment. The door eased open and the toothy smile of their neighbor poked in.

"Just me, Joseph. Would have been here earlier, but roads are getting muddy."

Joseph raised his hand in welcome. "Your timing is perfect. We were just loading the wagon."

As his three oldest sons gathered their baggage, Joseph snuffed the flames in the fireplace with water and a poker. The house grew dark. A rectangle of early-morning light seeped through the open front door—a light leading them away. He grabbed his wife's hand and together they closed the door behind them for the last time.

With an air of solemnity, the family piled into the wagon, slick from the morning mist. Their neighbor would accompany them as far as Belfort before returning with the horses and wagon to the Gentine homestead. Joseph sighed. The *former* Gentine homestead. They no

longer owned the horses and wagon, and it was no longer his vineyard. All was sold. Everything.

With the house slowly receding behind them, a lump rising in his throat, Joseph glanced at his wife and children huddled in blankets against the damp weather. His future, the future of his entire family, suddenly shrank to twelve pieces of baggage and approximately three hundred vine cuttings bound in a ragged cloth. They were all he had now, but they were all he would ever need.

He turned toward the road ahead, his back to the home he had always known. The wagon moaned as it rocked over the uneven road. Ahead, the two horses thumped along, snorting small vapor clouds into the cold morning air, their leather harnesses squeaking as they strained against the weight they pulled.

Unseen by others, tears welled up and blurred his vision. He remained head bent, facing forward. Joseph no longer wanted to see the sacrifice he was making.

1

Out of the Blue
1933



Leonard's high school photo

SEVEN SECONDS. IN the same amount of time it took nineteen-year-old Leonard Gentine to comb his hair as he prepared to leave the house, fate jolted his life, leaving behind a palpable air of uncertainty and unease.

Much the same as any other Saturday morning, he had arranged to spend the day with Dolores Becker, a woman five years his senior, who lived with her parents in Milwaukee. Navigating over lightly traveled roads, his thoughts had wandered, forsaking careful attention to his driving.

It was 1933, a time when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt introduced the New Deal, a time when the nation still reeled under the weight of the Great Depression, a time when the anemic economy and paltry wages made the purchase of gasoline a luxury. Families often resigned their cars to garages in deference to public transportation.

The car Leonard drove—an older vehicle with an annoying rattle, a stiff steering wheel, and doors that groaned when swung on their hinges—belonged to his parents, Louis and Anna Gentine. Their agreement had been simple. If he paid for the gas from his wages working at an industrial equipment manufacturer, they allowed him the use of their car.

Driving that morning, Leonard thrust his hand out the window, feeling the pressure of the air as he sped down the streets. Two men, sitting on a porch, had turned their heads as he rattled by. Leonard had barely noticed them. Absorbed in thought, he automatically turned right, spinning quickly around a corner.

It was then that fate played its card, waiting for this exact moment. From the midst of reverie, Leonard suddenly grew aware of the slow-moving vehicle—one that appeared to have dropped—out of the blue—directly in front of him.

Seven seconds compressed into a single stroke of time. He stomped

on the brake pedal. Tires squealed. He spun the steering wheel hard to the right.

Then, as if in slow motion, his car stuttered across loose gravel on an irrevocable path into the rear of the vehicle ahead.

The crash, so sudden, so startling, threw Leonard into the unforgiving rim of the steering wheel. A cacophony of senses consumed him: pressure on his lungs, impact to the head, crunching of metal, shattering of glass.

An odd stillness followed. The world had stopped, briefly, giving him time to collect his wits. With his long fingers barely looped over the top of the steering wheel, Leonard squeezed out his breath.

He surveyed for injuries: His ribs hurt. His left shoulder ached. His forehead sported a small lump. He could see no traces of blood. OK. He breathed easier. *I'm fine*, he remembered thinking. *Just a few bumps*. The car had suffered the brunt of the collision.

Then, panic gripped him. His parents' car!

Leonard's knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel. Ahead, the door slowly yawned open, and a finely polished shoe stepped onto the running board followed by its wearer, a sturdy, balding man in his mid-thirties. The man, freed from his vehicle, strode back to the point of impact.

Creaking open the door of his car, Leonard stepped out to offer his apologies and to study the damage. There was no anger, no shouting. The man, dressed in a somber suit and tie, examined the crumpled black metal and frowned. He then looked squarely into Leonard's face. "Son, you're going to have to pay for this."

Leonard's stomach clenched. He hadn't considered the expense of the other vehicle. Where would he find the money for that? Not from his parents. He knew they couldn't afford it. Leonard met the man's eyes and merely nodded agreement.

Then, an image of the crash—just moments before the impact—flashed back to him. Could that be right? Leonard inched backward to gain a better perspective of the other vehicle. Yes, it was true. That's exactly what he had seen.

Now, standing mid-street, his mind racing, he made a quick assessment and chose the only recourse he could imagine.

2

The Obligation 1933

LEONARD WORRIED. THE agreement, hesitantly accepted at the scene of the accident, might pale in comparison to this pending conversation with Dolores. He was uncertain of her reaction, how his agreed-upon undertaking might bruise their relationship.

Arriving later than he had promised, he took a deep breath as he approached the Becker home.

From her parents' porch, Dolores watched as he parked by the curb. Concern painted her face and grew even more pronounced as she hurried down the steps to greet him.

"Oh, Len!" Dolores gaped in shock. "You were in a car accident?"

"It wasn't just another car I hit," he explained. "One instant the road was clear. Then—*wham!*—out of the blue, there's this hearse in front of me! A hearse!"

Leonard shoved his hand into his pants pocket. "I have the name of the man driving it." Fishing out the note, he unfolded the paper. "Hobart Brigden," he said, carefully pronouncing the name. "He owns the Brigden Funeral Home over on West Lloyd Street. Gave me his phone number and address."

The sound of movement from the porch drew Leonard's attention. Dolores's younger sister, Margie, clung to the porch railing. He flashed a quick smile and a wave, and then returned his attention to Dolores.

"He told me I had to pay for the damage," Leonard continued, "and I panicked. I don't have that kind of money. But when I stepped back and saw it was a hearse, it gave me the idea. At first, Mr. Brigden hesitated, but after I explained my situation . . . well, he agreed to let me work off the debt."

As Dolores listened, she ran her hand over the dented car fender, her fingers probing the sharp creases in the metal and ridges left by the chipped paint.

"He'll let me know the total cost I need to work off. Next Saturday I might even drive the hearse—if there's a funeral. Said he'd pay me four dollars a day."

Dolores scrunched her brow. "You ran into this man's hearse and now he's going to let you to drive it? By any chance, did Mr. Brigden also suffer a bump on the head?" She touched his forehead. Leonard winced.

"Well . . . I think I kinda talked him into it." Then he quickly added, "Of course, driving the hearse may not be something I do all the time. I let him know that whatever else needs to be done, I'd do that, too."

Dolores studied Leonard's face. Despite the gravity of the situation, she grinned. "Well, aren't you quite the charmer, Mr. Gentine. Who else could crash into a man one minute and, in the next minute, be offered a job?"

Leonard returned the smile, grateful for the implied understanding and hopeful this would be only a short-lived obligation and minor inconvenience for the two of them.



The following Saturday, at the Brigden Funeral Home, in his best suit, Leonard trimmed hedges. His list of responsibilities was unexpected. Mr. Brigden unabashedly assigned him any job not requiring

a mortuary degree: washing windows, mowing the lawn, cleaning up after embalment, and occasionally driving the hearse.

At first, Leonard stood tentatively in the shadows, watching Hobart prepare the bodies for their funeral. The process was unfamiliar, slightly uncomfortable. Surprisingly, as his exposure increased, Leonard grew more intrigued and less reluctant.

“What we do here is not for the benefit of the dead,” Hobart said, “but for the comfort of the living. Focus your emotions on the needs of those left behind. Allowing the family to see their loved one at peace is an important responsibility.”

As weeks passed, when Brigden met with a grieving family, when a funeral needed greeters at the door, or when a body required prepping, Leonard eagerly volunteered, witnessing firsthand the inner workings of the funeral business. Each week, he routinely peppered his new boss with questions.

As a friendship grew, Hobart shared the nettlesome financial side of his business as well—the continuous stream of bills, the slow payments from those still struggling with the economy.

“To bring in a little extra money,” Hobart confided, “I tinker with inventions. Here’s something that I’ve sold to a few people. Some of the local stores offer it, too.” Hobart pulled out what appeared to be a small test tube—a pointed tip at the bottom with a rubber stopper at the top. “I hope to patent it someday. You stick it in the ground by the roots and it automatically fertilizes the tree.”

Leonard studied the small tube. How many of these things would Hobart need to sell to pay just one of the bills on his desk, he wondered. And the damage to the hearse, since Leonard’s free labor wasn’t paying any bills. Hobart didn’t replace anybody at the funeral home nor did he cut another employee’s hours. He allowed Leonard to work off his debt, an arrangement that probably helped Leonard more than it repaid the damage.

Why would he do that when his funeral business could use the money? Why not insist Leonard pay his debt outright from his earnings at the Falk Corporation—the full-time job he held during the week?

It seemed illogical. Is that how a business is run? He didn't think so. Still, Hobart's empathy, his sense of caring, the unorthodox way he treated his staff—as if they were considered more than employees—changed how Leonard viewed his time spent at the funeral home. He found himself arriving earlier each week and leaving well after his promised time, a way for him to convey an unspoken appreciation.

As Leonard suspected, the increased hours at the funeral home made a social life with Dolores difficult. Occasionally, they attended a dance or a movie. More affordably, their dates revolved around family events and meals.

In a blur of emotions, late one Sunday morning, Leonard drove Dolores to Brookfield, Wisconsin. His grandparents' vineyard was a part of his past—a chapter in his life—that shaped his boyhood. On the farm, he learned the value of hard work, and the satisfaction that followed a long day's labor.

There his grandfather taught him balance, not the careful footing while tending grapes on a steep slope—although there was skill in doing that. It was the lesson of keeping work in perspective. Leisure—hunting, fishing, or just playing cards well past a boy's bedtime—needed to counterbalance the arduous demands of the farm.

And while he felt the joy of sharing this part of his life with Dolores, he remained guarded. He had yet to share with her his hopes of one day owning his grandparents' farm, of carrying forward the Gentine tradition of growing grapes, a tradition that skipped over his uncles' and his father's generation.

Dolores was a city girl, unaccustomed to life constrained by the limitations of a farm. *What if she didn't find the vineyard appealing?* he

THE OBLIGATION

wondered. They were early in their dating. It may be too soon their relationship still too fragile to discuss such long-term plans.

Turning the car onto the plank road that led to the farmhouse, Leonard pointed out the vines on their left. “My grampa told me those grapevines came from France.”

Leonard searched Dolores’s face for the slightest hint of excitement as she poked her head around him to gain a better view. Rows of vines with their leathery leaves nodded in the breeze. To her right, on her side of the road, stood two more rows of vines—short rows but well-groomed. Stout tree branches trellised the gnarled vines.



Gentine Farm in Brookfield, WI circa 1933

The farm, now maintained by his uncles, remained in fair condition. Some of the house clapboards, surrendering to the weather, allowed the rain and ice to chisel away portions of their paint and permitted the

summer sun to gray its wood. A few listing fence posts, long abandoned by their railings, stood as ineffective sentinels to the property. Shingles on the south end of the barn curled and pulled away from the roof.

“Before my grampa died, he used to rent this land for hunting,” Leonard explained as he stepped from the car and scurried to open the door on the other side. As Dolores slid from the car, Leonard threw a hand above his eyes to block the sun and scanned the property. “It’s about forty acres. The owner of the Pabst Brewing Company, he’s hunted here. He and other owners of big companies have been out with their hunting dogs.”

The slam of a screen door drew their attention. Josephine, with her wooden cane, stuttered down the porch steps one at a time. Leonard rushed the short distance to hug her.

Turning back toward the direction of the car, with his arm around his grandmother’s shoulder, he smiled. “Dolores, this is my Gramma Gentine—Josephine. Taught me many things about life. Just don’t let her friendly face fool you. She’s ruthless at cards.”

Josephine affectionately patted Leonard’s chest.

With that cursory introduction and a promise to return for lunch, Leonard escorted his grandmother back to the house and toured Dolores around the hilly property. Steep inclines—perfect for growing grapes—plunged so dramatically that they slowed their pace to keep from tripping and rolling down.

They poked in and out of the barn, toolshed, smokehouse, and gazebo. Sweeping away thick ropes of cobwebs, they explored the rustic cabin—long deserted—that languished at the far edge of the property.

Middy, Josephine prepared a light lunch, and after the meal, they drifted out to the porch to relax, talk, and escape the heat mounting inside the house. Each angled a chair to best capture the occasional breeze that slid over the crest of the land. Josephine chose the stiff-back chair closest to the window and propped her cane against the sill.

THE OBLIGATION



Josephine and Leonard

“Think we could have a small glass of wine as we sit out here?” Leonard asked his grandmother following a few minutes of silence. Turning to Dolores, he asked, “Would you care for some? Just a taste maybe?”

With a shrug of her shoulders and a reserved smile, Dolores politely nodded.

Josephine reached for her cane. “I’ll see what we have,” she offered, her voice colored by a faint French accent.

“No, no, you stay where you’re at, Gramma. I know where it is.” Then, throwing his words in Dolores’s direction, he said, “I’ll be right back.” Leonard reentered the kitchen, allowing the screen door to bang behind him.

A few minutes later he returned with two partially filled glasses, handing one to each of the ladies. Josephine waved off the glass. “No, I don’t want one, Len. You take that one.”

Leonard beamed as he took a sip from his glass and joined Dolores. "Another one of my childhood memories."

"Your parents let you drink wine when you were young?" Dolores questioned. "My dad liked his beer, but my mom frowned on the habit. She wasn't a big advocate of prohibition or anything like that but to her the law was the law. 'Course, my dad would always protest, saying it was legal to drink at home, but she didn't even want the appearance of sneaking alcohol around."

Noticing she'd mostly talked about how her parents felt on the subject and not her own opinion, Leonard proceeded with caution. "Um, well... I would drink just a sip. Once in a while. But only just a sip of wine... or sometimes brandy. I'm not sure my mother totally approved, either," he added, "but my dad never saw any harm in just a small taste every now and then. After all"—he smiled at Josephine—"that's our heritage. Right, Gramma? We made wine."

"You made this wine?" Dolores asked, raising her eyebrow at Josephine.

"Well, I'm not sure Gramma still makes wine." Leonard quickly interjected before Josephine had the chance to respond. Then, unsure, he looked at his grandmother. "Do you?"

Josephine shook her head as she pressed her lips into a tight line.

"Probably my Uncle Leo does that now," Leonard suggested. "All the vines we saw today? They ferment the juice. Sometimes, they'd store ten or twelve full barrels of wine in the root cellar."

His grandmother leaned forward in her chair as if to share a closely held secret. "I would put a sign out by the road that read *Eggs for Sale*. That sign let the neighbors know that we had barrels of wine ready if they wanted to stop by."

Leonard cringed. Would Dolores now think they were some sort of bootlegging operation, or would she think they were just being neighborly? He watched for a reaction but couldn't read her expression.

“Gramma”—Leonard gestured toward Josephine—“and my grampa, of course, used to live in France. My uncles—my father, too—were born there. They owned a large vineyard—but things didn’t turn out as my grampa hoped. The vineyard was in the family for generations. I think he was hesitant to leave it. A sacrifice he made, he told me.”

“We all have an obligation to family,” Josephine murmured more to herself than to her guests.

Leonard paused, cast a sympathetic smile at his grandmother, and abruptly changed the direction of the conversation. Looking over at Dolores, he said, “All of my cousins would sit right there, on the edge of this long porch. Our legs dangling over the edge. Gramma, most times Grampa, would tell us about France and the war and the grapes and the farm. I remember all the stories.”

Josephine stirred uneasily in her chair. Turning a knitted brow to Leonard, she said, “You’ve had this poor girl hopping around since you got here. Just let her enjoy herself. No need dredging up old stories.” Then to Dolores, she asked, “Why don’t you tell me a bit about your family?”

Dolores shifted in Josephine’s direction. “Well,” she began, “I’m the second oldest of eight children. Peter and Anna Becker are my parents. With a name like Becker, I would guess you would know my ancestors are from Germany. Trier, Germany, actually.”

Leonard rolled back into his chair, finishing the last sips of wine as he listened. Dolores looked his way, flashing him a grin in mid-sentence, and he felt his apprehension dissipate. *Perhaps*, he thought, *Dolores would enjoy life on this farm*. They would talk about it in the months ahead.

One thing he knew for certain: No matter what his calling may be, no matter where life led him, he wanted it to be with Dolores at his side.

3

Gentine Funeral Service 1937

“WE NEED TO dump the body out of this casket,” Bob Merkel grumbled. “It’s too heavy!”

Attempting to avoid any gouges to the door frame, the casket, or—just as important—his knuckles, Leonard lofted his end of the coffin over his head. He issued a muffled groan. There was no body in the casket, but even empty caskets were not light, Leonard had to agree.

“C’mon, old man!” Leonard razzed. “This is the last of them. Get this one downstairs and you can take your mandatory afternoon nap.”

Weekends with Hobart Brigden encouraged Leonard to consider operating his own funeral home. “There’s good money in that business,” he had told Dolores. Once he met his debt to Hobart, with Dolores’s nod of approval, Leonard enrolled in school.

During his studies at the Wisconsin Institute of Mortuary Science, he met Bob with his quirky humor. A friendship blossomed—late nights studying together, prepping for tests. As graduation neared, Leonard suggested they continue to work together—for a limited time—as Leonard opened his funeral home in Plymouth, Wisconsin.

Back and arm muscles aching, the two men lowered the casket to



Bob Merkel and Leonard Gentine

the floor. Leonard had selected this area of the basement for the sale of caskets—far from the walled-off section they earmarked for embalming. Easy access down the stairs from the back door, Dolores had pointed out. Plenty of good lighting. The main floor could be reserved for visitations and the top floor for living quarters.

He remembered Dolores's smile the day they toured the house. The view overlooked the millpond, a small body of water seated at the base of a sloping blanket of grass. Resting on more land than other properties they considered, the imposing home at 728 Eastern Avenue—the former residence of the town's first mayor—projected an air of respectability.

As they walked through the house that day, Dolores even mentioned how one of the smaller bedrooms might prove ideal as a nursery—a comment that left him without a response.

Over the past year, the two of them had talked of marriage in comfortable conversations. Yet both were well aware of the hurdles. Neither of them had saved enough money as they struggled through the Depression.

To secure the Plymouth house, Leonard's parents provided the funding. The needed mortuary equipment Leonard either rented or borrowed. In time, he believed, the business would provide the income to repay those debts and support a wife.

A source of income aside, another obstacle impeded the marriage. Her father refused to allow his daughters to wed out of faith. That Leonard dismissed as well. If that was the prerequisite, he would convert to Catholicism. Once he fully settled in Plymouth, he would befriend the priest and later surprise Dolores—and her father—with the news.

In a way, he mused, it was the Catholic faith that brought them to Plymouth, Wisconsin. Looking for a suitable location for their funeral home, they ventured fifty miles north to this small town of four thousand residents. Prospects looked promising. The town had only one funeral home, and it wasn't Catholic. As they assimilated into the community, they planned to convert the large number of Catholic families to their funeral home.

Before any of that could occur, the house and the business had to be put in order. As Bob gathered scraps of cardboard and packing material. Leonard dragged several caskets closer along the wall. In the small room to the side, he uncrated tools, arranging them in a haphazard fashion, and then tugged the embalming table closer to the sink. A faint smell of formaldehyde already hung in the air.

Out of breath, Leonard paused, straightened, and let out a large puff

of air. *Slow down*, he lectured himself as he tapped out a Phillip Morris. *Think*. Blowing out the match flame from the corner of his mouth, he eased into the larger room. Leonard mentally arranged the caskets and display materials. Then mentally arranged them again.

“Tell you what,” said Leonard, pushing away his thoughts. “No mandatory nap as I suggested”—he curled up the corners of his mouth at Bob—“but I’ll buy you a cup of coffee upstairs in the kitchen. We can come back down and do the rearranging and cleaning after we rest.”

On the top floor of the home, Leonard dragged the metal dining room chair across the linoleum floor and eased into the seat to finish his cigarette with his coffee. Bob claimed a spot at the table adjacent to him. As cigarette smoke curled from the ashtray, Leonard stretched his long legs and slid down, his head resting on the back of his chair. “Did I ever tell you about Joseph, my grampa?”

“The one that came from someplace in France?” Bob took a draw from his cigarette and blew a stream of smoke to the side. “Yeah, you said he grew grapes, made wine.”

“OK so I told you.” Leonard rested in silence for a few minutes. “Joseph’s grampa, Jean Pierre Gentine, fought for France, you know. For Napoleon. Like my grampa, he was proud of his French heritage. Proud of his country.”

Bob shrugged and then reached across the table and tapped an ash into the ashtray. “Yeah, lots of immigrants came over here, Len. They all made sacrifices. You don’t think others were proud of the countries they left?”

Leonard sat up and took another swallow of coffee. “I keep thinking about my grampa’s decision. Imagine leaving behind a business your father—and his father and his father’s father—left for you to run? He must have felt he let them down.” Leonard took a draw on his cigarette. “He never said that, of course. And I don’t think he ever went back to France. Maybe the grapevines are still growing over there. Maybe

they're not. I remember asking him once if he would do it again if he had the chance."

"What'd he say?"

Leonard snuffed out the end of his cigarette. "He never really answered me. But I keep thinking that if he would have stayed—you know, Germany eventually gave that land back to France—if he had stayed, my dad would have owned the vineyard—or part of it anyway—and then it would have been passed down to me and my cousins.

"My grandma, to this day, reminds me it was all for the good of the family. Family is the priority. He forfeited his family's heritage to give his sons a better life. The vines he brought with him..." Leonard lowered his head. "No one cares about them anymore. Not my dad. Not my uncles. It's as if what was important to my grandfather is being lost."

Leonard drained the last of his coffee, pulled himself up from the table, and stretched, arching his back. "That's why I want this business so bad. Something to pass down to my family someday. Maybe rebuild a little bit of what my grampa had to leave behind. What he lost. Maybe make enough money to buy that vineyard. Bring it back. For my grampa. For my family."

He shoved the chair back under the table. "Speaking of which, let's get crackin'. We have lots of boxes to unpack, caskets to arrange." Throwing a glance at the kitchen clock, he added, "I have only three more hours before I head back to Milwaukee."

Leonard worked third shift at the Falk Corporation. Logic told him to keep that Milwaukee job. With Bob at the Gentine Funeral Service, Leonard could put in his hours, drive the fifty miles back to Plymouth, work with Bob, and then scrape together a few hours of sleep. It shouldn't be too challenging, he thought. He'd rest on weekends.

Once his funeral home started making a steady profit, he'd propose

to Dolores. Bob could leave to start his own funeral business. She would move out of her parents' house, and the two of them would run their little business together. That was the plan.

Leonard frowned, looking down at Bob, who remained in his chair. "Are you coming, old man?"

Bob stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray and dragged himself from his chair. "What's the rush? We have plenty of days to organize. I don't recall you mentioning any funerals you've booked yet."

No, no funerals yet, Leonard thought. They would come. It would just take time. Small towns thrived on symbiotic relationships. Tightly knit communities prefer to do business with those they have known for years—those who were friends of the family or friends of their friends.

To offset that tendency, he would remain patient while at the same time, immersing himself in civic organizations—becoming "one of them" through visible community involvement. Plymouth would grow to love their twenty-three-year-old mortician from Milwaukee, he believed.

It would just take time. He hoped he was right.