

# An Invitation

Tugs Button darted past Zip's Hardware, stumbled over the lunch specials sign at Al and Irene's Luncheonette, and pushed through the door of Ward's Ben Franklin as if the devil himself were chasing her. She ducked behind Aggie Millhouse and Aggie's mother, hissing, "Save me from the Rowdies!" as G.O. Lindholm burst in, looking around wildly.

Tugs sidled up close to Aggie, trying to melt into her back, and just as G.O. spotted her, Lester Ward, the oldest Ward boy, pointed at him from behind the register and hollered, "Out, Lindholm! Take your

thieving fingers and get outa my father's store!"

"And stay out!" echoed his younger brother Burton, who was stocking the sundries shelves.

"You're such a Button," G.O. spat as he banged out the door.

"Button," mimicked Burton.

"G.O.'s not a Rowdy," said Aggie, turning to Tugs.

"But he wants to be, and wanting to be a hoodlum is almost the same thing as being a hoodlum, or worse, now that I think about it because what did the Rowdies ever do except lump around looking tough, whereas G.O. . . ." said Tugs. "You saved my hinder for sure."

Mrs. Millhouse gasped at Tugs's crass language, but Tugs was loquacious in her relief. "I popped the tire on his bike, but I didn't mean to. I mean, I was putting nails in the street just to stop, well, never mind. I see you got lots of fun things in your

basket, Aggie. Looks like a party. Looks like your birthday. Twelve, huh? I turned twelve weeks ago. I would have invited you to my party, only it's an even year, and I only have parties on my odd birthdays, though they aren't really odd—ha, ha, ha! Guess you're going to have fun, huh?

“Look,” she said, picking up a whistle out of Aggie's mother's basket. “Mrs. Millhouse, you are one mighty good mother to let your daughter have something as loud as whistles at her party.”

Mrs. Millhouse stared dumbfounded as Tugs kept rambling, but Aggie interrupted.

“I've never stood quite this close to you before, Tugs. We are exactly the same height. And you came running in that door awfully fast. You gave me an idea.”

That stopped Tugs midsentence. Aggie Millhouse, of the Millhouse Bank and Trust family, got an idea from her, Tugs Button, of the . . . just Button family? She wiped her nose on the inside of her arm, then across

the front of her overalls. She admired Aggie in her pressed dress and shiny shoes.

“You should be a dancer, Aggie, with your long legs and your long hair.”

“I’d rather play basketball,” said Aggie. “But listen to my idea. We should be partners for the three-legged race.”

The Independence Day three-legged races were the stuff of legend in Goodhue. Children remembered the winning teams the way they remembered who won every Iowa Hawkeye football game. Tugs had been paired with her cousin Ned for the past hundred years, and she was resigned to the same fate this year.

“What about Felicity?” Tugs asked. “You always race with Felicity.”

“She’s going to Cedar Rapids for the auto races. Besides, we never win. Do you have a partner?”

Aggie’s question took the fuel right out of Tugs’s motor. It was assumed that she would run with Ned, but the words had

never been spoken. Ned and Tugs had the same birthday one year apart, which made them kind of like twins, except that they had different parents and were born in different years. Tugs was an only child, so they'd grown up playing together by default. *Family first* was the Button credo.

They made an awkward pair, Ned and Tugs, he short, she tall, and being from nearly the same gene pool, neither one was blessed with coordination. She'd try to take shorter strides, he'd try to take longer strides, and they usually ended up in a lump about five feet from the start line. Buttons were not, as a rule, graceful.

Aggie Millhouse, with her straight teeth and wide circle of friends, would race with her, Tugs Button? Still, Ned was her cousin.

"Ned," she said.

"Do you have to?"

"Well, I . . . he's my cousin and you're . . . I mean, me and you, we never . . . and besides, it's next week."

“Yes, well,” interrupted Mrs. Millhouse.  
“That’s that, then. Come along, Aggie.”

“Hmm,” said Aggie, and pressed on.  
“What are you doing tomorrow afternoon?”

Tugs scratched her nose. “Probably just studying my belly button, as Granddaddy Ike says. He’s really my *great* granddaddy, because he’s the granddaddy of my own dad, but everyone calls him Granddaddy Ike.”

Mrs. Millhouse raised her eyebrows at this outburst and put her arm around Aggie, leading her toward the door.

“You can do that another day,” said Aggie.  
“Come to my birthday party. Two o’clock. Do you know where I live?”

The invitation rendered both Tugs and Mrs. Millhouse speechless, and before either could respond, Aggie and her mother were out of the store, leaving Tugs looking after them. Absently, she picked up a statuette of the real Ben Franklin and turned it over in her hands.

“Are you buying?” said Lester. This startled Tugs so that she dropped Ben, and as she stooped to pick up his separated head and body, Lester barked, “You break it, you buy it!” Tugs hastily deposited both pieces on the shelf and ducked out the door.

“Rapsallion!” Lester hollered after her.

# Pie~Worthy

There was pie on the table when Tugs returned. Pie in the Button family meant trouble.

When Uncle Norton sliced off his left foot with the scythe while trying to mow hay for the horses after having gotten into the cups, the Buttons baked pie-plant pies and gathered at Uncle Norton and Uncle Elmer's farm to carry on about the sorry state of farm utensils and the difficulty of working the land. Now Uncle Norton spent his days sitting on the porch spitting sunflower shells over the rail while Uncle Elmer wrestled the farm by himself.

When a card-playing con man suckered Uncle Elmer out of his seed money and he had to plant with last year's leftovers, which he did too hastily, and a storm washed all those seeds away, the Buttons baked up oat-meal pies and cursed the queen of spades, Mother Nature, and even Mother Goose for good measure.

There were apple pies for fall funerals and custard pies for the measles, mumps, and broken bones. Fiona Button, like Aunt Mina and Tugs's own mother, technically only a Button by marriage, had once traveled all the way to Georgia and returned with a suitcase full of pecans begging to be baked into flaky crusts. It was nearly a month before anything pie-worthy happened, and when it did—marital trouble, Fiona and Albert—the pecans were passed around, and the family was together eating pecan pie for enough evenings in a row that Fiona and Albert called a truce and mended their differences.

Now not only was there pie on the table, but Aunt Mina was there with a fork in her hand and eight-year-old Gladdy by her side.

“Tugs Button. Where have you been? Your mother’s been worried sick. Gladdy and I brought pie, and now I’ve got a mind to just take your piece straight on over to Uncle Wilson and let him eat it instead.”

“But Aggie Millhouse asked . . . Pie?” said Tugs. “Did someone die? Where’s Dad? Is Granddaddy Ike all right?”

Mother Button interrupted. “I’m not worried sick, Mina. I just said . . .” But Aunt Mina wasn’t finished.

“Not only are you late, off getting up to who knows what kind of mischief, but my Ned is home moping because he’s got no one to toss a ball with. And that, Tugs Esther Button, is your fault. With you off doing heaven knows what this morning, Ned tried to take up with Ralph Stump. And you know as well as I do that I won’t let Ned cavort with a Stump. Next thing you know

he'll be smoking cigarettes behind Zip's with the Rowdies. I knew I should have sent him to help Elmer on the farm this summer."

"Pie?" repeated Tugs.

"Mina dear, just because Mr. Stump . . ." tried Mother Button, but she was cut off again by Aunt Mina, who set down her fork and turned to face Tugs.

"Tugs. You're twelve. I'm going to tell it to you plain. This is butter-up pie. Mostly brown sugar, cream, and eggs, along with a dash of something from Uncle Wilson's cupboard. I'm sweetening your mama because your family has got to take Granny into your house. She's insulted Aunt Fiona for the last time, says Uncle Albert. She has to go. I've got Uncle Wilson and Ned and my little Gladdy here to manage, and with Granddaddy Ike living next door, well . . ."

Tugs looked at Mother Button, who shrugged and held out a fork.

"May as well fortify. We're driving over to Swisher soon as you eat your lunch."

Tugs looked around the compact quarters of the Button house. There was one deep room, with a sitting area at the front, kitchen at the back, and dining table between the two. A pair of bedrooms opened off one side, with a bathroom between them.

“Where are we going to put her?”

Aunt Mina jumped in before Mother Button had a chance to answer. “There will be time enough to worry about that once she’s here. Now, eat up, child. We’re waiting on you.” She grabbed Gladdy’s empty plate and slid a piece of pie onto it for Tugs. “Oh, and there was a boy here looking for you. M.G.? T.L.?”

“It was G.O. Lindholm,” said Gladdy primly, folding her arms across her chest. “He said you’d know what it was about.”

# Stranger in a Panama Hat

Granny fell asleep the moment the automobile started moving, like a baby rocked in a cradle. "How'm I supposed to learn to drive one of these danged things if I can't stay awa . . ." she began as they put her in the backseat with Gladdy and set off.

They passed out of Swisher into the country. Tugs and Ned rode in the open air of the rumble seat, but Tugs didn't notice the hawk swooping overhead or the fox darting up to the edge of the road then back between the low stalks of early corn. What if Lester Ward made her pay for the statue she'd broken? What if Aggie found out and didn't want her to come to her party after all?

Ned interrupted her thoughts. “Fourth of July next week,” he said.

“Huh?”

“IndePENdence Day,” he said a little louder, and Tugs’s stomach fell further. How could she tell him she wanted to run the three-legged with Aggie?

“We aren’t going to win, are we?” Ned continued.

“Nope.”

“That’s OK. I just like to race. I can’t catch a football, but I still like to play.”

“Yup.”

Tugs played over her encounter with Aggie in her head. What if there was a chance of winning? What if she did run with Aggie? She felt a wave of guilt for even thinking it. Buttons considered victory, even for one’s affiliated party in national politics, showing off.

*Don’t go getting a swell head*, was all her father had said when Tugs won the first round of the third-grade spelling bee. She’d

been sure to confuse a letter here or there after that.

Ned and Tugs watched a cow trying to break out of its fence and a mare drinking from the cow pond. They passed a man in a Panama hat, walking on the side of the road. He waved, but Aunt Mina was driving fast and rounded a curve before Tugs and Ned could wave back.

“Where’s Granny going to sleep?” Ned asked.

“Davenport.”

“Where are you going to sit?”

“Kitchen, I guess.”

“Closer to the cookie jar, anyhow,” said Ned.

“Mm-hmm.”

Just then the car sputtered. They slowed, then lurched and rumbled to the side of the road and stopped. Tugs and Ned peered in the back window. Aunt Mina was climbing out of the car. Granny had popped awake and was shaking her finger at Gladdy.

Tugs and Ned hopped out and walked around to Aunt Mina and Mother Button, who were pondering the hood. Granny banged on the door.

“Gladdy, keep Granny in the car!” Aunt Mina hollered, but Granny batted Gladdy’s hand away and appealed to Ned and Tugs through the open window.

“Help the old lady out of this rattletrap!”

Tugs and Ned opened the door and each grabbed one of Granny’s skinny arms and helped her climb down. Gladdy passed Granny’s cane to Ned, then climbed out herself.

“You’re going to be in trouble!” Gladdy taunted, but they ignored her. Gladdy was always trying to get them in trouble.

“Look!” Gladdy said. “Someone’s coming.”

“What?” asked Aunt Mina sharply. “Where?”

“She’s right. A man,” said Tugs. “Walking this way.”

“Everyone back in the car,” commanded

Aunt Mina. "It's probably a hobo or maybe a gangster, and here we are, women alone in the middle of nowhere."

"Hey!" protested Ned. "I'm not a woman."

"Pshaw," spat Granny. "There's six of us and just one of him. He looks like a scrawny fellow, anyhow. We can take him."

"Is that a Panama? Hoboes don't wear straw hats," said Mother Button as the man got closer. She straightened her own hat and smoothed her skirt. "Try to look respectable, everyone. Maybe he knows something about cars."

"I'll find out," said Ned. He ran to meet the man as he approached.

"Ned!" Aunt Mina shouted after him. "You come back here this instant!" But Ned kept running.

"I stayed right here, Mother, no matter how curious I am," said Gladdy.

"I'll go with Ned," said Tugs, and she dashed off before anyone could protest.

The man was looking down at Ned and talking intently as Tugs approached. He did not look like a hobo or a murderer. He was younger than the uncles, wearing a dapper suit, tie loosed at the neck, and carrying a leather satchel.

“Who are you and what are you doing out here?” Tugs demanded.

The man laughed.

“He’s our newspaperman,” said Ned. “He got off the train at the wrong station and no one was there to pick him up and he’s been walking all day. He came all the way from Chicago.”

“We don’t have a newspaper anymore,” said Tugs.

The man chuckled. “You are an observant one, aren’t you?” he said. “You’re right, of course, but you’re going to have a newspaper.” He tipped his hat. “Harvey Moore, bringing progress to Iowa one town at a time. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Goodhue men don’t wear fancy hats,

except for Mr. Pepper, who is a snappy dresser, and Mayor Corbett.”

“That so?” Mr. Moore laughed.

“My aunt thinks you’re going to murder us,” said Tugs.

“So young Ned tells me. With all this dust and grime, I may look a bit shady today, but I assure you, the only murdering I’ll be doing is of lunch, soon as I can find it. I haven’t had anything to eat since the train left the Windy City.”

“We’ve got sandwiches,” said Ned. “And pie.”

“Now, that’s the way to welcome a newcomer, sport,” said Harvey, plopping his hat on Ned’s head and walking toward the car. Tugs stood back and watched them go. He didn’t look like a newspaperman, but then she’d never known a newspaperman in person.

The women were huddled around the front of the car, where Aunt Mina was heaving open the hood.

Harvey flashed his winning smile and introduced himself all around.

“Your lucky day, ladies. I worked as a mechanic back when. What seems to be the problem?” he asked.

“It just made a chortling sound, then sputtered to a stop,” said Aunt Mina.

“It was more like a *whirrawhoop*,” said Mother Button.

“*Clank* was all I heard,” said Granny.

Gladdy just stood there and giggled. She combed her fingers through her hair and giggled some more.

“Pull yourself together, Gladdy, and get the nice man a sandwich,” admonished Aunt Mina, smoothing her own hair and straightening her collar. Gladdy reached through the window to the basket on the backseat, then bumped her head backing out, which threw her into another fit of giggles.

Tugs stood off to the side. She held her fingers out in a square, like a camera lens.

She watched her mother and Aunt Mina watch Harvey peer under the hood. She watched Ned trying to work his way in front of Granny and Granny nudging him out of the way with her cane. She watched Gladdy hover around the edge, clutching two sandwiches. Everyone was bending, straightening, standing, sitting.

“When he’s done with the heart of the beast, an old lady could use a hand getting into the shade of the automobile,” Granny said.

Tugs wondered what Aggie Millhouse would do if she were here. For a mechanic, Mr. Moore didn’t seem to be fixing anything very quickly. Aggie wouldn’t giggle, like Gladdy, in the face of that broad smile and smooth talk; that was certain.

Tugs climbed into the front seat and felt around underneath, where she’d seen her father stash the manual. She paged through until she found what she was looking for, then stowed it back where she’d found it. She

walked around to the hood, where everyone was gathered.

“I know what’s the matter,” she said.

“Shush, child,” said Aunt Mina. “Can’t you see Mr. Moore is trying to repair our automobile?”

“But I . . .” said Tugs.

“Hush!” echoed Granny.

“No, no,” Harvey said, straightening and looking directly at Tugs. “Our little lady is dressed like a mechanic in those overalls; we’d better listen to her.” He laughed.

Tugs looked down at her pants. “Mechanics wear coveralls,” she muttered.

“What’s that?” snapped Aunt Mina.

Tugs had seen her father work on the car a hundred times. He’d chattered while he worked, telling her everything he knew about the engine and how cars worked.

“We’re out of gas,” she said simply.

Harvey Moore smiled even more broadly and snatched his Panama off Ned’s head, settling it back on his own.

“Truth be told, I was always better with a football than a wrench,” he said. “Played for Purdue, back in . . . But you’re not interested in . . .”

“Yes, we are!” said Ned. “Did you ever play Iowa?”

“Ned,” said Aunt Mina. “Let the man finish.”

“As missy was saying, you’re out of gas,” said Harvey. “Look how long you have had the hood open. I actually just assumed you knew you were out of gas. I am checking the safety of the valves and the . . . well . . . as soon as I have a little fuel myself, as they say, I’ll skedaddle to fetch you lovely ladies a can of gas so you can be on your way.”

Gladdy thrust two sandwiches out to Harvey, and Aunt Mina reached into her skirt pocket and pressed some coins into his hand.

“Hope he brings you the change,” snapped Granny as they watched Harvey saunter off. “That looked to me like more than enough

for a can of gas, Mina, and now we've given him Ned and Gladdy's sandwiches."

"Hey!" said Gladdy and Ned together.

"The sandwiches are all the same. How do you know they were ours?" said Ned.

"Well, I'm an old lady. It wouldn't be my sandwich, now, would it? And your mother is driving. Couldn't be her sandwich or Auntie Corrine's, now, either, 'cause she's doing the navigating. Can't be Tugs's sandwich, because Tugs helped Mr. Moore solve the mystery of the automobile. So it must be your and Gladdy's sandwiches. Now, go make yourselves scarce. Tugs and me want to dine in relative tranquility."

Tugs accepted the sandwich Granny handed her, but as she took a bite, she felt a little guilty. She tore it in three parts and handed a piece each to Gladdy and Ned.

They didn't have to wait long for help. Lester Ward's roadster came speeding along presently, with Harvey Moore in

the passenger seat. Tugs slid down in the backseat, hoping desperately that Lester wouldn't see her there.

“Rescued!” she heard Harvey bellow. “I flagged down this fine fellow, and isn't he the good Samaritan, picking up a stranger in need and buying a can of gas for you lovely ladies besides. There. And look, he's filling it for you, too.”

As Lester finished, Harvey clapped him on the back. “Let's go, my friend. We'll leave the ladies to their journey.”

“Wait!” Ned hollered. “Can I ride with you?”

Tugs peered over the seat. She saw Harvey take a long drink of lemonade from a bottle in Lester's car as they sped off, Ned waving from the center of the road until they were out of sight.

“Isn't he just the most amazing young man?” said Aunt Mina.

“He's dashing,” gushed Gladly.

“Imagine,” continued Aunt Mina. “Bringing the newspaper back to Goodhue. It’s about time.”

“Harvey Moore,” said Mother Button. “That’s the name of someone who can get something done.”

“He dresses too fancy for a mechanic or a football player,” said Tugs.

“Tugs, where have you been? He’s a newspaperman,” said Aunt Mina. “Now, everyone back in the car. Granny’s exhausted.”

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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