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## A Sunday Dinner

Frank Zahn

Uncle George and Aunt Molly parked in the driveway and climbed out of their large, black Ford sedan with the words *SHERIFF Olathe, Kansas* painted on each side in bold, white letters. Uncle George stood six-feet-five inches tall and weighed at least 360 pounds. Although a mild-mannered and soft-spoken man, he had an expression on his face that suggested he chewed nails for breakfast. Aunt Molly, a plump woman with a pasty complexion, sparkling eyes, and a gold, front tooth, looked like a midget beside him.

My brothers and I peeked inside the car at the heavy wire mesh between the front and back seats and the shotgun strapped to the dashboard. Wide-eyed, we listened to the police calls on the radio.

“Uncle George!” my brother Harry called out. “Would you let us hear the siren and see the lights on top of the car flash?”

Uncle George got back into the car and started the engine. He switched on the siren and flashing lights. My three brothers, my sister Fanny Louise, and I beamed. Papa, Momma, Uncle George, and Aunt Molly got a big kick out of our reaction, although Momma expressed concern about what the neighbors might think if they heard the siren, rushed outside, and saw the flashing lights of a sheriff’s car in our driveway.

Uncle George turned off the siren and flashing light, and everyone went inside. Uncle George sat on the couch in the living room. Papa, my brothers, and I sat in front of him, Papa in his armchair and my brothers and I on the floor.

Harry immediately asked Uncle George to tell us some stories about his shootouts with bank robbers and murderers on the Kansas-Missouri border. My brothers and I were very proud that one of our uncles was a famous lawman whose adventures were reported on the radio and in the *Kansas City Star*.

Momma, Fanny Louise, and Aunt Molly went into the kitchen, dished up the dinner, and put it on the table. Uncle George barely got one story finished before Momma called out, “Come on, everybody. Dinner’s ready.”

Everyone gathered around the table in the dining room. Pointing at the various dishes on the table, Momma said, “There’s fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, corn on the cob, Waldorf salad, coleslaw, deviled eggs, my home-canned pickled beet, Papa’s fresh-baked Parker House rolls, my home-canned strawberry preserves, iced tea to drink, and everything else that goes with a downhome Sunday dinner.”

“Looks mighty good, Sis,” Uncle George said.

“And make sure you all save room in your tummies for dessert,” Momma added. “Early this morning before church, I baked two large cherry pies, and Papa hand-churned some vanilla ice cream in the ice cream maker. And too, there’s ice-cold Black Diamond watermelon in a tub of ice water on the back porch just waitin’ to be cut into slices.”

“Homemade cherry pie with ice cream and watermelon too. My, oh, my!” Aunt Molly said. “It makes my mouth water just thinkin’ about it.”

Momma told everyone where to sit. Clinton, my youngest brother, sat next to Papa at the head of the table, and Fanny Louise sat next to Momma at the other end. On one side of the table, Aunt Molly sat between my brother Eddie and me. On the other side, Harry sat next to Uncle George, who removed his suit jacket and straddled the two chairs Momma had set at his place.

My brothers, Fanny Louise, and I gawked at the revolver strapped under Uncle George’s left arm. We had seen it before during our visits to his house next to the jail in Olathe, but we gawked at it then as if we were seeing it for the first time.

“I sure wish you would take that gun off at the table, George,” Momma said.

“I can’t, Sis. I’d feel naked without it. Besides, I’m technically still on duty,” Uncle George said.

Aunt Molly cackled. “He’s on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. He takes the gun off at night when he goes to bed but keeps it on the nightstand within reach. I’ve told him that one of these nights when I git up to go to the bathroom, he’s gonna sit up in bed half asleep, think I’m a burglar, grab the gun, and shoot me.”

“How many people have you shot, Uncle George?” Harry asked.

“Don’t really know,” Uncle George said calmly. “Maybe a dozen or so.”

Harry's eyes opened wide. He started to ask another question, but Papa stopped him. "No more questions, Harry. Let Uncle George eat his dinner in peace."

Momma asked Papa to say grace. With every head bowed, Papa said, "Our kind heavenly Father, we humbly thank Thee for the blessings that are set before us, and we ask Thee to sanctify us with Thy grace in the name of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

Everyone looked up and smiled, then quickly helped themselves to the food closest to them before passing it around the table in both directions. Momma helped Fanny Louise dish up her favorites.

Papa picked up the bowl of Momma's home-canned pickled beets. As usual, Momma had filled the bowl almost up to the brim. Careful not to spill the juice that covered the beets, Papa passed the bowl to Uncle George. Equally careful, Uncle George reached out, took the bowl with both hands, turned, and slowly passed it to Harry without taking any beets for himself.

The moment Harry reached out to take the bowl, the sound of a loud and prolonged burst of air came from under Uncle George.

Uncle George's hands quivered. The juice in the bowl of beets quivered as well, and then it sloshed out of the bowl and ran down over his fingers and onto the tablecloth.

Papa, Momma, and Aunt Molly's faces flushed with embarrassment.

"Oh, my! Uncle George said as he set the bowl of beets down on the table and dried his fingers and the tablecloth with his napkin. "That big breakfast I had this mornin' is still workin' on my insides somethin' fierce."

Eddie, Clinton, and I giggled as we watched Harry turn his nose away from Uncle George with a look on his face that left no doubt he had just smelled something awful.

Fanny Louise looked puzzled. "W-w-what's wrong?" she asked.

With that remark, my brothers and I clasped our hands over our mouths to hold in our laughter.

Papa cleared his throat and awkwardly readjusted himself in his chair.

Aunt Molly said, "George dear, why don't you try passin' the beets again. They look so good."

With that remark, my brothers and I could no longer contain our laughter.

Papa grimaced. “If you boys can’t control yourselves, get your butts away from the table!”

My brothers and I jumped up and headed for the front door. Outside, we rolled in the grass, roared with laughter, and embellished what had happened.

Momma, Papa, and Aunt Molly did their best to act as if nothing had happened and tried repeatedly to get the table conversation moving again.

Uncle George said very little. He kept his eyes on his plate and ate three times as much as everyone remaining at the table.

After dinner, Papa followed Uncle George into the living room. Papa sat in his armchair, and Uncle George dropped down on the couch. They talked about the weather, the economy, and politics.

My brothers and I came in the back door, and Momma fixed each of us a plate of food and a glass of iced tea. She told us to go outside, find a place to sit down, eat, and drink our iced tea.

Momma and Aunt Molly cleared the table, put the leftovers in the icebox, washed and dried the dishes, and tidied the kitchen. All the while, they exchanged family gossip, recipes, and patterns for dresses and aprons. Fanny Louise stood at the kitchen door and listened.

At a little after five o’clock, Uncle George and Aunt Molly said their goodbyes and headed for their car in the driveway. Everyone followed them into the front yard and waved goodbye as they drove away.

An hour later, Momma made a pot of coffee for her and Papa, set the table for supper, and retrieved the leftovers from the ice box and kitchen cupboards. Papa finished eating first. Then he turned sideways in his chair, crossed his legs, and in between sips of coffee, said with a grin, “Uncle George sure let it rip, didn’t he.”

Again, my brothers and I roared with laughter. So did Fanny Louise, who admitted she hadn’t realized what had happened until the air around the table filled up with that awful smell.

Even Momma managed a smile. “I’ve never been so embarrassed,” she said. “And for the life of me, I don’t know how I’m gonna get that beet juice out of my tablecloth.”