

THE
FUTURE WEARS
A STRANGE FACE

VERNAL LIND

THE FUTURE WEARS A STRANGE FACE

I don't know how it will be in years to come. There are monstrous changes taking place in the world; forces shaping a future whose face we do not know.

—John Steinbeck, *EAST OF EDEN*

VERNAL LIND

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PROLOGUE



February 2008

The blizzard raged on. Matt watched the blowing snow from the warmth of his living room. “Where is your faith?” he asked himself. Fear rather than faith permeated his thinking. He couldn’t forget his wife’s agonized look of pain after she fell.

This blizzard reminded him of a time and place more than sixty years ago, a storm that had marked a distinct turning point in his life. Then, he was twenty-one, just coming home from World War II. His future had stretched before him, filled with many uncertainties. The future and everything around him had looked unfamiliar, like the face of a person he did not know.

He stood by the window, looking out at the familiar street. But with two feet of snow and ferocious winds, everything looked ghostly and unfamiliar. Oddly shaped drifts had formed around the shrubs. The young maples on the boulevard were still heavy with the wet snow. The majestic oak trees seemed less affected by the storm. A glance at the street told him that the plows had not yet been out.

Matt felt some comfort and security as he looked at the familiar objects in his living room. He and his wife had lived here more than fifty years. The pictures of his wife and children and grandchildren gave him a sense of belonging. It seemed as if his beloved should call from the

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kitchen at any moment. And perhaps one of the children would stop with family news.

In the next moment, a wave of loneliness swept over him. This modest but spacious rambler seemed empty. His wife was in the hospital. She had come through surgery, but he knew many things could still go wrong. He had left her a few hours ago, thinking he would return in a short time. But the storm had made travel impossible—or at least not advisable. Fear plagued him. How could he face tomorrow without his wife of more than sixty years?

At times Matt loved solitude—away from people and that frantic pace so many lived. He wondered why people wanted so many things, such as property, fancy houses, lake homes, several cars, boats, snowmobiles, and all those other expensive playthings.

The telephone rang, interrupting his reverie.

“Your wife is resting comfortably,” the nurse at the hospital reassured him. She went on and urged him not to drive the three miles to the hospital. Matt kept wondering if his wife wouldn’t come out of this surgery a different person.

As soon as he hung up, his daughter called. “Dad, I’ll be home as soon as the roads are cleared. Don’t take any chances on the bad roads. I love you.”

Matt’s thoughts moved away from the present. Only moments ago, it seemed, he and his wife were in their twenties, having children, struggling to make ends meet, and buying a home. They had worked hard to achieve the American dream. The hopes and dreams that filled their lives then were so different from those of the present.

A lifetime had passed quickly. His earlier life had been filled with preparation. The military service. School. Love. Marriage. Career. A growing family. Friends. Extended family. Life raced by.

His teaching career had spanned forty years.

Matt looked at his hands. They bore the signs of age. He stood fifteen and had a full head of silver-gray hair. He was over eighty now. Was that possible? Where had all the years gone?

He glanced at the morning paper, a reminder of the harsh world of the present. The Iraq War. Threats of terrorism. Disease and starvation in parts of the world. Political fighting. Crime. Economic problems.

The future seemed to wear a face he did not know. His wife’s future was uncertain. And his own children and grandchildren—where were they going in their lives? And what about his extended family, his nieces

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and nephews and their families? There had been losses in his life—his parents and all members of that generation, his older brother and sisters, and friends and colleagues. Nothing at present seemed predictable. All was strange and uncertain.

The uncertainty took the form of the storm. The beautiful and ghostly forms of snow arrangements were mysterious and unfamiliar. The face of tomorrow was a strange one.

“I wish life were simpler,” he said aloud. “I wish I could go back to the days when we were young and healthy. I wish I could have all the confidence and certainty of my youth.”

The mind can play tricks. Matt continued to stare at the blowing snow. Suddenly, he was back home in Prairie Center. It was February 1946. Another blizzard was in progress. And in the next moment, the blizzard of the present and the blizzard of more than sixty years before seemed to blend into one. . .

CHAPTER 1



February 1946

Matt Andrews stepped off the train and left the depot. The new depot agent had not recognized him. Anyway, Matt wanted to be on his way home to Mom and Dad on the farm. But everything around him was a blanket of white. The snow swirled around him as he walked toward town.

This was Prairie Center. Home. 1946. World War II had ended six months ago. Matt had been discharged early. No one expected him for at least two weeks.

Daylight was fading, though it was only mid-afternoon. The Cities Service Station on one side of the street and the Farmers' Co-op on the opposite side looked deserted. He passed a number of houses. No lights had been turned on. People weren't about to waste electricity during daylight hours.

Matt walked toward Olson's General Store. Mr. and Mrs. Olson had known him all his life, and he had worked at the store and stayed with them during his high school years. This kindly couple knew everyone in both town and country. They knew many secrets, as well.

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The streets of Prairie Center were almost deserted. Some businesses had closed early because many roads were blocked. He saw someone hurrying down the other side of the street.

Matt set down his suitcase and duffel bag. His load had become heavier as he continued walking. He paused in front of Olson's General Store. He could see the outline of Mr. Olson. Some people never changed. The warmth of the light from the store invited Matt to go in, but he stood near the door, deep in thought.

The blowing snow hypnotized Matt. For a moment, he returned to Germany. He had been fortunate, for he had been spared some of the worst fighting and bloodshed. He thought of Randy, wounded in his side and leg. He had carried this friend over a mile to safety, despite the wound in his own leg. Matt had collapsed the moment he returned to his company. But he had saved his friend's life.

A sharp pain shot through his leg, reminding him of that battle and army life in general. Army life had been a lonely time for Matt. He hadn't fit in. He wasn't the mechanic that many men were. He did not participate in the heavy drinking and partying that many of his fellow soldiers did. As a result, he was often alone. Even the other farm boys didn't have much in common with him.

Matt had always loved books. He dreamed of being a high school teacher of history and English. He might even go further and become a college professor, but perhaps such advanced education would be beyond his reach. He thought of the many places in the States—and the world—where he would like to travel.

In contrast to a teacher's life, he thought of life on the farm. He loved the beauty of the open prairies and hills, but he had always looked for something more in life. There had to be more than just milking cows and plowing fields, cultivating crops and harvesting. Farm life drained a man physically, and in many other ways. He wanted to think and to do something that took him beyond the farm.

Once more, Randy's face haunted him. He thought of his friend's struggle for life. Saving his friend's life had made him a hero. He didn't think of himself this way; he knew he just happened to be at the right place at the right time.

A gust of wind and snow brought him back to the present. Memories of war faded, and the snow looked clean and white. He felt a resurgence of energy. He was almost home. The farm was only eight miles from town.

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The warm lights of Olson's General Store beckoned him. He picked up his suitcase and duffel bag and made his way to the door. As he entered, Mr. Olson looked up, startled.

Before Matt could say a word, the shopkeeper greeted him. "Hello there, it's quite a blizzard out there. I didn't think anyone would be out and about." He continued to work behind the counter. "I was ready to close early, but how can I help you today?"

"Hello, Mr. Olson. Remember me? Matt Andrews."

Matt could see that his friend had grown older. His wrinkles were deeper, and his hair had more white in it now than gray.

"Matt, you're home. That's great. I guess my eyes aren't so good anymore."

"Yes, I'm home." As Matt said the words, warmth seemed to spread through his whole being. He had looked forward to his return from the war for months—even years. "I just got off the train. Mom and Dad aren't expecting me. I was discharged early. It's a big surprise."

Mr. Olson moved as quickly as an old man could. "It's great to see you. I missed you after you joined the army. I haven't had such interesting talks since you left."

The old man's Scandinavian reserved mannerisms left him as he moved toward Matt. "So good to have you home! I feel sad for the men who didn't make it. That makes it doubly good to have you back."

"Yes, I'm home. I can hardly believe it!" Matt clasped the old man's hand. Then Olson held out his arms, and Matt found himself enfolded in the loving arms of his old friend. He tried to hold back the tears of joy, but they flowed freely.

"You were like a son to me. My wife and I have been praying for you. We've missed you."

The old store creaked as the wind blew more ferociously, but Matt felt only the warmth of this fatherly relationship. He loved his own father, but there had never been real warmth or closeness there. His father had always been cold and distant.

Olson stepped away. "Hey, Matt, I think you've grown, or else I'm getting shorter."

"No. I think I grew an inch or two. I always wanted to be as tall as Dad and my brother, but I never quite made it. I'm barely five-ten, even now, but they're over six feet."

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“Don’t shortchange yourself. You have an intelligence and a gentleness that few young men have. I might even say that you have a spiritual quality about you.”

“Thank you. I’m flattered.”

“I bet you want to get home to your folks.” Olson moved over to his new rotary phone. “We’ve got these new phones now, but you people in the country still have the old crank phones mounted on the wall.”

“I’d like to call them.”

“Some phone lines are down because of the storm. I hope you can get through.” Olson motioned for Matt to move with him behind the counter.

Matt dialed the operator. “Hello, Central. 113F30, please.” In his mind, he anticipated his mother’s surprise when she heard his voice.

The noise on the phone line crackled, then the operator was heard. “I’ll try, but I think that line is down.”

Matt heard more static and noise. The call didn’t go through. “I’m afraid that line has been down for several days. Those phone lines are in need of repair,” the operator said.

Disappointed, Matt set down the receiver. “I guess I’m out of luck.”

“That’s too bad. Even the rubbernecks listening in on the line can’t spread the news. We still have party lines here in town.”

Matt smiled despite his disappointment. “Some things don’t change. People still listen in to the phone conversations of others.”

“Your folks were in here the other day. I know everything’s fine with them.”

Matt felt a heavy tiredness coming over him. “It’s been so long. I haven’t been home since I was on leave in the fall of ’forty-four. Seems like an eternity.”

“Hey, we’ll get you home. But right now, the roads may be blocked, as well.”

“I didn’t notice any snowplows out and about.”

“You can always stay here. Sleep in your old bed.”

“Thank you, but I really would like to get home to my family.”

“I’ll try to take you home, but I know the missus would like to see you, too. Oh, but I see you aren’t dressed for a Minnesota blizzard. You came from a warmer climate, didn’t you?”

Matt laughed. “Oh, you’re trying to make a sale, are you?”

In the next few minutes, Matt checked out the boots and some heavier clothing in the store. When he brought the items to the counter

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to make the purchase, Mr. Olson said, "You just take these trousers as a coming-home present, and I'll give you the boots at cost."

Matt objected, but then accepted the gift.

"I thought I heard a familiar voice." Mrs. Olson, short and round and grandmotherly, appeared in the door. Soon Matt had this woman in his arms, giving her a kiss. Matt did indeed feel the warmth of home.

"Why don't you stay here for the night?" invited Mrs. Olson.

"Can't you see, Ma, the boy wants to get home? He hasn't seen his folks in over two years. I'll see about taking him home when we close up shop."

"Ya, I know he wants to get home." She smiled. "But I don't know if that's possible in this weather. I heard that all the side roads are blocked, and the main roads aren't very good, either."

"Oh, but I can walk. Hitchhike. Someone will come along." Somehow the thought of walking down the familiar roads appealed to him, even in the storm. How wonderful to be home! In a moment, though, Matt realized that even a short part of the eight miles would be too far to walk in a blizzard.

The next hour passed quickly as Matt caught up on Prairie Center news. Darkness arrived early.

"Matt," said Olson, "I can see how much you want to get home. I'll get out the chains and see about taking you there."

Mrs. Olson objected again. "Pa, I don't like the idea of you going out on those roads."

As Mr. Olson started to reply, a sturdy farmer of German background entered the store. Matt recognized Mr. Schmidt, who lived west of town.

In his mind, Matt thought of the way the rest of the world would look at this area that he thought of as home. Prairie Center was in many ways typical of many rural communities in 1946. People of Swedish ancestry had settled in town and immediately to the west and south. East of town and farther north, those of Norwegian background had settled. Farther to the west was a German community. Each sector or town had at least one church, and national origins and traditions were still strong.

He remembered Mr. Schmidt as being a man of few words. Schmidt handed Mr. Olson the list of necessities that his wife had compiled. The two men exchanged only a few words.

From his days spent working in the store, Matt remembered Schmidt's habit of always coming in right before closing. After all, Schmidt had sons who could do the family chores.

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“Say, Schmidt,” said Mr. Olson, “I bet you’re traveling west on the county road, aren’t you?”

Schmidt mumbled his reply.

“How about giving this young man a ride home? He’s about a mile from the Oakwood School.”

“Sure thing,” Schmidt replied. “Neighbors are here to help. But I don’t think the township road is passable.”

“I’ll walk that last mile,” Matt suggested. “It’ll do me good. I was on the train for hours earlier today.”

“I’ll take you as far as I can.”

Mrs. Olson objected. “I don’t think it’s good for you to be out walking so far in this blizzard. You’d better be careful.”

“There are neighbors around if it gets too bad.”

“Whatever you do, I don’t want you to leave on an empty stomach.” Mrs. Olson hurried upstairs, returning with a glass of milk and a bowl of steaming beef stew. She motioned for Matt to sit at the table in the back of the store. “This stew should help put some meat on your bones. You’re far too thin.”

Mr. Olson found the grocery items and packed them in two sturdy boxes. “Why don’t you offer Mr. Schmidt some food, as well?”

“I’m sorry. That was thoughtless of me.”

“No thanks,” said Schmidt, “the wife will have supper waiting when I get home.”

Matt eagerly ate the beef stew, enjoying every morsel. This was like old times, but he couldn’t wait to get home.

As he got up to leave, Mrs. Olson began to fuss. “Remember, it’s getting real cold. I bet you don’t even have long underwear on.”

Matt blushed. Mrs. Olson waddled over to the clothing section of the shop and came back with heavy mittens and a pair of long underwear. “Here, these are your size.”

Matt went into the back room and changed. He felt a heavy weariness come over him. Right now, all he wanted was to see Mom and Dad and then feel the warmth of his own bed.

A few minutes later, Matt found himself in Schmidt’s ’37 Ford pickup. As they left town and turned west, Matt observed the prairie fields that would be rich and productive in summer. They passed farmland filled with groves of trees. He felt as if he were living a dream—the winds and snow produced a ghostly sense of unreality. The wind and snow increased, but Schmidt was able to keep on driving because of his powerful pickup.

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Schmidt, speaking very few words, concentrated on driving. The seven miles seemed much farther than that. Schmidt turned off the county road and shifted into low gear on the township road that would take Matt close to his home. Schmidt had driven only a short distance before he confronted adrift almost as high as the pickup.

“I can’t make it through any farther. But don’t you take any chances. This blizzard could be a killer.”

Matt grabbed his duffel bag. It was a good thing he had left his suitcase back at the store with the Olsons. “I know the way. It’s less than a mile, and there are neighbors where I can stop if walking gets too difficult.”

Though gruff in nature, Schmidt showed tender concern in the words that followed. “You know the danger. You can easily get lost. I had an uncle who once froze to death. Stay close to the road. If you get too cold and tired, find a farm and knock on the door.”

“Thanks!” Matt shouted as he got out of the pickup and began to face the storm. He walked to the side of the drift until he found some hard-packed snow. He managed to get around that obstacle.

As he kept moving forward, the snow against his face felt prickly and piercingly cold. He turned around and began to walk backward. In the dark shadows, he saw the Oakwood School, the school of his childhood.

For a moment as he looked at the white frame schoolhouse, he pictured himself as an eleven-year-old boy, seated at a desk. He loved books, and he had always been a dreamer. As he looked east toward the prairies, he thought of the vast distance he could normally see. He had dreamed of leaving town, traveling far away and doing important things.

He trudged over to the schoolhouse and stood before the white frame one-room building. The door was locked, but he could still look through the windows. The wet sleet cut across his face. He moved closer to the building that protected him from the violence of the storm. In the shadows, he saw the blackboard, the maps hanging on the wall, and the shelves of books.

Those shelves of books reminded him of the children’s books he had once read. Toby Tyler had made him think about running away to join a circus. And Huckleberry Finn had made him want to get on a raft and travel down a river. Tom Sawyer encouraged him to explore caves. He recalled other dreams and fantasies of his childhood.

In the next moment, he became a child again. It was autumn. He was sitting at a small desk, dreaming of the future when he would travel far and do great things.

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He pictured the land around him. To the east were the prairies, with straw stacks that dotted the landscape after threshing. Cornfields had not yet been harvested. Large pumpkins, as well as squash, could be found along the edges of the field.

His mind carried him on down the winding road and through the woods filled with healthy oak trees and basswood and ash trees. Next, he saw the long driveway to his home and the barn with its high roof and hayloft, where he had played as a child. He remembered the suffocating dust and heat present in the granary during the summertime. The wheel of the windmill would move fast in the wind. And finally—there was the stately house, one of those white farm homes with two full stories and an attic.

There was something comfortable and familiar about this place he called home. And yet, at the same time, he felt a restlessness and a desire to move beyond this place.

Matt felt a chill. A new blast of cold wind and sleet brought him back to the present. Yes, he must move on. Within a half hour, he would be home. He walked back to the road and struggled through and around snowdrifts. He looked down a long driveway to the Peterson place. He felt safe because their house and barn were close by, and he would be warm and safe if he needed to seek shelter. He shivered and felt his feet tingling with the cold, but he was determined to go on.

For several minutes, the snow stopped and the wind died down. He realized he was being protected by the trees in a heavily wooded area. With a foot of snow on the road, however, a car would not have been able to get through.

Matt thought of the life of a farmer. It was a good life in many respects. Hard work and long hours. Milking cows twice a day. Feeding cattle. Cleaning the barn, with its smells of cattle. Manure to be hauled. Springtime work of plowing and seeding. Cultivating. Making hay. Stacking it just right. Harvesting the grain and then shucking and threshing.

Farm work, hard and endless, was a good way of life. But there had to be more to life than just this. There had to be beauty and love and excitement in new places.

Matt looked at the trees and shadows. No area of the world could be more beautiful. A heavy weariness came over him as he thought of the difficult life on the farm. But at the same time, the beauty around the area excited him.

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The familiar old oak tree reminded Matt of where he was. "I'm home!" he shouted. "This is our land!" He thought of the way he used to cut through the pasture and woods on the way home from school. Better not try that tonight, he thought. Even this close to home, he could get lost in the storm.

Matt had lost track of time and didn't realize how cold he had become. He arrived at the two driveways. If he turned right, he would go to his sister's home. Irene, his oldest sister, had been more like a second mother to him than a sister. Her own girls would soon be teenagers. And in a few days, it would be his nephew Billy's birthday.

Instead, he turned left. He walked faster because he was almost there. Mom and Dad would not be expecting him. He couldn't wait to see the surprise on their faces when he opened the door.

As he approached the house, he saw that the barn was dark. Dad always did the milking early. The chores were already done for the night.

The lights of the house glistened in the blowing snow and gave him a feeling of inexpressible warmth and joy. The light in the kitchen window told him that Mom and Dad were no doubt having their last cups of coffee of the day. Dad would soon turn on the radio to listen to his favorite program.

Matt stood still, overwhelmed at the thought of being home. Suddenly, Rex, the collie, appeared, barking sharply at first.

"Rex!" Matt called. "Don't you remember me?"

He set down his duffel bag. The collie sniffed and then recognized his old playmate, jumping up to greet him with joyful abandon.

At last, Matt Andrews was home.

