

*Tom Backer*

**Carly: A Christmas Carol**

**A**s I open the side door, the one that I know Carly doesn't lock, it gives a loud creak. Bernie, a poor kid in my Third Grade class, and I listen for any footsteps. Not hearing any, we proceed along the edge of the hallway since I know that the boards in the middle also creak. I slowly push open one of the saloon type doors and we enter the bar room. We look for a bag but do not find one as Carly doesn't sell anything that requires a bag. He sells sections of ring baloney but wraps those in paper and ties them with string so we undo the top buttons of our shirts and begin to stuff our ill-gotten gains there. Packs of Lucky Strikes and Camels, a box of kitchen matches, a package of cheroots and Bernie smiles his bad teeth as he grabs a twist of chewing tobacco off the shelf behind the bar and we take wax lips and bottles, Bazooka Bubble Gum and a box of Whoppers Malted Milk Balls from the one end of the bar. I grab an Orange Crush and he a Bubble Up from the water cooler and we find a church key. With another smile, he grabs the half full bottle of Sterling beer Carly always keeps in the cooler.

We still don't hear any footsteps so we quietly exit, holding our liquid refreshment and pressing our hands against the bottom of our shirts so nothing falls out and we run for three blocks and plop on an open lot, panting and laughing as we display the loot.

We start with the cheroots and the beer until I start coughing and wheezing while Bernie enjoys himself. As I lay groaning, Bernie takes off with all the contraband. I throw up and, after a brief snooze, make my way home to tell mom "I don't feel good so I can't eat supper." And I go to bed.

Mom finds out and makes me tell Carly that I will mow his side lot every week until I pay for the damages. I don't mention Bernie by name but say that my partner in crime took off with the loot.



Carly owned and operated a huge grey building in the center of our small town with a fifteen feet high metal pattern-pressed ceiling in the bar room. His father ran a bar there but lost his license so Carly kept it open as a place for adults who didn't want to put up with the rowdy behavior known to happen in the drinking bars to play cards in the evening and on Saturdays and a place for us kids to hang out after school. He only sold sodas, candy, tobacco products, coffee in the morning, and occasional slices of ring baloney if a farmer had come to town and wanted a snack or to take with him. Also, upon request, Carly would get the whiskey bottle out from a cupboard under the bar and pour morning eye openers for himself and the customer. That and the ever ready Sterling beer in the water cooler produced the tiny burst veins running across his nose and cheeks.

He also rented out the rooms on the second floor except that his nearly deaf sister Bertha got to stay in hers for free. He also owned three older houses in town but kept the rent low. To show his old fashioned ways he had a house built in 1950 that included an outhouse, something not done for decades. He owned a large, flat farm just east of town. Not getting rich

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like the owners of the drinking bars, he enjoyed his easy going life style.

I knew that Carly took naps every afternoon and locked the doors except the side one in case Bertha or a renter wanted in or out so that's when we did the heist.



Short and a little chubby, Carly wore old suit pants and an unpressed thin-striped dress shirt. Some of his habits might seem uncouth. To blow his nose, he held one nostril shut, blew out the other, rubbed the result into the oiled wooden floor and wiped his nose with his handkerchief. An older brother who worked for Carly complained that, instead of using the outhouse when he needed to do number two in the winter, Carly spread a section of newspaper on the floor in the basement and tossed it in the furnace and my brother had to remove the stinky cinders. Carly owned the place and did as he pleased.



After the first couple of times I mowed the lot Carly began paying me a quarter each time and we became friends. He taught me how to play two-handed pinochle and we played that a lot. He had me do various jobs around the place and gave me a raise of a quarter a day. I spread some oil and sawdust on the wooden floor and swept that into the bottom of a candy box where Carly had cut off the one side to serve as a dustpan. I removed empties from the tables and wiped the tables dry. If Carly played cards in the back room off the bar room, I collected money from the customers and made change when kids wanted something like a box of candy cigarettes or an adult wanted a soft drink. I emptied the spittoons. Once an adult flipped a dime in a spittoon and told a kid he could have it if he fished it out. The kid turned up his nose so I got it when I emptied it. One of the perks of the job.

Once bugs got into a box of Bun candies and Carly gave it to me. I took it outside, shook out the bugs, went home to get a card table and folding chair to set myself up in business in front of Carly's. Adults stopped to look at the Buns, saw evidence of where bugs had bitten through the wrappers and laughed to think that I could sell them for the reduced price of two cents apiece. I placed those with holes under the box and a few adults smiled like I was selling lemonade and bought one of the unholy ones. After an hour of no more business I ate one of the ones with holes in the wrapper since the bugs had only eaten bits of chocolate here and there and I took the rest home for later.

My theft had resulted in a paying job and free refreshments so I guess you could say that crime pays but I didn't feel like I deserved the money or Carly's friendship.



As I got to Fifth Grade, Carly gave me more responsibility and raised my wage to fifty cents a day. During the summer, one of my older brothers painted one of the houses Carly owned around town and I took him a cold Double Cola and a bag of chips for his morning break and again at noon to go with the peanut butter and jelly sandwich he had packed for lunch. I replenished sodies in the cooler and opened and displayed new boxes of

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candy. I painted whitewash on the tree trunks, set mousetraps and fed the chickens. He would hitch up the team of large tan horses in his barn behind our house and I sat next to him as we drove to his farm. Since he had a nearby farmer work the land, we just walked about, gathering debris and picking ears of field corn when still tender enough to eat.

All of us students had to attend mass in the morning but a number of us boys began to hang out at Carly's during that time. We knew how long it took Fr. David, who we called "the Duce" after "il Duce," to say mass so we waited until near the end to go stand by the side door of the church so we could join our classes as they left and before the nuns came after them.

As a favorite pastime we bought a sody and a bag of salted peanuts, drank some of the sody and poured in the peanuts. It required considerable skill to get some of the sody and a few peanuts without having the peanuts block the neck of the bottle. Sometimes the dam burst and the kid got so much sody and peanuts at once he had to spit it out. I had to clean up but it was fun to watch.

On a shelf in the wall across from the end of the bar stood a large cardboard cylinder half full of mustard and next to it a large open box of crackers. The crackers got stale and the mustard got a crust on top because of infrequent use and you had to use a dinner knife nearby to break through and get any mustard.

One morning Johnny Seufert, a year ahead of me and kind of a smart aleck, came and stood by our table as we played euchre. "Anybody want a mustard cracker sandwich?" Of course not, why would such a bright kid ask us such a dumb question? "They're real good and they're free."

We kept giving him this squint-eyed look but we hadn't tried one and maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

"Okay."

"Me too"

"Yeh, I'll try one."

"Sure, fix me up."

He went and grabbed a cracker, used the knife to break into the mustard, spread some on it and put another cracker on top. He did that five times and brought the "sandwiches" to our table and dished them out. You could see little brown and tan specks of the dried mustard oozing out the sides of the crackers along with the creamy yellow stuff. We each grabbed one and looked at the others to see if we were actually going to eat these.

Johnny held the cracker sandwich in front of his mouth. "Alley Oop!"

We looked at him open mouthed and held the sandwich there, staring at him and one another to see who would go first.

"C'mon guys, not every day you get a treat like this."

He hesitated ten seconds but then plopped it into his mouth and chomped on it. We closed our eyes and noses and did the same. The stale crackers and rank mustard caused us to tear up. We held our breath and

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then all of us, including Johnny, blew them out of our mouths. Tiny bits of cracker and brown and yellow mustard bits spewed across the table like snowflakes someone had peed on. We started laughing so hard that two of us fell off our chairs.

When we recovered somewhat, I moaned, "What did you do that for?" He leaned against the table and managed to shout, still laughing, "I wasn't planning on eating it. I was trying to get you guys to do it without me but since you didn't I couldn't back down and pushed it into my mouth."

"You have some on your face and clothes!"

"We all do!"

We continued laughing until our sides hurt. I of course had to clean up the mess but it was worth it.

One of the mornings we played hooky from mass we were sitting at the tables playing euchre, sometimes for a dime a game and nickel a buck but usually just for fun. One guy not playing sauntered to the large windows facing Main Street and the slope up to the church a block away and yelled, "It's the Duce! He's headed this way and walking fast!"

He must have gotten the assistant priest to say mass. Chairs overturned as we pushed them back and tables went over as we tried to get past them. Sodies, cards and peanuts skittered across the floor as we crowded thru the saloon doors, out the back and circled the block so we could stand outside the church door and join our class as they came out before Father David made it back up the hill.

Next day Carly asked me to tell the boys they could no longer congregate at his place during mass.



Us kids continued hanging out at Carly's after school and on Saturday to play euchre and enjoy our Orange Crush with a candy bar or peanuts and in the evenings I watched adults play euchre in the smaller room off the bar room and take Carly's place when he needed to take care of business in the bar room. Carly had taught me well so I knew that when Harry Wobkenberg dealt I had to cut the cards and make sure that he put them back correctly or he would deal himself a couple of jacks from the bottom.

I tended to get good cards and one of the opponents would shout, "Get back in here, Carly. This is embarrassing!"

Many characters frequented Carly's. Herb Wenholt would have some refreshment at a bar serving whiskey and he would come to Carly's and fall asleep sitting on the long green bench over a double radiator under the large windows facing Main Street. Then he shook his large frame awake and started marching around the bar room. He cupped his left hand over his mouth, flapped it back and forth, pulled the imaginary cord and imitated the sound of the train whistle: "Wwaaaaaaaahh, wwaaaaaaaahh." He quickly and noisily shuffled his feet as the train picked up speed and he crossed the room in a widening circle. "Wwoooooo, wwoooooo," then, quietly, as the train moved into the distance: "whaaaa-eeee, whaaaa-eeee" As he got to the open doorway to the back room, he threw his right leg straight up to stick on the top of the door frame momentarily

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and then let it crash thunderously to the floor. We kids clapped and whistled. The adults paid no attention, as if you could see such a feat without going to the circus.

Bill Bockelman rented a room for a week two times a year and sat on the same green bench. Tall, thin and tan, with flint-like features, he wore pressed pin-striped long sleeved shirts even in summer and dark brown pressed suit pants, silk-like long stockings and shiny black shoes. He crossed his legs and blue smoke from his Black Hawk cigar circled his face. He almost never said anything, just smiled contentedly and kept his place except when Harry Woebkenberg wanted to spit tobacco juice to the spittoon five feet away and past Bill. Harry could hit the center of the spittoon but Bill didn't trust him and got up and stepped aside when Harry got ready to spit.

I whispered, "Carly, what does Bill do for a living?"

"Bill doesn't make a living. He's a hobo."

"He doesn't look like a hobo."

"He's a high class hobo."

So, if someone asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I smiled real big and said, "A high class hobo."

I later learned that he made his living traveling from one horse race track to another. Sounded pretty glamorous to me.



Carly had his serious side. If his almost deaf sister Bertha came downstairs and Johnny Seufert, the smart aleck, knew that Carly was outside or back in his living quarters, he would yell, "Bertha, get out fast. The buildings on fire!" Bertha paid no attention, just looked for Carly in the back room and, not seeing him, went back upstairs. All the kids laughed except me. One time Johnny did that but Carly, in the side hall, heard him and came through the saloon-type doors to the bar room and, face and burst veins redder than usual, said, "You boys have to stop making fun of Bertha. I don't need your business so all of you except Tommy get out and don't come back."

He did let them return but Johnny behaved himself.



At Christmas time the Jaycees hung decorations: a large bell, sleigh, Santa and the like on the telephone poles and lights crisscrossing all along Main Street. They attached the electric box controlling the lights within reach on a telephone pole across the street from Carly's and Carly had the job of flipping the switch before he went to bed. Main Street had no traffic light or stop sign. One dank evening a car saw him too late and skidded into him. They rushed him to the hospital in Huntingburg.

My dad, the town doctor, took me with him when he made rounds at the hospital the next day and left me next to Carly's bed. Carly was asleep so dad placed a hand on his shoulder and said, "Tommy is here to visit you."

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Carly opened his eyes, looked at me and smiled. He pulled me close and we cried. I managed to say, "You have to get better so we can play pinochle."

Dad came to get me and I pulled myself away, knowing we would never play pinochle again. He died the next day. He was 49 and I was 11.

An older brother took me to the visitation at the funeral home but I didn't look. I wanted to remember Carly sitting across the card table laughing when one of us made a good play. I carried a white cross with a garland of white roses in front of the casket as they brought it up the aisle and again as they took it to the cemetery behind church.

A nephew served as Carly's executor. He counted out eighty-five dollars in the cash register but did not find any money anywhere else. Carly donated his valuable farm to the Benedictine sisters of the convent that dominated the horizon east of town. The nephew found no ledger of rents collected or owed. I don't know what happened to the houses he owned in town but his relatives sold his place to a bar owner who closed his saloon and moved his liquor license to Carly's place.



I'm retired from teaching History, where I learned an interesting item along the way. A king of the Franks in the 700s named Charles Martel founded a dynasty called Carolingian, based on the Latin version of his first name: Carolus. Carly signed his name Chas. Olinger as short for Charles and a more proper version of his nickname, Carly. I still think of Carly often, especially at Christmas time, when that awful accident struck down my boyhood hero. He brought joy to my world; he is my Christmas carol, my Carolus.