

Found on 16th Avenue tells the story of Joe Vesely, a silent fourteen-year-old with a mysterious past, and of the family and community where he is sent to live when his mother suddenly dies. This excerpt is told from the point of view of John Mark Starosta, Joe's uncle, a minister who wants to help Joe but is concerned about the boy's erratic behavior.

When this scene opens, John Mark has just returned home from a long night shift at the factory. Breakfast is over and his boys have gone to school, his wife Kate has gone out for the day, and his cranky mother-in-law Josefina is doing the laundry. John Mark finally heads for bed, but he is not going to get much rest.

Someone was shaking his arm. John Mark tried to keep his eyes closed, hoping that it was a bad dream that would go away, but the person kept shaking him. He finally dragged himself out of a deep well of sleep and opened his eyes, squinting against the sunlight that someone had let into the room.

Josefina was leaning over him. John Mark blinked, trying to wake up.

"*Probu_! Probu_!* Get up!" she yelled. "*Záchod p_et_ká!* The toilet broke and water is all over! Hurry!"

John Mark groaned. He pushed himself up on one elbow and nodded. "*Dob_e, dob_e, pani Vesely,*" he told her. "All right, all right, Mrs. Vesely. I'm getting up." She left the bedroom and he hauled himself out of bed and pulled on his work pants to go look at the problem.

The toilet was old. He should have replaced it, but he had been so busy . . . He looked in the kitchen and groaned. Water was gushing from the tank, and both the bathroom and kitchen floors were flooded. Josefina was trying to dam up the water with towels in order to keep it from going into the front room.

What to do . . . John Mark stepped gingerly into the bathroom and turned off the water supply valve; at least that was a start. The water stopped running. Josefina brought in the mop and bucket, and for a while they both worked to get the water up off the floor as fast as possible. After they had soaked up the worst of it, Josefina sat down on a kitchen chair and looked at him expectantly.

John Mark frowned and wondered what to do. The toilet was the old kind, with a wooden tank placed up high on the wall, six feet above the toilet bowl itself, and connected to it by a long brass pipe. He really needed a ladder to see what was going on, but a chair would do. He dragged one over and stood on it to see the problem.

The tank was cracked. It would have to be replaced. John Mark climbed down slowly from the chair, and then sat on it while he thought. Maybe the hardware store would have a tank. But the toilet was so old, a replacement might be hard to find. Did they even sell these kinds of tanks anymore? How long could they go without a toilet?

Well, he would have to start work on the problem right now if they were going to have a working toilet again today. Maybe he should remove the tank for a start. It wasn't going to magically fix itself. John Mark went to the cellar for his old canvas tool bag, and when he came back up he found Joe standing in the bathroom doorway, looking at the mess on the floor.

I knew it, John Mark thought. *He's skipping school. Doggone it, I knew this boy would be up to no good.*

"What are you doing home?" he asked. Joe jumped and turned around.

"Uh, I'm sick," he said, with a guilty little glance.

John Mark decided he was too tired to argue about it. “Do you know anything about toilets?” he asked.

“Some,” Joe said. “What’s wrong?”

“Tank’s cracked.”

Joe hopped up on the chair. He was not as tall as John Mark but he could see where the crack was and where the fittings connected the valve to the tank. “We have to take this off,” he said. “Do you have a candle and some pliers?”

“I have pliers,” John Mark said. “What’s the candle for?”

“You got to warm up the nuts before you can get them off,” Joe told him. “Brass is like that when it’s old.”

“Oh,” John Mark said, and went to find a candle.

Joe worked on the fittings, warming them gently with the candle and then slowly turning them loose. John Mark handed him tools and helped him pull the tank off the wall. Clumps of dank black grime came with it, spreading over their hands and everything they touched as they wrestled the heavy oak tank down to the floor. They sat down, sweating and panting, and looked at the grey spot on the wall where the tank had been for so long.

“What’s next?” John Mark asked.

Joe shrugged. “Got to get a new one,” he said. “Put it on.”

John Mark looked at him. “How come you know so much about plumbing?”

Joe’s gaze drifted past him, out to the kitchen beyond. He didn’t answer right away. “Oh, one of . . . my mom’s friends . . . used to take me with him on jobs,” he said after a while. He seemed to be looking at something. John Mark looked out to see what it was, but there was nothing in the kitchen, just the table and chairs, as always.

He glanced back around as Joe suddenly gasped and bent over, one hand covering his mouth. He made for the toilet bowl as if to throw up, but recovered himself halfway there and sat back down, breathing hard. He closed his eyes and doubled over, arms crossed over his stomach.

“Joe?” John Mark moved over to him and put a hand on his back. It was damp with sweat. “You need to throw up?” He felt guilty for doubting the boy earlier.

Joe shook his head. “What’s the matter then?” John Mark asked.

“Oh . . . I’m just . . . sick,” Joe said. John Mark sat back in puzzlement. What on earth could he say to that?

“Want a glass of water?” Joe shook his head. Something about the way his shoulders moved looked like he was holding back tears.

John Mark sighed and leaned back against the wall, looking at the toilet tank, the grimy floor, and the crying boy. He knew that he should do something about each one of those problems, but for the moment he just leaned his head back and closed his eyes, feeling himself drifting . . . he jerked his head back up and looked around. Joe was sitting up now, eyes red, still looking out into the kitchen as if he could see something there.

“Joe.”

The boy started and looked over at him.

“You all right?” He nodded.

“We got to get this tank replaced,” John Mark said.

“Be hard to get one like it,” Joe told him.

Especially if it’s expensive, John Mark thought, but all he said was, “Let’s go over to Vincent’s. Maybe we can use his car.”

Vincent was not home, but John Mark went to the Prazskys' house, ignoring the dog that was barking itself into hysterics, and knocked on the door. Karel came out. The two men talked for a while, and then Karel went to fetch the key to the car, and John Mark called Joe to help shovel out the entrance to the garage.

"Where do you want to go?" Karel asked, once they were on their way.

"Let's go to the Avenue hardware store first," John Mark said after a while. When they got there, the manager told them that he no longer carried that model of tank, and referred them to another store.

They piled back into the car and headed down the road again. Karel was shaking his head as he drove.

"I know, I know," John Mark said with a touch of irritation. "I should buy a new style tank."

"Well, yes," Karel said. John Mark looked out the window in despair. Payday was not until next week.

"Uncle John, remember your Bible verse this morning?" came Joe's voice from the back seat. "God works out problems so things are better than before?"

Karel snorted. "If there is a God, you mean," he said. "If there isn't, looks like I'll have to buy you a toilet today."

John Mark pulled himself up from where he had slumped against the seat. *Be strong now*, he told himself. "This world didn't get here by accident," he said. "There's a God. Let's just see what happens." *Not much of a defense*, he thought miserably, but that seemed to be all he could come up with at the moment.

God, why are You doing this to me? he pleaded silently. *I don't have even a dollar to spend, and here I am, trying to buy a toilet part that nobody carries anymore, and I'm sitting in a borrowed car with a Freethinker and a . . . a boy I can't figure out for the life of me. Have I made You mad or something?* John Mark caught himself before he went too far down that line of thought. No, it was just that the toilet was broken. That was all. The Lord never promised that things wouldn't go wrong once in a while.

"I think God should take better care of you, seeing as how you work for Him and all," Karel pointed out.

"There's lots of things I don't understand, but that doesn't mean there's not a God," John Mark said stubbornly. Thankfully, the second hardware store was in sight. "There's the store." He was grateful to get out of the car and away from the argument. He didn't feel like he was holding up his end very well.

They came back out of the store no better off than before. Only new toilets were for sale, no old models. Karel pulled out his pipe and filled it with elaborate patience, plainly waiting for John Mark to decide what to do.

"I know a place," Joe said.

John Mark looked over at him. "What kind of place?"

"Where they have lots of old parts."

"Where is it?"

Joe frowned. "Over by where I used to live," he finally said.

John Mark looked at him, thinking. The policeman who had brought Joe to the house last November had told him about the shanty camp where he had been found. It was across town, but they had enough gas to get there.

"You want to go?" he asked Karel.

The big man took a long pull on his pipe and grinned. "Sure," he said.

"Here it is," Joe finally said, and Karel stopped in front of a rickety garage on the northeast side of town. The boy jumped out of the car and went in. The two men followed, a little more slowly. The store was dark inside, filled with barrels of greasy machine parts and piles of scrap metal and old rope. Joe had already threaded his way through the junk to the back of the room, and John Mark could hear him talking to someone.

A wrinkled old man dressed in incredibly dirty overalls greeted John Mark and Karel from a chair the back of the store. Joe was standing just behind him, peering into an even darker room farther back in the building.

"Heh, heh, heh," the old man chuckled, shooting a glance at John Mark as he laughed. "Looking for a washdown tank? Not much call for those these days."

"Yes sir, we are," John Mark said, hoping that the old man was all right in the head.

The man showed no sign of getting up to find a tank. He peered at John Mark in the dim light, looking him up and down. "So this little fella's living with you now," he said after a while. "Feeding him good?"

"We're trying," John Mark replied, warming to the old man a bit. "Hard to keep up with him."

"Well, well. Looks like he's grown, anyway," the old man said, and got up to shuffle into the back room. Joe was already inside, and the two of them clanked and thumped in the dark. John Mark and Karel looked at each other, then looked around. Dirt covered every surface in the store. Loops of oily chain and buckets of rusty hardware hung on the walls. A rat scampered across the filthy floor and disappeared under a table.

The old man came out, shaking his head. He shot another glance at John Mark. "I dunno. I thought I had one. Well, let's look some more," he said, and led them out the shop's back door. A pile of discarded sinks and toilet parts sat there, covered with snow.

"Here's one!" Joe called. He pulled out a snow-covered lump that turned out to be, indeed, a washdown tank. John Mark and Karel hurried over to look at it. John Mark's heart sank when he saw a long crack down the side, almost exactly where his own tank was cracked.

"Hmm, yeah, that's what happens to 'em," the old man said, poking at it with his shoe and pushing it back into the pile. "You don't want that one." John Mark wondered why anybody would bother to keep a worthless toilet tank that would do no one any good.

"Here's another one," said Joe from the other side of the pile where he was rooting around in the junk. John Mark went over and crouched down to see what Joe was pulling out. It was not a washdown tank. It was a brand new china tank, the close-coupled type that most bathrooms had now.

"That's not the kind we're looking for," John Mark said.

"No, no, the boy knows. That'll fit what you've got," the old man said comfortably. "You just need the part that connects 'em. And then you need to change out the water pipe and the washdown valve." He winked at John Mark. "Good amount of brass there when you take it all down. Junk it for a pretty penny when you're done."

John Mark looked at Karel. The big man shrugged and nodded after a moment. "We could do that," he said.

John Mark stood up. He felt very uncomfortable now that he had to ask the price. He had less than a dollar in his wallet, he was still unshaven from the night before, and he was covered

with black grime from the toilet. *I guess I fit right in here though*, he thought. *Maybe the guy will go easy on me.*

“My uncle’s a minister,” Joe said to the old man.

Oh, no, John Mark thought. *No, Joe, not now. This guy’s gonna think you’re lying. Or else bump up the price.*

“Are you, then,” the old man said.

“Um, yes,” John Mark said. “Ah, how much for the tank?”

The old man turned around as if to go back inside, then stopped and scratched his head. “Oh, just take it,” he finally said. “And if this young fella,” he pointed to Joe, “can find the connector, take that too. Nice to do something for a man of the cloth. Don’t see them out this way too much.” He shuffled back inside the building.

John Mark gaped after him. A free toilet! *Lord, you have done it again. Took care of the problem and taught me a lesson, all at the same time.* He looked over at Karel. They both looked at Joe. The boy nodded, as if to say “See?” and then turned back to root through the pile of parts, looking for the connecting piece.

“Well, let’s load up,” Karel said after a moment. John Mark helped him put the tank into the back of the car. Joe gave up looking for the connector in the outdoor junk pile and went inside the garage again. John Mark followed him in and found the old man watching Joe as the boy rummaged through buckets of parts.

“Thank you,” John Mark said. He pulled fifty cents from his wallet and laid the coins on the counter.

“Naw, naw. Keep your money,” the old man said. “Look in that next one, son,” he called out to Joe. The boy moved over to the next pile of junk and came up with a part. “There you go.” He winked at John Mark again. “Now you boys go on. Can’t keep the missus without a crapper.”

John Mark and Joe burst out laughing. Kate, without a . . . ! They waved at the old man and left, still laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Karel asked when they got into the car.

Joe started to explain. “He said . . .” and soon Karel was laughing too.

By the time they were near the bridge and their own part of town again, John Mark had nodded off more than once. He shook himself awake and looked over at Karel.

“Thanks for coming,” he said. “Can I buy you a beer?”

“Sure,” Karel replied. He pulled up to the Little Bohemia bar and turned off the engine, but John Mark didn’t move.

“You gonna sit here in the car all day, or you gonna come in and buy one for yourself too?” Karel finally asked.

“If I drink a beer now, you’re going to have to put in that tank by yourself,” John Mark yawned, “because I’ll go to sleep.”

“Ah, well, I have the master plumber here to help me,” Karel said with a glance toward Joe. “Let’s go in.”

John Mark was sleeping . . . he was sleeping . . . someone was sitting on the bed beside him, and it wasn’t Kate. He opened his eyes with a start, wondering who it was. Johnny sat there, watching him.

“Hi, Dad,” he said. “It’s five o’clock.”

John Mark closed his eyes again, sinking back into slumber. He felt as if he had just lain down a minute ago.

Johnny shook his shoulder. "Mom says it's time to get up and eat so we can go to the dance."

Eyes still closed, John Mark rolled onto his back and flung his arm across his face. He gave a yawn that turned into a groan. After a minute he put down his arm, opened his eyes, and looked around. Johnny was still there, looking at him.

"Are you tired, Dad?"

Was he tired. Oh . . . could they all just stay home tonight, or could the rest of the family go without him? John Mark grimaced a little as he thought. No, and no. Everybody needed a little fun, and they all wanted to go to the dance. Kate would not go without him. They had been looking forward to it all week.

He heaved another groan and looked up at the ceiling for a moment. *Oh, dear Lord, help me*, he began, and then stopped and laughed at himself. He was going to a dance, not facing some terrible problem. Things could be worse. Taking his wife out for some fun was a lot better than, say, being burned at the stake, like poor old Jan Huss. He would feel better once he got going.

"Johnny . . ." He looked over at his son, still watching him, now with a worried frown. John Mark reached over and patted his leg. "Can you go heat some water for my shave? And make a half a pot of coffee? Then come back and get me when it's ready?"

"All right," Johnny said. John Mark was asleep again before Johnny got off the bed.

In what seemed like only seconds later, Johnny brought him a cup of coffee and a peanut butter sandwich. He sat up and ate and drank for a while, slowly waking up, while Johnny sat companionably beside him on the bed. John Mark shared the last part of the sandwich with his son and then swung his legs to the floor.

"Come on in with me," he invited, and Johnny came into the bathroom and sat on the closed lid of the toilet, a little awkwardly because he wasn't used to the tank being so close to the bowl. John Mark flicked a little spray of water on him to make him smile. "So, how 'bout the new toilet?" he asked.

"It's great. It's like all my friends' toilets now," Johnny said. "What about the wall?" The place where the old high tank had been was now a dirty gray blotch.

John Mark tried to yawn and shave at the same time. He had to stop and finish first one job, then the other, before he could talk again. "Oh, we'll do something," he said vaguely. "Maybe Mom can hang a picture up there."

"My friend's mom put up a cabinet there when they got their new toilet," Johnny told him.

"We could do that," John Mark said agreeably.

"Maybe we can get a telephone next?" Johnny asked.

"I don't think so," John Mark started on his other cheek. "Joe needs a bed first."

"Right," Johnny said quickly, then put his head down.

John Mark glanced over at him. "How's school going?"

"Fine," Johnny said. "I got an A on my math test."

"That's great," John Mark said. "That's the way to go. You're better in math than I was at your age."

"Joe skipped today," Johnny said. John Mark looked down at him again.

“I think he was sick,” he said tentatively, and glanced at the door to make sure it was closed all the way. “He came home early and he did seem sick to his stomach.”

“I think he just skipped school,” Johnny said.

“Johnny, you don’t know that,” John Mark said.

“If that’d been me, you would’ve been mad,” Johnny went on.

“Not if you were really sick,” John Mark pointed out.

“You know what I mean,” Johnny persisted.

John Mark sighed and sat down on the edge of the bathtub, drying his face with a towel. “I think that what you think is that I . . . you think he gets away with stuff I wouldn’t let you get away with. Is that what you mean?” he asked.

Johnny nodded and looked down. “Well, yeah. Like smoking.”

John Mark looked at him for a moment. “I’ll tell you, *Jan*, I don’t always know what to do about him either. But don’t you think he’s better now, though, than he was when he first got here?”

Johnny’s head hung a little lower. He sighed. “Yeah.”

“And don’t you think that he’s had a lot harder time than us, trying to get over his mom dying and all that?”

Johnny sighed louder. “Yeah.”

“So, I want you to be patient with him. I’ll talk to him,” John Mark raised his hand when Johnny started talking again, “about the smoking. I think we need to not jump all over him about everything right now. Just let him get better for a while. Everything’s going to work out for the best.”

Johnny heaved a huge sigh. “You always say the same thing.”

“It’s always true,” John Mark told him.

Vincent, dressed in his best suit, walked into the kitchen later that evening just as they finished supper. “The family taxi is ready to take Mrs. Starosta to the dance,” he said. “Where’s this free toilet everyone’s talking about?”

“It’s a beaut,” John Mark said. He had finished a second cup of coffee and was feeling better. “Joe found it and Karel put it in. *Mockrát d kuji* for letting us use the car, *bratr*.”

“*Rádo se stalo*,” Vincent replied, from the bathroom where he was inspecting the new tank. “What’d you do with all the brass?”

“Karel’s going to sell it tomorrow,” John Mark told him. “I’m giving him half of whatever he gets, for helping.”

Anton came into the kitchen and leaned against the doorjamb.

“Annie!” Stephen yelled, and ran to him for a hug.

Anton picked him up, hugged him, and turned him upside down. “Don’t you dare call me that at the dance tonight, *trapi_ku*, you little troublemaker,” he said. Stephen squealed with joy at the attention.

“Anton, he just ate. Put him down,” Kate said.

John Mark watched Anton set Stephen on his feet and swat him lightly on the behind. His nephew looked like he had just washed and shaved, and he was wearing a new sweater that made his eyes look very blue. John Mark knew that Karel’s two sons insisted on washing and shaving before they went out to a dance, steaming up the whole little house with their demands for hot water. Even eleven-year-old Rose was dressing up on dance nights now. He looked back over at

Joe and Johnny, still sitting at the table in their school clothes. It would be a few more years before those two started dressing up for a dance, if he was lucky.

“Well, Kate, are we ready to go?” he asked.

“Let me drive you and the boys over first, then come back for the ladies,” Vincent said. The dance was on the other side of the bridge, which was a fairly long walk. “We don’t want to take them first and leave them without escorts at the dance.” He winked at Kate. “Too many good-looking young guys out there. We can’t handle the competition like we used to.”

Kate finished pinning her mother’s garnet brooch to her best dress, made of burgundy velveteen and trimmed with lace at the neckline and sleeves. She arched an eyebrow at Vincent. “That’s right,” she told him. “Hurry up, then. I’m ready to go.”

A burst of voices and polka music met John Mark and the boys as they walked into the auditorium of the old brick C.S.P.S. Hall, named for the Czech-American benevolence society that had built it in the 1890s. On most nights, men’s and women’s social groups met in the lodge rooms, or theatrical groups used the stage to rehearse their plays. Tonight the chairs were cleared out of the auditorium and a band was playing. Couples were already circling around the floor.

John Mark led the boys to a table in the dining area by the bar, where they could hold a table for Kate and Ruzina, but Stephen wanted to go and play with the flock of little boys running up and down the balconies on the upper level of the hall. Johnny looked around at all the dancing couples for a moment, and then threw a bashful look at John Mark and headed upstairs as well. Anton and Joe sat down at the table, but got up again when John Mark gave them a quarter and told them to go buy root beers at the pass-through window to the bar. Women and children generally did not go into the barroom, which was a long, smoky space packed with men ordering beer at a fifty-foot-long wooden bar, but there was an open window from the bar to the dining area, and drinks could be ordered there by anyone who could pay. Anton and Joe, at their age, could have worked their way into the bar for their root beers, but they went to the window for now. The night was just beginning.

Karel and his sons joined them, along with some of their neighbors. The men bought beer and pulled tables together for the group. Vincent finally showed up with Kate, Ruzina, and Rose, and as soon as everyone was settled, John Mark pulled Kate out to dance.

The band was played a set of waltzes and polkas. John Mark danced with Kate for a while, then traded off with Vincent and partnered Ruzina for the rest of the set. Unmarried men and women clustered in groups on opposite sides of the room, and pairs or threesomes of bachelors would make the trip across the floor and invite the women to dance. The band finally took a break and everyone sat down to catch their breath and have a drink. When the music started up again, Kate pulled Anton out to dance and Karel took Ruzina’s hand, so John Mark invited Rose.

“Rosie, you’re almost as tall as Kate,” he said as he guided her around the floor. “Who’s been teaching you to dance?”

“I practice with Mom at home,” she said. “Or Wence, if he lets me.”

John Mark led her through a little twirl. “Very nice,” he said. “Did you sew this nice dress yourself? Your dad is going to have to fight off the boys with a baseball bat when you grow up.” Rose looked almost grown up right now, in her flowered dress and black shoes with ankle straps.

“He already does,” Rose giggled. “I’m not allowed to dance with anyone who’s not married.” John Mark laughed and twirled her again.

The band was playing a set of American tunes now and the music was slow. John Mark caught sight of Wence Prazsky on the dance floor, not far from them.

“Who’s Wence dancing with?” he asked Rose.

“Rachel Sedlak,” she said. “She’s not supposed to be here.”

John Mark looked back at Wence. He was smiling down at a young woman with brown eyes and smooth brown hair, softly singing the tender words of the song to her as they danced.

*Don't know why, there's no sun up in the sky,
Stormy weather, when my gal and I ain't together,
Keeps raining all the time . . .*

“Why isn’t she supposed to be here?” he asked Rose. “Aren’t her parents with her?”

“She doesn’t live with her parents. She lives with her grandparents. They run the Otis Street grocery store by St. Wencelaus’s church, and they don’t like Freethinkers,” Rose said. “They don’t even like the C.S.P.S. Hall, because the Freethinkers meet here.”

“What happened to her parents?” John Mark asked after a while. Rose shrugged.

“I don’t know. I think her mom left, or something.”

John Mark looked at the girl again, then back at Rose.

“How come you know all this stuff?”

“Her sister’s in my class,” she said with a confidential grin.

John Mark glanced back at Wence just in time to see him pull Rachel deeper into the circle of his arms. He was still singing to her, more quietly now, because their heads were so close together.

*Can't go on, everything I had is gone,
Stormy weather, since my girl and I ain't together . . .*

John Mark led Rose into a turn that brought him alongside the younger couple. If they kept on dancing that closely, the gossip about Rachel would get back to the Otis Street grocery store before she did.

“Not so close there, you two,” he warned, with a grin to take the sting out of his words. “Gotta watch out for this guy,” he teased Rachel, with another smile. “Let me know if he gets out of hand.”

“Aw, Uncle John, go on,” Wence groaned. Rachel smiled shyly at him, and they pulled away from each other, but only a little.

When the song ended, John Mark escorted Rose back to the table and looked around for Kate. She was dancing with Vincent. John Mark sat down and realized how good it felt to be off his feet. All of a sudden the little wooden chair seemed marvelously comfortable. He tipped his head back against the wall and closed his eyes for a moment.

Stephen and Johnny roused him, just as he was drifting off, when they ran down the stairs from the balcony and surrounded him, one on each side. They were flushed and panting. “Can we have some root beer, Dad?” they begged. John Mark dug his other quarter out of his wallet and gave it to them. “Bring me change,” he called as they dashed to the pass-through window and lined up with all the other youngsters waiting to buy drinks.

He looked around. Joe was sitting at the table with a smile and a bottle of cream soda in front of him.

“Hey, where’d that come from?” John Mark asked.

Joe nodded at Rose, who sat at the other end of the table, talking with a cluster of schoolgirls.

“Rose bought you a cream soda?” Joe nodded again and grinned.

John Mark almost laughed. What was Rose up to? Talk about young ladies looking for trouble! He didn’t need to look any further than his own table tonight.

Joe sat with his soda, watching the dancers and tapping one foot to the music. John Mark shook his head. The boy must have a gift for getting things for free. Like the toilet tank. He wondered foggily how long it had been since they had fixed the toilet. It seemed like a long time ago, but it had been only this afternoon. Was that possible? John Mark blinked hard and came back from his wandering thoughts to the present.

Johnny and Stephen returned with their bottles of root beer and put the change down on the table before heading back up the stairs. Rose glanced over at Joe and smiled. Joe grinned back. The girls all giggled, expecting Joe to invite Rose to dance, but then Joe lost his smile, looked away, and left the table to join the other boys upstairs.

John Mark blinked. Joe’s face had looked so much older for a moment . . . old and sad, as if Rose’s flirtatious glance had awakened some past grief. What on earth had happened to the boy, to make him look like that? He sat at the table and thought about it for a while, wondering.

Vincent came in from the dance floor and sat down. John Mark looked around for Kate.

“She’s over there,” Vincent said. John Mark could see her now, talking with a group of people on the other side of the room.

“Come on, let’s get a beer,” Vincent said, and pulled John Mark into the bar. The smoky room was full of men shouting into each other’s ears. The brothers pushed their way through the crowd and ended up in line behind the band’s accordion player and cornet player, who were both at the bar buying beer.

“Bernie Drahozal! What are you doing in here?” Vincent yelled at the accordion player. “Aren’t you supposed to be playing?”

“Naw! We found some kids to play for us! Gotta take a break!” he shouted back. People would dance past midnight and on into the morning, as long as the accordion played.

“Who you buying all that beer for, Bernie?” John Mark shouted.

“I’m going to dance with Barbara Barta tonight if it’s the last thing I do,” the accordion player yelled back. He picked up two mugs and headed for the dance floor. “Hey, Starosta! Your boy’s playing this set for me!”

Vincent and John Mark both glanced over at the band on the stage. Anton was playing accordion and his friend Robert Stastny was playing cornet. Both boys looked out of place in the group of older men, and the other players were laughing, joking with Anton as he played, because he was not nearly as good on the accordion as Bernie. He kept up with the beat, though, and finished the song with a decent musical flourish and a grin. John Mark smiled and looked over at Vincent.

Vincent was trying to hide his pleasure. He cleared his throat, then frowned and shook his head. “What’s he doing up there? He’s terrible on the accordion, terrible. And look at his hair. I gave him fifteen cents to get his hair cut today and he went and forgot all about it.”

“Right,” John Mark agreed. “We better trade right now. It’ll take me two or three years but I think I can straighten him out.” He smacked Vincent good-humoredly on the side of his head and almost made him spill his beer.

“Hmhf,” was all Vincent said, but he smiled.

Men were still arguing all around them in the bar, condemning the devaluation of the dollar and talking about the danger that Germany was becoming to Bohemia. The shouting would get louder as the men drank more, and there would probably be a fight outside before the night was over. John Mark left the bar and looked around for Kate. He finally saw her at a table across the room, chatting with a group of women.

Kate was easily the most beautiful girl at the dance, he thought. He watched her as she smiled and laughed. Her hair was done up in a French twist, but little strands were coming loose around her face, and she was wearing the garnet earrings and necklace that he had given her years ago for a Christmas present.

He drained his mug and set it down. The band wouldn't play forever, and he wanted to dance with his wife. Unlike Wence, he was a married man and did not have to worry about gossip, so he headed straight over to the table and took Kate's hand, ignoring the amused looks from the other women, and led her out to the floor. The band was playing a lovely slow tune from the old country. He drew Kate in close to him and put his head down to her hair, breathing in her special scent. *Rejoice with the wife of thy youth*, the Lord said. He would do that tonight. He pulled Kate even closer, and felt her laughing in his arms.