



William "Tuppon" Braun



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Chapter 11

The Chicken-Coop House

Summer, 1962

Boys, my Mom's side of the family came from very little. Mom's parents worked hard as dairy farmers, brewery workers and cooks, and then spent their last years in a house that started life as a chicken coop. Despite a life of hard work and lack of material things, they were happy. Here's what happened.

When I was sick (or faking an illness to stay home from school), Mom would call Grandma Braun and ask her to watch me while Mom went to work. I loved visiting my Grandma and Tuppen at the ATO fraternity house on the School of Mines campus. Grandma was the cook and my grandfather helped out anyway he could.

Grandma Braun was a short, round, very warm and vivacious woman. She was always laughing; my favorite grandma. Everyone called her Janey, including all the ATO frat brothers. She was a great baker; one of my reasons for faking illness was to gorge on her freshly baked cinnamon rolls. She also loved practical jokes. One April Fool's Day, while I was faking an illness and in her care, she served the ATO brothers gingerbread topped with shaving cream substituted for whipped cream. I watched in horror as they ran from the dining hall out the back door to spit out the soap while she laughed and laughed. Then to my amazement, they told her what a great prank it was.

My grandfather William Braun, who for reasons unknown, I called Tuppen, was stern and quiet. He was distant and I never felt very close to him. Grandma made up for his silence. Tuppen was a big man, bald on top with a ring of gray hair on the sides. His hands were distorted from rheumatoid arthritis and yellowed with nicotine from a lifetime of smoking unfiltered cigarettes. His feet were so misshapen that he could only wear slippers. Now that I'm older, I think he may have seemed distant because he was in constant pain. He combated the pain with daily doses of aspirin, Coors beer, and Jim Beam whiskey. Despite the pain, he often sat on the back stairs of the ATO house peeling potatoes and throwing them into a large pot while Grandma cooked in the adjacent kitchen.

They slept on a double bed covered with handmade quilts in a small dark room in the basement of the ATO house. It had one small window adorned with lace curtains so high above my head that I could not see out. It was always cool in that room, even on the hottest summer days. On the days when I was actually sick, I would

watch TV lying on their bed in the darkness while they prepared meals for the ATO brothers upstairs. The TV had poor reception; only one channel came in clearly and like all channels then, it was black and white.

They hadn't always lived at the ATO house. Tuppen, his father, and brothers once owned The Golden Eagle Dairy, a dairy farm and cattle ranch on the north side of Golden. At some point in the 1950s, the dairy fell on hard times forcing the brothers to close it and sell the land. I think it coincided with the opening of a Safeway and the end of home milk delivery. They couldn't compete with a large supermarket.

Before the dairy closed, I often accompanied Mutz, my grandfather's brother, and my great uncle, on his route delivering milk door to door. I would run to a house, open the milk box that sat on the step, take out the empties and replace them with quarts of fresh white milk, with cream settling at the top of each bottle. When the dairy failed, Mutz opened a creamery on Ford Street, where he made ice cream and sold milk shakes and sundaes.

After the dairy closed, Grandma took the ATO cook job. After all, she knew how to feed large groups of hungry men; she had done that for years at the dairy.

One Thanksgiving Grandma made dinner at the ATO house for Mom's brother Carl, his wife and five kids, Mom, Dad, and me. It was rare for us to get together as an extended family. Mom and Carl did not get along so well. Mom thought Carl took advantage of Grandma and Tuppen, often borrowing money he never returned. He worked as a part-time truck driver and drank beer and whiskey full time — he was an alcoholic. Carl always struggled financially. At one point, Mom and Dad offered to take Donna Jean, Carl's only daughter, to help them out financially and to give Donna Jean a better start, but Carl wouldn't have it. At the end of that Thanksgiving dinner, Grandma told Carl to go to the storage room, take several cases of canned beans and corn and carry them to his car. I wondered if that was right.

Apparently it was not right, nor was it the first time the ATO brothers found food missing from their pantry. Shortly before Christmas, Grandma was fired for stealing food. Needing somewhere to live, they moved in with Grandma's sister-in-law, Viola Bacon.

Fortunately, the small house next to ours was for sale just then. Originally, it had been a chicken coop, but sometime in the 1940s, it was converted to a house. It was very small, containing only two rooms. One contained the kitchen, living and dining areas and the other was a bedroom. The tiny house did have large windows, lots

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of light, and a small lawn, which I soon added to the list of lawns I mowed. Somehow, Grandma and Tuppen came up with the money to buy the house although I suspect Mom and Dad actually bought it for them.

They were happy in the chicken-coop house, but I don't know how they survived financially; maybe Social Security made it possible, or was it more help from my parents? Grandma had a little garden behind the house where she grew carrots, potatoes, and other vegetables. Tuppen sat in a large strait back wooden chair, smoked cigarettes, and watched TV. Every day, he shuffled over to visit Mom after work, while she made our dinner. He would enjoy a beer and a shot while they talked. Then he would make the return shuffle in time for Grandma's dinner. Those dinners occasionally produced an unpleasant aroma that filled the little house. Unlike Grandma's baking, which smelled wonderful, some of her dinners contained varieties of meat I had no interest in eating. Tongue, tripe, brains, heart, liver, and kidney were often on her menu. Organ meat was cheap, but produced a serious stink while cooking.

A few years after they moved into the chicken-coop house, Tuppen fell ill. Dr. Goad suspected cancer and soon Tuppen was in the University of Colorado hospital in Denver, where Dr. Goad's suspicion was confirmed. He only lasted a few weeks and died in March 1962. Shortly after his death, Grandma was diagnosed with cancer, too. Mom and her cousin Florence, Viola's daughter, tried to care for Grandma at home, but it was in vain. She was gone by July of the same year. Grandma and Tuppen died only three months apart. They were married more than 40 years. Without Tuppen, life was too empty for Grandma.

Tuppen was 68, Grandma was 67, and I was 14 when they died. I had been so used to seeing them everyday, walking next door for fresh-baked treats, and helping out with their chores, that it was hard to believe they were gone.

Following Grandma's death, Mom, Dad, and I set about cleaning out the chicken-coop house. We put clothing, bedding, and household goods into cardboard boxes for delivery to Goodwill. We spent one bittersweet day looking through my grandparents' photos and mementos, including hand-painted plates commemorating events in Golden's past, like the reopening Coors Brewery following Prohibition; and milk bottles from the Golden Eagle Dairy. This was hard on Mom. At the end of that day, we closed up the boxes and headed to the local hotel, the Holland House, for dinner to try to make ourselves feel better.

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That night, a cold front blew through Golden, producing rain, hail, and unseasonably cold temperatures in the low 40s. I woke up to close my window and find a blanket — quite unusual for July.

The next day while I was mowing our back yard, I looked over at the empty little house. The living room window seemed very dark. Thinking it was just because the house was closed up and the shades drawn, I continued to mow. But for some reason, I couldn't keep my eyes off the chicken-coop house, something seemed wrong. Finally, I hopped over the fence that separated the two houses and walked to the window. I placed my hands on the glass to stare in, and as soon as I touched the window, it crashed to the ground. Smoke and heat poured from the broken window and flames rose up inside. My hands were burned, but I didn't realize that until later, I was so shocked by the fire.

I ran back to our house and called the fire department, then I called Mom at work. "Grandma's house is on fire!" I yelled. Mom, in shock, said she would be right there.

I ran back to the house, grabbed the garden hose, and opened the front door of the chicken-coop house. I tried to go in, but the smoke was so thick I couldn't see or breathe. I heard the fire siren blaring, and I realized there was nothing I could do but wait for the volunteer fire department to arrive. It seemed like I waited forever, but in reality they were there in less than five minutes. Dave Crawford, Golden's mayor and one of many Golden volunteer firemen, was the first on the scene. A few seconds later, the fire truck arrived with six others. Protected by coats, hats with face screens, and oxygen masks, they burst into the house and had the fire under control in short order. One of the men dragged a charred box of smoldering linens from the house.

By then Mom had arrived. While clearly upset, she was tough and kept her feelings in check with the firemen there. Dave explained that the smoldering box had been sitting on a floor heater and the heater must have come on automatically when the temperature dropped the night before. They stopped the fire before it destroyed the house, but the damage was extensive. By then, Dad had arrived from work in Denver and, with his arm around Mom, got the full story from Dave.

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With the action over, I finally noticed the pain in my hands. Blisters were forming where I had put my hands to the window. Seeing my condition, Dave retrieved the burn kit from the fire truck and he and Dad treated my burns. As they applied a salve and bandages, both told me that the house would have burned to the ground had I not noticed the fire and called in the alarm.

Later that evening, Mom and Dad were lying on their bed in grief and exhaustion. Over the past three months, Mom's parents both died and the chicken-coop house had burned.

I stood at the door to their room and listened as Dad told Mom, "Jerry, bad things happen in threes: we're done now. Things will get better."

Noticing me at the door, they told me to join them. I was too old for that and the double bed was too small for the three of us, but I climbed on just the same.