

GRANDPA'S WAGER

By
Randy Ford

The news sounded bleak to the staunch Democrat. As he did every evening, the old man eagerly listened to his Philco Console. Since REA reached them, Salas simply plugged in his radio and let the wet cell batteries and an old wind charger gathered dust. On that particular election evening he had more at stake than ever before.

“Come! Sit on my lap.” Salas motioned to his granddaughter as she came into the room. “Come!”

True, grandpa had almost no lap. It was easier for Nancy to sit on the floor or the arm of his easy chair. They both knew that. Salas, however, needed to cling to her, particularly then and more than she would ever know.

Wagered the farm he had, and by then regretted it. Truman over Dewey. When Salas woke up that morning, Truman seemed like a shoo-in to him, so much so that he had risked everything on the incumbent's reelection. It was the biggest wager he had ever made, and it looked as if it would turn out to be his biggest mistake. Salas had not consulted his wife Helen before he finalized it with Uncle Ned.

The more established the trend became, the higher his blood pressure rose, till his face turned a telltale red. Helen, if she'd paid attention to her spouse, would've had a stroke herself. He looked that bad.

“Now come, Nancy, come sit on my lap while we hear who'll be our next president.”

The stale smell of beer emanated from his pores. Yet Nancy thought nothing of it. She lacked the experience to equate it to a problem.

Salas felt sicker and sicker as he turned the knob back and forth from station to station. He sat quivering as he listened to each prediction of a Dewey victory, so that by late afternoon he'd all but given up hope of saving the farm. Still, he had not confided in Helen, opting to delay that for as long as possible.

Yep! He'd have to tell her. She deserved to know; but he knew when he did tell, her response would be audible in the next county. Yep; he knew her and what her reaction would be. He also knew she'd get over it because she'd gotten over such things before. By then Helen had grown accustomed to moving every year or two; though, by the almanac, it wasn't time for that yet. Given the results of the election so far, however, Uncle Ned had no doubt begun to drool. Yep! Salas' chest had fallen, and so had his shoulders and head, as all of his esteem drained out of him.

Now Salas' past sins were about to catch up with him. He never pretended to be a good role model for Nancy. He never valued reliability, stability or wealth. His deficits were many, perhaps too many. On the other hand, this stumpy man, who sat buried in his chair, and on tenterhooks, generally showed his granddaughter more love than anyone ever had. But, looking as if he'd aged almost ten years within a day, he was less demonstrative this evening than in anytime in recent history.

Talk to your grandpa, Nancy, thought Salas, soothe his ruffled ego. I'm afraid this time your grandma won't forgive him. He'll lose what they've worked so hard to build. He'll revert back to what he was before, but this time he'll have a family to drag along with him. They'll have nowhere to go. It's going be just like before when he ran away from responsibilities at fifteen and got in trouble. He didn't have an attachment to family, friends, and community then; so he hopped a train, changed his name, and never

returned. Thank goodness he's become an old man now and has outgrown those tendencies.

Still, such stupidity! "Come Nancy, and sit on my lap," Salas repeated, as he dreaded the prospect of facing her grandmother.

Now he appreciated his granddaughter more than ever, in her clean shift and bare feet, with those bangs cut straight across her forehead. Her quiet manner as he faced certain catastrophe calmed him somewhat. There was that smile of hers again! When he needed it most, his precious Nancy, she smiled and snuggled up to him, as if by resting there, he'd have mercy on her and she'd get to stay up a little while longer.

She had come to them last year when both of her parents sought refuge under a huge oak tree and were killed by lightning. It was tragic, her parents snatched from her. An event changing forever her destiny, a city girl now stuck on a little farm and, for her, an exchange of soda pop and movies for cows and chickens. My! What joy, though, she'd been to her grandparents, helping heal the stab of their loss. She seemed like a daughter to them by now, though at times disruptive and exhausting. They hadn't anticipated this responsibility so late in life.

As the news grew bleaker, Salas leaned on the girl more. Unfortunately, he couldn't rely on her until morning, nor even until the stations went off the air. The newspaper presses across the country had begun to roll with tomorrow's headline: **DEWEY WINS**. And in spite of that, it gladdened Salas, after his foolishness, to find that his granddaughter seemed unaffected by his anxious mood.

Thus he used Nancy as he had always used people. As he clung to her, he whined about how the Republicans caused the depression and how now with Dewey in, history

would repeat itself. He continued in that vein, without acknowledging that he'd been a fool.

Their small farm had been salvaged from the dust bowl, with several rows of poplars planted for a windbreak and a dirt lane that connected it to the section road and the rest of the world, which at the moment seemed very hostile. There was a storm cellar between the house in front and the chicken coop and the milking barn out back. Divided into various sections, the pastures were fenced so the cows no longer roamed or messed in the creek. Here Nancy played, in the summer swam and in the winter skated. She had run of the whole farm, with its fences constructed from scrap lumber--barn, house, a number of other structures--and a mail-order windmill.

This farm was Salas' latest scheme. He had traded for it. Helen definitely didn't want to move again. So they eked out a living by selling butter, cream, and eggs. Just beyond the south pasture grew a grove of wild plum, from which Nancy's grandma put up pints of jam every year...peaches and jam and vegetables canned from the garden. When times got really hard and the price of butter, cream, and eggs dropped so low that it hardly paid for the cost of feed, Helen would set up a roadside stand and sell her wild plum jam, cling peaches, and everything else she had put up.

They rose each morning before dawn, the old man dressing in the same plaid shirt and overalls and his wife the same sack dress, with her hair wrapped in a tight bun. They were truly poor but determined. They knew as long as they had the farm, they wouldn't starve. They seemed industrious enough to make it. As if resting meant instant death, their claim to health depended on how much they put back into the place. It wouldn't have been possible for them to live without several projects going on at once: fences had

to be mended and whitewashed, blankets quilted and socks darned. Helen wanted a screened-in front porch and a well dug near the barn.

A pleasant morning it had been. Salas knew everyone, and everyone knew him. Flapping bunting, bright patriotic shirts, distinctive Panama hats of both parties, and smiles and handshakes gave Election Day its festive feeling. He had to make sure all of his friends voted Democrat. Once again he got in trouble.

Where you found booze, you always found Salas. He'd drink and drink. He'd drink and swear at the darn Republicans. Once he got started he couldn't stop. With more capacity than most people, however, he never acted intoxicated. A quiet drunk; always, he'd drink beer, always beer, always too, too much...always...always a time of peril for him. See, this was how he got in trouble this particular election day and wagered the farm.

There! There Salas' own features, his face so reddened by the illegal booze, should have alerted his friends. They knew him well, and what could happen if he drank too much. That was when Salas was most vulnerable. Look what had happened before. Sometimes the drinking had cost him a job and, over the long haul, a lucrative career. People knew that.

On that day electioneers and politicians and Salas all had one objective: to work the crowd and rally people who would vote for Truman. They used booze.

Throughout September he had avoided the temptations of town by working himself to death. Whenever the urge to drink became strong and intolerable...whenever the thirst after a long hot workday made him think of capitulating, Helen would do something special for him. She'd add pork to a pot of beans, bake peach cobbler or stop

the iceman to make ice cream. Whenever his sense of failure and inadequacy spiked, he'd lean on Helen and rely on Nancy to cheer him up. He'd be there when his granddaughter came home from school, greeting her along with their collie.

Almost nightly Nancy sat on the floor near her grandpa and listened to the news on the radio. She called him Grandpa, the name he wanted her to use and felt close to him. She had never heard anyone talk about his drinking problem. On this particular evening he had been focused on only one thing: whether or not he would have to live through another round of ridicule. Worried and angry at himself, he hurried through supper so as not to miss any of the drama. By then, he had stopped talking.

Sometimes he embellished past exploits. He dwelt with enthusiasm on the hardship of his journeys. Supposedly, he survived on rabbits and small rodents he'd kill with a stick. He'd smile as he related how he joined a band of hobos. Bragged about how he cooked his kill over an open fire and shared a huge pot with a brotherhood he'd always claim. He'd sleep on the ground. How rough it was then. Tough they were, during rough times. From that rough brotherhood, Salas learned that he didn't need amenities to survive. But now he had two women to think about.

Because the track of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe ran right along the creek that delineated his northern property line, Salas never got far away from trains and often came in contact with the men who rode the rails. These were fine men. Some had just come back from the war, and most had survived the depression. A few refused to compromise, would never settle down. Those were the ones Salas admired the most. Often he sat on a fence, where he'd snag his pants and talk to them.

Traveling balladeers distinguished themselves. They carried guitars and sang songs that often softened people, even those with stone hearts. May God be with you, my friend! You're welcome here! You provide us music, and we'll bring the food. And with her door open wide, Helen would open her heart. Stretching a meal never seemed hard for her.

Some of the men came from the Midwestern plains, others from the West Coast shore. Salas respected them all. He knew them and felt like one of them. Whenever he heard a song celebrating them, the confidence he felt in these men carried over to him. But on this momentous evening, his confidence was sinking, and he was thinking only about the outcome of the election and the two women he had responsibility for.

Someone rapped on the kitchen door, and Helen answered it. She didn't hesitate or seem afraid. They never locked their doors, an example of their naiveté and an article of faith that they seemed willing to bet their lives on. Hearing the dog bark, Nancy jumped off her grandpa's lap and ran to the kitchen. Salas raised himself by his arms before he heard the tenor of his wife's voice. Her friendly manner was an example of her hospitality.

As her grandma opened the door and spoke to the stranger, Nancy saw no need for alarm. Helen would explain, "There're ain't many bad ones out there. What are the chances of meeting up with one?"

What a sight! The man on the other side of the screen door appeared injured. Seemingly friendly and obviously someone who had just jumped off the train, he had a gash across his forehead. Dried blood matted his left sideburn, and his overall pallor

suggested something bad had happened. A few words satisfied the need for a conversation.

How is it, Helen, that you talked and acted so freely with a stranger? Critical for his well-being, you did the right thing. You didn't hesitate nor seem shocked by his condition. Where did your compassion come from, a woman who tended to shy away from people and who lived on an isolated farm? She was quiet, decisive, and even a stranger could feel her genuine warmth. Salas always touted her quiet inner strength, though Helen rarely talked about the potential she saw in her man.

Kindhearted, Helen led the stranger to the kitchen table, where she asked frank, simple, and sensible questions. Obeying her grandmother, Nancy fetched a basin of warm water. Nancy proved she could be helpful and, given her age, as helpful as could've been expected.

Salas admired his wife for how she responded without hesitation. It helped him forget, if only temporarily, the bad news. Even with the prospect of losing the farm, he turned off the radio and joined the crew in the kitchen.

They remained quiet as Helen cleaned the wound and Nancy sat on a stool and watched. As Salas stood nearby, he noticed their guest had a guitar. "So you play? Do you sing...play and sing?" asked Salas. "How about singing something about the railroad?"

Their guest readily agreed to sing for his supper. As he picked through a tune, Helen fixed him a plate of turnip greens and pinto beans. The songs rekindled Helen's desire to play the piano. She had always wanted to, but instead of piano lessons her father had given her a heifer. So she drummed out the rhythm on the kitchen table.

The musician, singing of lonely days and the price of the road, took them on a long journey across the country. He stayed and sang into the night. The singing and talking distracted Salas. The songs reminded him of his life on the road, memories quickly supplanted by the image of him being on the road again with his family, this time in a truck filled with all their possessions. That image wouldn't go away. What a mess he had made!

The young guest uttered something about how he felt sure Truman could still win. When Salas heard that, his heart jumped. He clapped and laughed. "There, Mother!" cried Salas. "Well, won't Uncle Ned have a fit?" In a strange way, Helen had known something was up. A wail was heard when Salas confessed. Then they all gathered around the radio in time before the station went off the air after predicting a Dewey win. "You fool!" Helen cried.

On the mantel, beneath a cross constructed of nails, lay the family Bible. It generally gathered dust except for a move, a birth or a death. A move and a death to Helen were almost equivalent. For Salas, the opposite was true. He normally thrived on change. Except this time, he foresaw disaster. This huge, cumbersome Bible, the equally huge Farmer's Almanac and the books Nancy needed for school represented the extent of their reading. This evening Helen removed the Bible from the mantel and read from Lamentations: "Remember my affliction and my bitterness..." That was as far as she got before slamming the big book shut.

Later, under a colorful quilt, the couple stuck to their own side of the bed. As they each saw it, the loss of the farm because of a Dewey victory seemed symbolic of the aftermath of the election. They could see the nation thrown into the throes of financial

ruin; see the loss of jobs, the return of soup lines, and the explosion of foreclosures. They knew they'd be among the first to stand in line and among the first to shout "I told you so."

The next morning Helen found solace in her routine. She didn't rush. She let Salas fret. It took only one of them to wait for the news, so she tackled her chores. She milked the cows, separated the milk, churned the butter, fed the chickens, but forgot the mule, poor mule. Still, she had excessive energy and refused to go back into the house.

She couldn't face her husband yet, so she took off down the shady lane, kicking sand as she went. Saw a covey of quail and reassured the lookout bird, feeling no reassurance herself. Too early for the mail, of course, but she took off in that direction anyway and along the way scared up the sun. And as the eastern sky promised a cloudless day, gloom overcame her. She sat on the ground and broke down, something she couldn't do in front of anyone.

She remembered the first time she and Salas had driven that lane and seen the farm. She recalled their plans for a bigger house. She tried unsuccessfully to focus on the positive. It seemed as if they were always making plans and starting over. Always, and with each move a loss of something. She wanted it to stop, though she knew it probably wouldn't unless she... She sorted through her options.

"Darn you, Salas!" she screamed, knowing no one could hear her. "Darn you!"

They could refuse to move. What could Uncle Ned do? She considered that as she stood up and dusted off her bottom. He could involve the sheriff. She knew he would. She knew how Uncle Ned operated. Evicting them wouldn't faze him. Yet there had to be some way to save the farm.

She'd have to speak to Uncle Ned. Plead with him. Plead Salas' case. Yes, his case and not so much hers.

One could understand why she hesitated at the section road. It was easy to see why she didn't want to go home and why she fought the urge to keep going. More than anything else her protruding jaw expressed her anger and her slumped head, her disappointment. Yet she shouldn't have been surprised. The old fool could no more help himself than pass up a good bargain.

Though she hadn't given up, she could predict what would happen. It would test her and strain her relationship with her husband. The strain would increase. And increase. But she was a strong lady. She had strength and tenacity and knew she would prevail. She no longer had just herself and Salas to think about. Having a grandchild in the home totally changed the equation. She had made up her mind that Salas would have to stop drinking, or she'd leave him.

Then she remembered the optimism of their visitor. How his songs had cheered her up. Cheered her up? Odd. Had she been sad and depressed before? Before she knew of her husband's wager, a wager that she could've predicted? Still, the shock seemed more than she could bear.

By then, like most other radio listeners across the country, Salas knew the outcome of the election. He sat there a little longer to catch the concession and acceptance speeches and had the satisfaction of telling Nancy the name of the next President of the United States.

With trepidation, Helen headed back to the farm. "How could he?" she thought. "How could you ever wager a working farm for a small piece of river-bottom land?" Just

as she passed the poplar trees and entered the yard, Salas rushed out and gave her the biggest grin he had ever shown.