Copyrighted material University of Nebraska Press

Topeka Underground

The whole time I was growing up, the Lindsborgs' unfinished house sat in our newly created suburban development. The basement-foundation cinder blocks rose up three high. Window wells cupped dirty windows never open to the light. Nothing but the faintest glow came from them, even at night. The top of the foundation was black with tarpaper. When Mr. Lindsborg papered his roof-floor, winter soon followed. For a year after my family moved onto the block, I didn't even see the Lindsborgs. They did not own an automobile. They did not work in their yard, but let it grow to knee-high weeds good for hide and seek.

We kids did not trick-or-treat there on Halloween because we weren't sure how to knock on their huge cellar door, painted white, hinged on both sides to open in the middle, like storm cellar doors, or like the entrance to a homesteader's storage cave. In winter, we saw a plume of smoke rise from a short tin spout, topped with the tin man's hat, and sticking up from the foundation. We saw the Lindsborgs' footprints, one set very large, the other very small, both in boots, come from the house to the woodpile and back again; once, down the street to meet tire tracks and then back home.

One day, in the spring of my fifth-grade year, I cut the center of the neighborhood lengthwise, on my slow way to school. That meant moving between the Lindsborgs' woodpile and the one fence on the block, the chain link of their back neighbor, who wanted to express a solid difference between his green, clipped yard and the riot of dandelion, pigweed, lamb's-quarter, bindweed, and wild grasses growing unchecked on the Lindsborgs' property. Just when I was at the end of the long, stacked pile of wood, the cellar door screeched open. I ducked behind the woodpile.

Mr. Lindsborg climbed, stooped, up the outside basement stairs, shaking his head slowly like an old bear remembering the world after a long winter. His beard was white, and longer and fuller than any department store Santa

Click here to buy the book

Copyrighted material University of Nebraska Press

Claus's, but streaked with yellow. I saw why when he reared his head to spit tobacco juice at his heavy boots.

Then he came toward me, moving slowly, as though reminding his limbs how to work. I could outrun him if I had to, so I stayed to watch. At the opposite side and end of the woodpile, he stood quietly. I heard a stream against grass, a sound I could not believe, but had to acknowledge. Mr. Lindsborg was peeing in his yard, something I hadn't done since I was five years old. I stayed tucked down, hidden, wanting to run, but not daring to, now, until it was quiet again.

Mr. Lindsborg chucked wood into a stack on his arm and started toward his basement. I peeked out at his back, hunched now with the weight of a morning's warmth. Just as he reached his cellar doors, thrown back like the stiff covers of an open book, he muttered, his voice garbled and incoherent. A very small head appeared from the basement stairwell. Mrs. Lindsborg wore a blue kerchief tied in a knot under her chin, and when she reached to help with the wood, I saw such thin arms, like small sticks, like the arms of a child. Just before grasping a small piece of stove wood, that arm waved at me, and the small mouth smiled, and I ran like hell for school.

Once I'd seen the Lindsborgs, and Mrs. Lindsborg had seen me, I wanted to see them again. I asked my parents about them. "Don't bother them, William," said my mother. "They're old. And I've heard she has some disease."

She's so small, I almost blurted out, smaller than me.

"I heard he bought his lot off old Mr. Daniels," said my father. "They're friends or something. It was before Daniels sold the rest of his farm to Stevens. Before there was even a Nottingham Street here."

I excused myself from the table. I knew my father's speech about property values and old Mr. Daniels's paint-chipped house, his rundown barn, his crumpling boxcar full of ancient bales of hay: How his four-lot "farm," littered with old cutters and rakes, plows and disks, and meager, head-high corn ought to be sold, torn down and developed, like the rest of the neighborhood.

I told my friend Manny Stein about seeing the Lindsborgs. We were in our hideout in the bottom of his bomb shelter, where we went to pretend the world was ended and we were the only ones left.

Click here to buy the book

Copyrighted material University of Nebraska Press

"That old man's not one of the ones we're letting in," Manny said. He raised his extended finger as though pointing a gun. "Pow, pow," he said, using the pistol in his head that matched the one in his father's closet. He took a few small bullets out of their box in the bomb shelter. "This one's for him, and here's one for his old lady."

We both knew that when the bomb dropped, everybody would head for Manny's shelter. We would kill them all to keep the food, water, and air for ourselves. We liked to sit in the bright light of the hundred-watt bulb, the smooth concrete walls cool as the inside of an empty test tube around us, and imagine the end, more like a wonderful beginning: two boys, alone, ready to start the world over again.

But when I wasn't with Manny or some other friend, I drifted again and again to the Lindsborg foundation. Even though I tried, I didn't see the Lindsborgs until early one Sunday, just after dawn. Out retrieving the paper for my father, I heard the cellar doors creak open three houses up. I slapped the paper onto the porch and took out on my bicycle. I left it in the Lindsborgs' unpaved driveway and sneaked to the short wall their foundation made. They were in back. Each had a bag. Each stooped to the ground to fill the bag with something. With dandelion tops.

"Come," said Mrs. Lindsborg suddenly, and she turned to wave to me. "You will help?" she asked. She was no bigger than I was, with a smile on her face; she might have been a new girl on the playground.

I shrugged my shoulders and started toward them. Mr. Lindsborg looked at me sternly, his lips pursed under his large white mustache. His back was hunched under his bib overalls. But I approached him, with both curiosity and fear. Finally, he held out his bag and muttered something from the back of his throat.

Mrs. Lindsborg circled around him, her legs stiff, so she looked as though she was walking on stilts. "Dandelions," she said. "We pick the tops, with no green, while the dew sits on them."

I did not know what to say. Picking dandelions was for children. We waited until the yellow turned to white, and the seeds mushroomed onto the plant top, poised and ready to catch the wind of our breaths. But I reached down and picked a yellow top. I took it to Mrs. Lindsborg's bag. "My name is William," I said.

Click here to buy the book

Copyrighted material University of Nebraska Press

"William," she said, nodding her head. She reached for the single top in my hand. "Too much green," she said. "Nothing but yellow, or the wine will turn bitter."

"Wine?" I asked.

"Dandelion wine," she said. Mr. Lindsborg grunted, smiling. Then he licked his lips and patted his large stomach.

"How do you make it?" I asked him.

"He cannot hear you," Mrs. Lindsborg said. "I am his ears, and his voice. When he talks, only I can understand the sounds he makes."

I looked at Mr. Lindsborg, who hadn't heard what she said. He smiled, as though still thinking of the wine they would make. I picked another dandelion top. This time, it passed inspection, and Mrs. Lindsborg dropped it into her cloth bag.

"Sweet," she said. "When winter is cold the wine will be our spring." She hobbled from place to place, barely able to bend her stiff body, almost creaking on the hinge of her sunken waist. The more I watched her, the faster I picked, careening around her like a crazed insect.

Until I heard my name, faintly called into the early Sunday morning air. "I gotta go," I said.

"Thank you, William," said Mrs. Lindsborg. "You shall have a taste of wine, come winter."

I ran for my bike. Mr. Lindsborg grunted after me, and I turned to wave to him before I pedaled to my split-level house down the street.

"I've been riding my bike," I told my father.

"Are you forgetting we go to church?" asked my mother.

"No," I said, but I had forgotten everything but racing from one yellow dandelion top to another, filling Mrs. Lindsborg's sack.

From that morning when I officially met the Lindsborgs, I spent the rest of my spring looking for them. Sometimes I would carry a stack of logs from the woodpile to their cellar door. The next day I would find a large sheet of paper between two logs, with "Thank you, William" scrawled on it. Sometimes I would catch them in their yard in the very early morning, before the birds were even awake. Once, they were harvesting lamb's-quarter for a salad. When their large redbud bloomed, Mrs. Lindsborg showed me

Click here to buy the book

Copyrighted material University of Nebraska Press

how to pick and eat the tiny pink flowers. She gathered enough for what looked like a whole meal.

Each time I saw them, out early, or on my way to school, or at dusk, just before I heard my name called into the clear evening air, they greeted me as though we'd known each other for years, Mrs. Lindsborg with "Hello, William," and Mr. Lindsborg with a generous shake of his head and a smile of brown, tobacco-stained teeth. They always wore the same clothing: he in overalls and a stiff flannel shirt; she in a blue kerchief, long blue dress of some thick material, covered over by a deep blue shawl. She always carefully explained what they were doing; I helped for a time, then they went inside.

I wanted to follow them but was too timid to ask. Still, I prepared for the time when they would invite me into their basement. I'd practiced saying, "Yes, but just for a minute," because I was frightened. Manny Stein said the Lindsborgs tempted children into their basement, suffocated them, drained out all their blood, and stacked them in a closet like Egyptian mummies. They did this because they had no children of their own. Other kids said their whole basement smelled horrible, because they had no bathroom. They just went on the floor in a corner like cats and dogs, and they'd move out once their basement was full and there was no room to live in. And, of course, my parents had always told me, "Never go in the house of someone you don't know." Mom and Dad would expect me to come home and ask their permission, but I knew I wouldn't.

On the first day of summer, with long playing days ahead of me, I went to the Lindsborgs' yard. Their cellar door was closed. No smoke plumed from their chimney. Since they didn't own a car, I could never tell if they were home. The grass was as tall as my knees, and grasshoppers clung to the leaves and stems, sometimes hopping onto my bare legs. In my hands, when I caught them, they spit their filthy brown juice, trying to soften, then eat, my palm. I cupped them, then let them fly away, their ratchety wings too insubstantial to keep them from falling.

I felt I had to see the Lindsborgs to start my summer right. Next year I would be in sixth grade, one of the big kids. Our teacher told us to prepare ourselves over the summer. We would be the models everyone else looked up to. My parents had sat me down the week before and decided on Boy

Click here to buy the book

Copyrighted material University of Nebraska Press

Scout camp for a week, swimming lessons until I passed the advanced class, and some art lessons especially for kids, offered by the local college. "It's going to be a great summer," said my dad. "Expensive, but fun."

"It'll be a summer of fun learning," said my mom.

I had never knocked on the Lindsborgs' door. As far as I knew, nobody ever had, or would. So I did. I went to the cellar door and bent down on my bare knees in the grass and rapped on the wood. I stood up and waited.

After a time I bent down again, but this time I pounded with my fist.

Then I whapped on the door with my tennis shoe. It seemed to give, as though it might not be latched solidly from the inside. I reached for the metal handle and pulled. Up came the door, screeching on its hinges. I looked down the concrete stairwell at another door, white-painted wood, latched from the outside with a small hook and eye. They were not home. I went down the stairs to see if I could peek inside through the glass panes. I had no intention of lifting the hook out of the eye and turning the doorknob until I did it.

Their basement was one big room, lit only by the dull light from the window wells. I stood squeezing the summer sun from my eyes, like when my parents took me to a matinee. When I finally opened my eyes, I was in another world. Around me, the walls were hung with quilts of intricate pattern: circles, swirls, blocks, triangles, diamonds, fans, all pieced in an unceasing movement of wheeling colors. The furniture was huge and dark: a hutch stacked with delicate, almost paper-thin china; two elegantly carved wardrobes, buttressing the walls in a corner; a canopy bed, like in the princess's bedroom of a castle, curtained so that the inside was a little room, closed today, like the basement had been.

In another corner was the kitchen: freestanding sink; huge iron cookstove, shiny with blacking; small oak table with two chairs; shelf after shelf of food in jars – the glowing red of tomatoes, the dull green of cooked beans and dill pickles, the deep purple of beets, the yellow of summer squash and corn, the white of pearl onions, the orange of pumpkin, the colors as patterned and lovely as the quilts.

Still another corner was a workshop: several tables were littered with blocks of wood, hand tools, and wood shavings; raw lumber leaned against

Click here to buy the book

Copyrighted material University of Nebraska Press

the wall. When I turned to look more closely, shelf after shelf of wood carvings – men, women, children, and more animals than in a circus – stared back at me. Even in the dull light of the open door, I saw intricate detail: the teeth of smiling children, the bold stripes of a zebra, the wrinkles of an elephant's trunk, the teats of a sow. Each carving was perfect and alive, but everything was exactly the same size, as though cut from the same block of wood: a woman holding a child in her lap was no smaller than the hippopotamus next to her, who was no bigger than the grasshopper, who was no smaller than the deer at the back of that parade across Mr. Lindsborg's shelf.

On the far wall, near the bed, was the only door: to the bathroom, I supposed. I went to see. The old porcelain fixtures stood like ghosts in the near dark. The side opposite the bathroom fixtures was given to storage: linens, jars, more wood, old furniture, boxes, all neatly arranged. The inside of the Lindsborgs' basement was as tidy as the outside of their place was given to disorder.

The whole time I was in their house I felt no fear, just curiosity, like Goldilocks exploring the home of the three bears. Once inside, in fact, I was disappointed. There were no horrible secrets to discover, no children's bodies, no terrible smells, nothing but intricate simplicity, honesty of work, and obvious care for every detail. The difference between the Lindsborgs' basement and other houses I'd been in was remarkable; they were people like nobody else I knew or would know. But the experience of peeking into their foundation had all the silly adventure of spending the night in a tent in my own backyard. I hurried away, hooking the eye in the door after me, screeching the cellar doors closed, then running until I was out of their yard.

That's when I heard the sirens. Frightened, I hurried to Manny Stein's house and hid behind the closed hatch of the bomb shelter to watch. An ambulance pulled into the Lindsborgs' graveled driveway. Two attendants raced for a stretcher, jerked it to their shoulders, and hurried to the cellar door. Mr. Lindsborg appeared from up the street, no doubt from Mr. Daniels's farm. He signaled the men to go down the stairs, and they disappeared.

They didn't come up for a long time. I kneeled there behind the funny mushroom cap of our hideout. I heard my name called over and over again, my mother's voice insistent, but not as compelling as my need to wait.

Click here to buy the book

Copyrighted material University of Nebraska Press

Later, she told me she was afraid the ambulance was for one of us neighborhood kids, hit by a car or injured terribly climbing trees. I just shook my head.

I didn't tell her how, after what seemed forever, the men appeared up the stairwell, the stretcher between them, the small body on it, covered completely by a white sheet, the old man trudging behind, muttering, his garbled voice barely reaching my ears.

I didn't tell her how, when they got to the ambulance, Mr. Lindsborg was told he couldn't go with them, how he howled and pounded the vehicle with his huge hands.

I didn't tell her how, when the ambulance drove away, Mr. Lindsborg sat on his foundation and cried, or how I cried, too.

I didn't tell her how, on the way to the bathroom in the Lindsborgs' foundation home, I had been so tempted to open the curtains that surrounded their huge, four-poster canopy bed, to look where they slept, though I have done it many times, in my dreams, since.

"Maybe he'll give up and sell his ugly foundation," my father said at dinner.

"I hope he doesn't," I said. "I hope he always lives there."

"You're still a kid," said my father. "You'll see it different when you get older."

I never did see it different. I never told my father how, that next winter, on my way home from school, I saw Mr. Lindsborg at his woodpile, how he waved to me and yodeled in the way he did when trying to speak. How when I waved back and went to him, he clasped me to him, hugging me. When I broke free I saw tears in his old gray eyes. He reached into his overalls pocket and gave me a small vial, an old medicine bottle, stopped with a tiny cork and containing a pale yellow liquid. Mr. Lindsborg made a noise I understood as "drink." He kept saying it, then throwing back his head and putting his thumb to his mouth.

I uncorked that tiny bottle and drank the sweet liquid, the taste like earthy lemonade, only lighter, with the twist of alcohol to make me catch my breath. It was dandelion wine. I remembered the spring, and Mrs. Lindsborg. I handed him the vial, and mouthed a big "Thank you." I moved my head up and down, and he nodded back, trying to smile.

Just as I tried to run away, Mr. Lindsborg grabbed my arm and reached into his overalls again. This time he pulled out a carving, smaller than the

Click here to buy the book

Copyrighted material University of Nebraska Press

ones I'd seen on his shelf when I'd trespassed in his basement. In a circle of wood the size of my hand, two snakes, mouths to tails, consumed each other. Their eyes bulged, each anticipating the slow swallowing of the other. "Thank you," I said, nodding again, and ran for home.

I stopped in my yard, in the little gardening shed my father had built out back, and hid the snakes behind a shovel. Later, I buried them in the yard, just to the side of one of my father's rosebushes. I didn't want to mix my knowledge of Mr. Lindsborg with my parents' curiosity. They were just counting the years until he moved away.

Farmer Daniels moved first. Manny Stein and I were in the old crumpled boxcar one day, trying out cigarettes for the first time the summer before junior high. Maybe one of us left a smoldering butt by mistake. Maybe Manny, who left after I did, deliberately set the fire. He never told me. Sirens roared up our street, and the neighborhood came to watch what turned out to be a huge, but harmless, bonfire. I was more alarmed than the adults, who seemed somehow relieved.

Mr. Daniels moved into a nursing home the next week. His children said he was too forgetful to take care of himself. They sold the rest of his tiny farm to the developer, and four Tudor homes, oversized for their lots, moved into the neighborhood.

I never saw Mr. Lindsborg again. Manny and I quit playing the kinds of games that took us through backyard lots. We needed playing fields. His father sheered the top off the bomb shelter and filled it with cement. The whole neighborhood grew up: people put in privacy fences, hedgerows, chain link fence, shrubbery. Mr. Lindsborg's foundation sat unchanged, except for a new layer of tarpaper each fall.

Then one summer, when I returned from college, his house was finished. "There were three huge boys," said my mother. "The spitting image of Lindsborg, all in overalls, with beards. They came with trucks full of lumber and put up his house in three weeks. Then they were inside doing the finish work. Never said a word to any of us."

"Typical," said my father. "But they did a heck of a nice job for amateurs."

The next spring, the newly built frame house was sold. Nobody said goodbye to Mr. Lindsborg. People wondered for a while just what kind of

Click here to buy the book

Copyrighted material University of Nebraska Press

people would move into the house, but the new neighbors seemed like ordinary folks, oblivious to the history of the Lindsborg place. Pretty soon everybody took them a cake or casserole, and a story or two about the Lindsborgs.

I stayed away. I did dig up the carving. It looked so much like an old root I was surprised it hadn't sprouted. The detail was all gone, but I knew what it was, and I took it with me to remind me of life underground.

Click here to buy the book