

A Stain on Utopia

Chapter 1

Utopia Bound

The air in the landing pattern over Boston had more ups and downs than a rutty and rocky off-road trail for all-terrain vehicles, so I stepped onto solid concrete with a feeling of relief as I walked away from Delta Airlines flight 284 at Logan International Airport on a Saturday afternoon in mid-November. The actual touch down on the runway was so violent that it felt more like a crash than a landing, but I had learned as a flyer in the Navy that the definition of a good landing is “any landing that you can walk away from,” so I had to mark this one in the positive column.

A couple of steps behind me, my best friend Alan Jeffrey was muttering something about this having been “one hell of a ride” as we reached the stability of the terminal. After collecting our luggage at the carousel, we hustled to the closest car rental desk to obtain a means of transportation to a small Massachusetts town called Hopedale, where we were going to join the search for a prominent Minnesota professor who had vanished while researching the history of a progressive nineteenth-century minister. This was business—not a pleasure trip taken by two long-time buddies.

At the rental car counter, I asked the shaggy-haired young man with the silver stud in the left side of his nose if he could direct us to Hopedale.

“Never heard of Hopedale,” he said. “Is it on the Mass Pike?”

“Never heard of the Mass Pike,” I said. “Is it some kind of fish?”

Mr. Nose Stud stared at me as if I were a green-skinned man from a different planet. “The Mass Pike is the biggest and most famous highway in the country,” he said. “It goes all the way from Boston to the west coast, I think, where it actually ends up at an ocean in Montana or someplace like that.”

This bit of twisted geography did not shock me because I’d been told that many Bostonians believe that American civilization ends at their city’s western border. Truncated as it was, at least this guy’s version of the country stretched as far as the Rocky Mountains. Still, I felt a need to make him aware of seventy-one thousand square miles of land known as the state of Washington that lay between Montana and the breaking waves of the Pacific Ocean.

“Montana’s not quite on the west coast,” I said. “You’re about one state short.”

“And I’ve always thought that Route 66 is the most famous highway in the country,” Al said.

Mr. Nose Stud shook his shaggy head. “Anyways, it’s the big Interstate highway that goes west out of the airport,” he said. “Most of the major towns are on it.”

“I don’t think Hopedale is a major town,” I said. “Does the car we’re renting have GPS?”

“Course it does,” he said. “Everything you need comes with all of our vehicles.”

“Then we’ll get on your big, famous Mass Pike, which goes all the way to the Pacific Ocean in Montana, and we’ll find a way to get to Hopedale,” I said. “Just give me the keys and the paperwork.”

Our unexpected journey to Hopedale was launched, like so many of our travels, by a phone call to my desk at the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch*, where I have worked as a reporter for nigh onto twenty years. I answered, “*Daily Dispatch*, Warren Mitchell,” as I always do, even though I’m better known as “Mitch.”

“Mr. Mitchell, this is Rosemary Butz,” said the caller. “You’ve worked with my husband on a couple of stories for your paper.”

Indeed, I had worked on a couple of stories with Dr. Pinchas M. Butz, PhD, in his capacity as a history professor at the University of Minnesota. He was an internationally-known scholar, a prominent figure on the campus and a frequent go-to source for reporters in need of historical background for their stories. He also had written occasional historical perspective op-ed pieces for the Sunday opinion sections of our paper and for that of our competitor in Minneapolis.

“What can I do for you, Mrs. Butz?” I said.

“You can call me Rosie,” she said. “And I’m calling to tell you that Pinky—Doctor Butz—is missing.” What a couple: Rosie Butz and Pinky Butz. I silently thanked the gods of journalism that I was working in a form of printed media and did not have to recite those names verbally for a television or radio audience.

“Missing where?” I asked. Dumb question: If she knew where, he wouldn’t be missing, would he?

“In Massachusetts,” Rosie said. “He was working in a little town called Hopedale, and he was calling or texting me two or three times a day. Then for two whole days I didn’t get any kind of message from him, and he didn’t return my calls, so early yesterday morning I called the desk at the motel where he’s staying and asked them to check his room. They said he wasn’t in his room, but that his personal belongings were there, and he hadn’t checked out.”

“Have you reported this to the Hopedale police?” I asked.

“I have, and today they told me that when they questioned some people that he’d been working with they said they hadn’t seen him since Saturday, which was the last day I heard from him.” This conversation was taking place on We afternoon.

“What is Dr. Butz doing in, uh, Hopedale, Massachusetts?”

“He’s researching the life of a religious leader named Adin Ballou, who founded Hopedale as a Utopian community back sometime in the middle eighteen-hundreds. He’s been planning to do a research paper and a book about Ballou, along with some similar charismatic ministers of the time.”

The fact that a person of Dr. Pinchas Butz’s status was missing from a small town in New England certainly warranted a story in the *Daily Dispatch*, so I quizzed Rosie on the details. After he’d been in Hopedale for four days, Pinchas Butz had told Rosie that he was planning to wrap up his research and return to his home in St. Paul no later than the end of the current week. He had been in fine spirits and good health, and he seemed to have been enjoying his visit to the tiny once-upon-a-time Utopia. Then silence for what was now the third day.

I thanked Rosie and asked her to call me at once if she heard anything from either Hopedale authorities or her husband. She said she would do that, gave me her phone number for reference and ended the call. I went to the city desk and told City Editor Don O’Rourke about our conversation. He told me to write the story, omitting the rubicund nicknames of the couple,

and find out if we had a photo of Professor Butz on file. We did, in fact, have several, most of them taken by Alan Jeffrey, who was the staff's most proficient photographer in addition to having been my best friend since we met as freshmen at the University of Minnesota almost thirty years ago. Al has joined me so frequently on *Daily Dispatch* assignments that Don has labeled us "the Siamese twins."

Don says that Al and I are joined at the funny bone, which in our case is the skull. I've been trying to convince Don that he should use the current politically correct term, which is "conjoined twins," but he says he will not change what he calls us until he gets a written complaint from the king of Siam. This is highly unlikely, since Siam now calls itself Thailand and is no longer a monarchy.

My story about Dr. Pinchas Butz's disappearance appeared on the front page of the local section on Wednesday morning. The *Minneapolis Morning Sun* carried a similar story, with almost identical quotes from Rosie Butz. Apparently, she'd felt the need for a two-pronged publicity campaign that didn't play favorites. The major difference in the two stories was an editor's note at the end of the *Morning Star* report, telling readers that the writer would be traveling to Massachusetts for on-scene coverage of the search for this prominent Minnesota history scholar.

Don O'Rourke saw this as a challenge. He summoned both Al and me to his desk and told us to pack our bags for "a couple of days in Utopia." Who could ask for anything better than that? We'd already been booked on an early Thursday flight to Boston, from where we would find our way to the once Utopian land of Hopedale.

"A couple of days?" said my wife, Martha Todd, after I told her of my upcoming journey when I arrived home at our rented duplex on Lincoln Avenue that evening. "What makes Don think it will only be a couple of days?"

"I guess it's because he's ever the optimist," I said. This was meant as a joke; Don is noted for expecting (and we sometimes think hoping for) the worst possible outcome in every hard news story.

Martha did not laugh. "Better pack enough undies and socks for at least a week," she said. "How often have you seen a missing person found in a couple of days?"

I couldn't imagine the *Daily Dispatch* footing the motel and restaurant bills for Al and me for more than a couple of days, but because Martha is usually right, I decided to take her advice and pack for a longer term. My faith in Martha's wisdom eventually saved me a trip to the laundromat.