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A photograph of a tall, cylindrical metal water tower with a conical top, supported by a lattice of steel beams. The tower is set against a clear blue sky with a few wispy white clouds. The title 'Just Bill' is overlaid on the upper portion of the image in a large, white, cursive font with a slight drop shadow.

# Just Bill

SMALL TOWN LIFE IN NEBRASKA

PALMER MCGREW

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By Contacting**

**Alan Salisbury  
abslsbry@aol.com**

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# JUST BILL

*Small Town Life in Nebraska*

By

Palmer McGrew

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*“We’ll stop in a small town and learn the history and stories, feel the ground and capture the spirit. Then we’ll turn it into our own story that will live inside our history to carry with us, always. Because stories are more important than things.”*

*– Victoria Erickson*

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## FOREWORD

What the people living in small towns in Nebraska need most is an audience. For the most part, they are intelligent, creative, interesting people, but their lives are narrowly bounded by surrounding cornfields and feedlots. They have many shrewd observations on life, but they only have the same small audience to tell them to. After a while, they end up talking about((gasp!)) television “reality” shows.

Not that in New York or San Francisco the daily topics of discussion are more erudite than the latest NFL game or *Dancing with the Stars*. That seems to be the focus of many urban lives as well, but at least in the big city something dramatic happens at least once a day.

Not so in our little town, a made up one named Blackjack. It is supposedly named after Black Jack Pershing, but two words in the name proved cumbersome to the inhabitants, so it was made into one, leading to years of jokes about it being a gambling Mecca.

Notable events seldom occur in such little towns. For one thing, there just aren't a lot of people there to do things you want to talk about. And then there is the fact that everyone knows you, or almost everyone, and anything you do is likely to be quickly reported to your friends and neighbors. Someone famous likes to say, “It takes a village...” The gist of which is that in villages everyone is watching, and whatever they have to say about you is likely to be said over and over for years. It does cause one to be somewhat cautious.

Since I lived much of my life in the vicinity of the very large city of New York and the very important city of Washington, D.C., my small town friends were apt to say how they envied my opportunities.

One said, “You can go to the opera any time you want.”

I suppose that is true, even though I had never actually gone to the opera when he said that. Whereas, when I lived for several years

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in a pretty small town in Minnesota, whenever the Minneapolis Symphony came to play, everyone attended the concert. So I'm not at all convinced that opportunity somehow equals realization. For some reason, it often works out just the other way around. When we lived in New York, though, I was a young teen; it was my job to take visiting Nebraska relatives to the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building. Most New Yorkers had never been to either.

A friend of mine moved from my neighborhood in Lincoln, the state capital, to a small Nebraska town, and I went many times to visit him there. I was entranced by the differences I could easily observe, even as a teenager.

Later, I found that I had many friends from rural Nebraska, and I asked them to tell me their stories. Some did, and those stories are found here, slightly "enhanced" in some cases. Some of these stories you could make up, but you would not be likely to.

As my wife's aunt liked to say, "People are funnier than anybody." People will actually do things you could never imagine, until they do them.

What surprised me, though, was how some of my rural Nebraska friends have no stories to tell me at all. Of course, they do have them; it's just that they don't find them interesting or amusing.

I suppose that's why a guy who never actually lived in a small Nebraska town came to write about one. To me, it was not just what it was; it was something unknown to most of us with its good and bad sides—both of them amusing, or at least interesting, to those of us who don't live those lives on a daily basis.

Fewer and fewer people in this country live in small towns. Small towns have ceased to fulfill any function that can't be fulfilled as well or better in a larger community. Soon, if not now, you could live in a totally remote location and lead your life quite adequately via the internet or its successor. The lifestyle depicted here is slowly disappearing, and that's too bad.

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Even in my childhood neighborhood on the East Side of Lincoln, there were neighbors watching me whenever I was out of the house and giving me parental advice if I didn't act in a way they found acceptable. My favorite example was Mrs. Murray, who liked to sit on her porch and comment on everything the neighbor kids did. We all knew that her own offspring, in their late teens and early 20s, were poor examples for us to follow, and we doubted that she had anything worthwhile to tell us. But, she was there, watching, and that was what mattered. In small towns, everyone is a Mrs. Murray on her front porch.

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## PROLOGUE

Hi, I'm Ralph Anderson. This is my story.

For some reason, I hadn't thought about actually getting a job until my senior-senior year at Bison State. I say "senior-senior year" because it was kind of difficult to tell what year I was in. It might be better called "Year Five out of Four." I was still trying to pass freshman math, but it didn't seem likely to happen that year either. To my surprise and consternation, however, I got a D at the end of the year (oops!), and realized that I was going to have to leave college and go to work. I seriously doubted that my parents would let me just hang around the house for the rest of my life.

I suppose that sounds pretty lame. I'm not dumb, and I'm not lazy. I just never got into the hang of studying. I could get by without much effort, and let's be honest, I kind of liked it there. College was a lot of fun!

As for getting a job, one of the problems was that I had a GPA of around 2.0, and you can't get a job with that. Another problem was that, at some point, faced with declaring a major while having no idea of what I wanted to do, I had become a journalism major. There aren't that many big papers in Nebraska, and the journalism majors with 4.0s were gobbling up all the jobs there were.

I had worked at Runzas flipping burgers and frying fries for a couple of summers, and I thought I could always do that if I had to. I might still be doing that today, if my dad hadn't come up with an idea. He had a friend who knew a small-town publisher, and he arranged for me to be introduced to her.

Well, I got the job, and now I'm a "reporter." In my first three weeks on the job, I have managed to screw up in every assignment she's given me. I wish I had paid more attention in all those journalism classes.

Oh, Jeez! She's calling for me again.



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# PART

## 1

Who was Bill Just?

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## CHAPTER 1

*The Blackjack Press,*

May 14, 2006

The publisher's name was Irma Fritzling. Everyone at *The Blackjack Press* calls her Mrs. Fritz. No one on the staff called her Irma. Of course, I did, and on the first day on the job too. I'm not going to do that again!

It's funny how employees seem to have their own rules, and they enforce them. Mrs. Fritz said nothing to me about my gaffe, but the rest of the staff, such as it is, let me know "the rules."

The office was very small, essentially two rooms—one for Mrs. Fritz and one for the printing operation. I had to work somewhere else, unless Mrs. Fritz was out, which was often.

When she called me in from the sidewalk, where I was chatting with townspeople, hoping to learn something, I went in to see what she wanted, and she waved me over to her desk and motioned to the empty chair beside it for me to sit down.

It was the first time I had seen her today, so I had to check to see what outrageous outfit she had on. Today, she's wearing red, as usual, but it was a pantsuit so the red went all the way down to her red toenails. You could never miss her, even on the darkest night. She dressed in bright clothes, always, and since she's about as round as she is tall, that's a lot of brightness

"Have you written that obituary I assigned you?" she asked. *Oh, right, we print this afternoon,* I thought. *Nuts!*

I've been dreading this moment. Every time I've turned in an article she has found lots of stuff wrong with it. I know she only hired me because I would work so cheaply that she could hardly say "no."

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But still, I think she expected I would be a better reporter, with my degree in journalism in just five years, after all.

I handed her the copy I had written. It read:

William Just, a long-time pillar of the community, passed away yesterday of natural causes. He leaves no family, but a multitude of friends mourn his passing. He was 69. A memorial service will be conducted at Peace Lutheran Church on Saturday, at 11 a.m.

While Mrs. Fritz was reading it, I was trying not to pass out from the fumes from her expensive perfume. *Did she bathe in that stuff?* Then she sighed. And suddenly she looked older than her 50-some years. I think she knew I wouldn't be able to write that obit and was testing me to see if I had the gumption to get the facts and do it justice. My problem was, I really didn't know how to find stuff out. Everyone in this little town knew everyone else, and I didn't know anyone or anything. This journalism stuff was harder than I thought.

Yesterday, I overheard Mrs. Fritz talking on the phone, and she was telling someone that I had "such a nice smile" that she had to hire me. I decided it was time to turn on the smile again.

It didn't work. She paused a second, admired the smile, and said, "Uh, well... this won't cut it, Ralph. Bill was our hometown hero, and we'll have to do a lot more than this for him. But it's not all your fault. The guy was always a sort of mystery around here. I'll write it for this week's paper, but now your job is to find out as much as you can for an article next week that will do him justice. So get started on it right now."

Up until then, I had been embarrassed, but now I was getting scared. I couldn't seem to do anything right, and now the whole town would be sitting in judgment on how well I could write up their "hero."

I decided to try a tactic that I sometimes used with my mother. "How can I find anything out about this guy if he's such a mystery?"

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I asked, giving her the little puppy dog look I had honed to perfection at sorority parties. It worked really well there. Not here, though.

Come to think of it, it never worked on my mother, either.

Irma Fritzling was well known for her patience. No one could remember a time when she showed any real annoyance. She was known to be a placid, almost stoic figure in the community, despite her flamboyant dresses and bright red Caddy convertible. My question did seem to annoy her though, and she showed just the tiniest irritation in answering.

She spoke calmly and with just a touch of kindness in her voice. *Or was that sarcasm?* “Look, kid, you have a college degree in this stuff. I don’t. All I’ve ever done is run a paper for 9 years, and go broke doing it. You just go ahead and get started on it, and come to me with questions when you have them.”

I really wanted to ask a lot of questions right then, but I sensed that this was not the time. I nodded my assent and walked out of the office to the sidewalk without any idea of what to do next.

Essentially, all that I knew about the man was his age, that he was dead, and that he must have some connection to the Lutheran Church where the funeral is going to be. *So, what the hell?* I thought, *I’ll go there first.*

I needed to ask where the church was, since I had only been in town for a little over two weeks, but I thought I’d ask someone outside *The Press* offices to be safe.

Irma, I mean Mrs. Fritz, had decided to write the brief obituary on one of the town’s best-known and loved citizens. I figured she could do it from her own memories of him, so it wasn’t that great a challenge. However, I know she wished that she could just be the publisher for once, instead of the writer, editor, reporter, sales manager, proofreader, and purchasing agent. Sometimes she was the janitor too. *Am I her only hope? Scary!*

My father had told me a lot about her, which he must have learned from his friend, whose name I’ve forgotten, so I guess I can’t

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write him a thank you note. She inherited the paper when her husband died suddenly of a heart attack years ago. She had been left with three boys to bring up, and her only source of income was the paper. As little as she wanted to run it, she had no choice. Small town papers at that time were selling for peanuts, if you could get anything at all. The times they are a'changin' now, with Gannett out there, buying every little paper it can get, but now she has ink in her veins. Everyone says you couldn't get her to sell for any amount of money.

Up until her husband's death, she had contented herself by being the most outrageous dresser in town—some say the most outrageous character in town. She always loved bright colors, especially reds, and often wore bright red dresses accented by matching shoes, purse, lipstick, and nails. That was before she discovered other colors of nail polish, such as black. She thinks black nails go very nicely with her red dresses, and I'm not going to say anything different. I've learned a few things already, such as: If in doubt, keep your mouth shut.

Mrs. Fritz is shaped like an apple, so the red outfits seem quite appropriate. She can be spotted coming from the far side of town, either on foot, a rarity, or in her big, red Caddy. I hope someday she'll let me drive it, but I'm not holding my breath.

I, on the other hand, try to be as inconspicuous as possible, which is not easy when you're driving a 28-year old Camaro, painted bright yellow and rust. Well, the rust color isn't actually paint.

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## CHAPTER 2

### 1955 - Bill Comes to Town

Kenny had been working in the frozen food locker for over an hour, and the old jacket that was kept there for such a purpose was no longer effective. He stepped out into the parking lot to warm up, even though he knew it would just be harder to go back in once he was warm.

The locker was a fixture in this rural community. Farmers brought in chickens and sometimes steer carcasses by the pickup- load for storage. In those days, almost no one had a freezer in his own house, and those who did still couldn't handle that much meat. The locker was located behind "The Ideal," a restaurant that had been an ice cream parlor when Kenny's dad, Johnny Jackson, had bought it.

Johnny, like so many guys without much education but lots of native smarts, had cruised through the Great Depression by doing anything that would pay. He had worked most of that time as a milkman in Lincoln. One of the good things about being a milkman was that you were done by early afternoon, leaving you hours to work for yourself. Johnny had made the best of that. He would buy something old, a car maybe, fix it up and sell it, and then buy another one, each one a little better than the one before. He would demand ration stamps, especially for tires, when he bought a car, and those were worth gold. In this way, he managed to save a fair amount of money at a time when most folks were finding it a struggle just to eat.

After the war ended, Johnny noticed that times were radically different. Everyone had money, so it was almost impossible to do the deals he had thrived on. The young returning vets were getting the good jobs, and Johnny was sure he would be fired soon. He took his savings out and went looking for an opportunity in a small town. He found it in Blackjack.

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Most of the time, when Kenny wasn't in school, he was working in the Ideal Dairy Bar, usually just odd jobs and swatting flies. He loved working behind the counter, but his dad thought that the girls were not just better at it, but that the customers came in to ogle the girls, not the pimple-faced teenage boy. He was wrong. A lot of the young lady customers came in specifically to be seen by and talked to by the cute teenage boy, who was pushing his way up past 6 feet.

Today, Kenny had been given his least favorite job. Two farmers had brought in their chickens. The chickens were dead, but still feathered and all body parts intact. Someone had to de-feather them, cut them up, put them on trays, freeze them, and put them in the proper lockers.

Kenny was no good with the feathering, but his grandmother, who had lived her whole life on a farm until now, was a pro. She had a huge pot of water boiling on the stove in their little apartment upstairs, into which she dunked them to loosen the feathers, and then quickly and magically, pulled the feathers off in great handfuls. The apartment would have feathers floating in it for days afterward.

Being an inventive and playful teen, Kenny made a game out of cutting up chickens. He would place a chicken on the cutting block and take a huge butcher knife in his right hand, swing the weapon high above his head, and with a loud "Eee-yah!" bring it swinging down on the poor dead bird. Feet would fly off and lodge behind barrels of cleaning materials or the compressor for the freezer. Some of them would not be found until they stank so bad that Johnny had to go looking for the source.

Kenny moseyed into the sunshine for extra warmth. It didn't usually get really hot in Nebraska in the summer. Nineties were unusual. The sun felt good to the chicken devastator.

Another boy walked up timidly and said, "Hi."

Kenny knew every kid anywhere near his age in Blackjack, and he had never seen this guy before. The boy looked respectable, if a

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little ruffled and covered with bites. His clothes seemed to be well worn, but there was nothing unusual about that.

“Hi,” he said back, “I’m Ken.”

“Bill,” was the curt reply. “New in town?”

“Yeah... and need a job.” “How old are you?”

“About 17,” Bill said.

“What does ‘about’ mean?” Kenny asked, with a naïve sound in his voice that made it possible for him to ask any question without making anyone mad.

“Okay, I’m 17.” “What can you do?” “Anything.”

Kenny eyed this new guy a little suspiciously. New kids didn’t just show up in town. Where had he come from? He had a scruffy appearance, or maybe the right word was disheveled, as if he had slept in those clothes and needed a comb for his tousled brown hair.

His pockets were bulging with something soft, and Kenny guessed it might be underwear and socks. This guy was probably a run-away, and he sympathized with that.

Looking him over a second time, Kenny noted that he was about five nine or ten, sandy haired, a little teen acne, and crooked teeth, but he was pleasant looking nonetheless.

Kenny wanted desperately to get out of the freezer, so he took Bill in to meet his father, who was stacking boxes of chocolate syrup in the storeroom behind the counter.

“Hey, Dad,” Kenny began, “I’ve got a friend who needs a job, and I think we should hire him.”

Johnny was dressed in his usual shirt, slacks, and white apron, letting everyone know he was the proprietor of this combination frozen-food locker and dairy bar. His receding hairline did nothing



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to detract from his rugged handsomeness. “To do what?” Johnny asked.

“Well, for now, he could help me with all those chickens, and I need to do some homework this afternoon, anyway, so after he gets the hang of it...”

“You just want to get out of that freezer,” Johnny broke in. “Oh, no, it’s not that,” Kenny lied, “but he really needs the work, and I really need to study.”

Johnny turned around and saw Bill standing there looking hopeful. Johnny tried to act like he was strict, but he had a big, soft heart. He liked the looks of this new kid. “You’ll have to train him.”

“Oh, sure, I know that.”

“And I want you to spend one hour with him to make sure he knows everything he has to do.”

“Okay, Dad!” Kenny said with enthusiasm. He was getting out of the freezer.

As they walked to the back of the building, Kenny asked Bill, “Do you know how to clean and cut up a chicken?”

Bill smiled, “Sure do.”

“Good, that’s the first part, and as long as I’m standing around training you, I’ll help you with that. Grab that coat, and I’ll show you the lockers the chickens have to go into.”

They stepped into the huge freezer with its hundreds of large, locked storage bins, most with names on them, and nearly empty at this time of the year. He showed Bill the two bins that belonged to the farmers whose chickens they were taking care of. Then they retreated out to the long table where they cut up the chickens.

“I’ll watch, and you cut up a chicken,” Kenny said.

Bill did it expertly.

“Well, that part of your training is done, and you got an A,” Kenny said. “The next thing you do...” He talked him through the process. It took about a minute. Then the two of them worked together for another 20 minutes, and Kenny figured that was almost

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an hour. He went upstairs to the apartment and got out his math textbook, into which he inserted the latest Batman comic book.

When the chickens were all processed, Bill called up the stairs, and Kenny came down. “Okay, show me what you’ve done,” he told Bill.

“You’ll have to go into the freezer,” Bill said, having already figured out why Kenny wanted him hired.

Since the chickens had been cleaned and divested of everything not edible, frozen, and placed into the correct bins, Kenny was pleased. “Good job,” he told Bill. “Now let’s get you some pay.”

Johnny was chatting with some customers seated at a booth in the restaurant section. This was part of his marketing strategy. Most places didn’t have time to talk to customers and didn’t develop personal relationships with them, but Johnny, still a new guy in town, worked at the relationship thing.

Kenny interrupted, “Uh, Dad, we’ve got a new employee to pay.”

Johnny told his customers, “Kenny has taken over hiring around here, and now he wants me to pay the people he’s hired. I’ll be back in a minute.”

They walked back to the counter, which served as Johnny’s office and desk. Johnny pulled out his ledger and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Just Bill,” Bill answered.

It’s still not clear whether Johnny misunderstood him or was playing his little joke, but he entered “Bill Just” on the payroll sheet. From then on, so far as anyone in Blackjack knew, Bill’s name was Bill Just.

Kenny had the rest of the afternoon free, not that there was much afternoon left. He took Bill around town and introduced him to some other kids their age and pointed out some places of possible employment. Bill was a convincing interviewee and had several part-time jobs lined up by dark. Being unhampered by the need to attend school made him a valuable part-timer.

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When it came time to go home for supper, Kenny asked, “Where do you live?”

“Well, I just got here, but don’t worry about me. I’ll be all right. And listen, thanks for everything, okay? You’ve really been a great help to me, and I won’t forget it.”

As Kenny walked back toward The Ideal, he wondered what that meant, “I won’t forget it.”