

FROZEN SHADOWS

By Gene O'Neill

An Excerpt

Part One

Northern California

1.

Mysterious Ailment in Mother Lode

A rare childhood disorder has reared its ugly head in Sutter Creek in the heart of Northern California, gold country. In the last year, seven youngsters, ranging in age from eight to twelve, have been stricken down by a disorder that is mystifying local medical experts. The youngsters have all been hospitalized at Sutter Amador Hospital in nearby Jackson, with very similar symptoms that include severe headache/anemia/malnutrition/ongoing blood loss/low white blood cell counts. But the underlying cause(s) of these symptoms stubbornly eludes hospital staff. A half dozen specialists have been consulted and are also stumped as to the exact nature of the ailment. Several think it may be an exotic virus(s), which has not been isolated by testing as yet. A pediatric oncologist feels it could be a rare form of childhood leukemia, but if so, specific cause(s) remain undetermined. Local press directs attention to the possible carcinogenic conditions remaining at several gold mines now abandoned near Sutter Creek, where all seven youngsters lived and played. In any event, two of the children have reached the critical life-threatening stage.

—Sacramento Bee, June 10, 1962

2.

When I was six-years-old, I went to live with my grandparents in Sutter Creek.

Shortly thereafter, I met a beautiful girl named, Bell. And together, Bell and I would confront an evil man who cast no shadow. These three interrelated events would significantly influence the course of my life...

3.

June 1956—

“You will love living in the country with them, Sean,” I remembered my mother saying when she visited me that last Saturday before I left Children’s Hospital in San Francisco. I had been there for over six months, recovering from polio, which I had unfortunately contracted just shortly before the Sabin vaccine became available.

“As soon as I’m on my feet financially I will come and collect you,” my single mother promised.

I never knew my father. He died—five months after I was born—in December of 1950 near the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, part of the famed General Chesty Puller led 1st Marine Division breakout.

My father left the standard \$10,000 military life insurance policy and little else. At the time, Mother had been a housewife, uneducated with very few outside job skills. With the insurance

money thinly stretched out and supplemented by Mom taking in other people's ironing, we just barely struggled by for six years. Then, I got real sick and the medical bills began to pile up. The good news was that my mother had been offered an excellent opportunity to temporarily move in with her sister and brother-in-law in Sacramento and work full time at their rapidly growing family nursery—*The Lone Oak Tree*. She dearly loved gardening and tending plants. So, Mom was upbeat and joyful that Saturday afternoon, enthusiastically telling me all about her new job in a new town.

“We'll be together as soon as I can afford our own place. And the future finally looks really bright for both of us, Sean.” I didn't argue about me not going immediately with her to also live with Aunt El and Uncle Mike. She'd briefly explained there was not sufficient room for me there, with three kids already falling out of beds in the small two-bedroom house.

But that Saturday visit was the last time I ever saw my mother alive. Returning to our small apartment on Louisiana Street in Vallejo, she was involved in a multi-vehicle accident, caused by a gas tanker jackknifing across lanes on Highway 40 and blowing up.

She never escaped her burning car, dying alone and so young.

The following Tuesday morning, still burdened with grief, I was released from Children's Hospital and picked up by my grandfather, Thomas O'Donnell. He took me straight to *All Souls Catholic Cemetery* for my mother's memorial service. I'd had an almost miraculous physical recovery, no withered limbs or weakened lungs, like many of my friends whom I was reluctantly leaving behind. So, I easily managed the long uphill 100-yard climb to Mother's graveside. After a blur of meaningless talk by mostly people I didn't recognize, Gramps and I threw a handful of dirt onto her coffin, and then we left. A very disturbing, mind-numbing experience for a six-year-old boy.

My grandfather, a short, husky man, had a baritone voice made raspy from a life-long habit of smoking roll-your-own cigarettes but softened by his thick brogue. He took my hand in his gnarly, strong mitt that he'd earned boxing as a youngster, working on Southern Pacific work gangs maintaining railroad track, and the last twenty-eight years as a rigger at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo. He'd retired four years ago from the Yard and moved up to Sutter Creek to stretch his modest pension dollars. I didn't remember him from my early Vallejo years and had only seen him and Grams maybe twice or perhaps three times briefly on holidays since their move. No Interstate 80 back then and folks didn't make too many long car trips on the old two-lane, crowded State highways, except for maybe at Christmas time or occasionally on Thanksgiving.

We left *All Souls* around eleven in the morning and rode nonstop for almost four hours from San Francisco up into the Sierra Nevada foothills, due east of Sacramento, to finally reach Sutter Creek, getting only barely acquainted on the way. I wasn't very talkative, still traumatized over my mother's untimely death and feeling more depressed by the formal, detached, routine nature of the burial; but I was successfully able to hold back any tears in front of this almost total stranger.

4.

Sutter Creek was a little backwater town on State Highway 49 that had once played a significant part of Amador County's role in the famed California gold rush back in 1849-50. A number of mine shafts once surrounded the town, producing a significant part of the gold rush tonnage. Now, the mines were all closed down, and there were less than 1000 people left living in the historic town. A solid core of established Anglo family names, some dating as far back as the 1850s, but a good number of “newcomers,” many of them from immigrant stock, the majority of them Italians with a handful coming from Eastern Europe and Ireland.

Neither of my grandparents had lost their distinctive Irish brogues, even though arriving as youngsters in this country just over a decade after the turn of the 20th Century. Both had only gone to the second grade in school in Ireland. Gramps went almost immediately to work on the railroad after eventually settling in Southern California as an eleven-year-old boy. Grams came over five years later and finished the third grade here before quitting school to help her recently widowed mother and unmarried aunt in a small laundry on lower Tennessee Street in Vallejo. The laundry did fairly well, serving both the military and civilians from nearby Mare Island Naval Shipyard.

Apparently, my grandmother, Kathleen, was quite the redheaded, emerald-eyed beauty back in the day, with many avid beaux. But Gramps eventually claimed her hand. They actually married much later than most immigrants, because Gramps only quit the railroad down south and took a job in Vallejo at the Shipyard when he was at the advanced age of twenty-seven. One day soon after arrival in Vallejo he brought his laundry into the *Erin Wash* and fell in love at first sight with the Gaelic beauty that waited on him. Grams said he didn't claim her twenty-three-year-old heart until after the first time they attended a dance— "Because that Donegal lad had grand feet blessed by St. Padraig, his ownself."

These two Irish immigrants worked hard and raised my father and his two sisters in Vallejo. Then after the three kids grew up and left home, Gramps decided to retire early from the Yard at fifty-five, taking a reduced pension. By then he'd been involved in demanding, heavy labor for over 40 years and had some recurring episodes of minor but painful back problems. He'd told Grams that he thought he'd maybe continue to do some light odd jobs around Sutter Creek if his general health held up. He was still robust and very handy throughout his 60s and early 70s while I lived with them—an accomplished jack-of-all-trades including farm and ranch work, with all the *light* odd jobs he could handle.

I didn't have much family background on either of my grandparents before coming to Sutter Creek. And now they both seemed to be exceedingly strange to me with their funny accents; Grams was quiet, rosy-cheeked, still freckled, and no-nonsense strict; Gramps was gruff acting and smoked those funny brown cigarettes he could deftly roll with one hand. That first day I was nervous and unsettled arriving at their white and brown-trimmed two-story wood-frame home, located on narrow Eureka Street, just two blocks east off of Main Street next door to an old sand foundry. I was also feeling very sorry for myself, definitely missing my mother.

Of course, my grandparents had to have been a little unnerved themselves, too, bringing a recently orphaned grandson they barely knew to a tiny, strange town off the beaten track to live with very conservative people who looked, spoke, and acted differently from his mother and her working-poor friends in urban Vallejo.

But Gramps adjusted easily to all this underlying tension. On the ride up he'd managed to learn that I dearly loved books, even though my mother was not a book person and had not been able to afford many for me during the tough economic times after my father's death. Gramps shared my love of books and oral stories, too—no doubt a reflection of our shared Gaelic genes. His ongoing influence in appreciating literature and good writing would eventually have a dramatic impact on the arc of my life.

So, on my first late afternoon in Sutter Creek, after he showed me where to unpack and stow my tiny suitcase in my upstairs front bedroom, Gramps said: "C'mon, Sean boy, let's go downtown to a special place I think you are going to love."

5.

We walked at a relaxed pace along Main Street—which was also State Highway 49—on old redwood plank sidewalks past a half a dozen business establishments, Gramps reading aloud from the signs as we passed: *Wells Fargo Bank* with its impressive tall cast iron doors painted

black, *Marconi's Drugs* with its magazine/comic books wide circular stands in front, *The Chatterbox Café* with its breakfast and lunch daily specials neatly posted on a blackboard outside, *Cabri's Food & Meat Market*, *Dom's Hardware & Dry Goods*, *Marie's Tailoring & Seamstress Work*, and a narrow door leading to a darkened 2nd floor upstairs, which was simply and mysteriously labeled, K.O.C. Gramps made no comment on these three initials, but later I'd learn they stood for the Catholic fraternal organization: *Knights of Columbus*. The bulk of the Sutter Creek population was not Catholic of course, attending either the 1st Baptist Church or Full Gospel Church in town or one of the several Pentecostal Churches over in Jackson, the Amador County seat four miles away.

Finally, we stopped at the northern outskirts of town in front of what was once a small, but elegant, well-maintained, white and black-trimmed Victorian residence. It was set back from the street-highway a good hundred-fifty feet, with a neatly lettered black and white sign in front announcing:

Amador County Branch Library

Of course, I couldn't read the sign because I had missed a significant part of my first year in school, even though I'd received a few tutoring lessons at Children's Hospital. And I probably wouldn't have known what a library was at that point in time anyhow. I don't recall Mom ever taking me to one in Vallejo.

In his wonderfully expressive Irish brogue—which I would soon learn to relish during nightly story-telling time—Gramps announced: “This is where all the right words finally come, Sean.”

I first looked at the small residential building, then frowned, and looked questioningly back up at my grandfather, wondering why the right words traveled here, and how they even discovered this place?

He smiled thinly and continued in a nearly reverent tone: “Aye, lad, all the right words. When they have enough collected in there, they are carefully arranged into a group. Now, *if* they have selected wisely, and *if* they have put those right words in the proper order, something extraordinary and magical happens. They create one of God's true gifts...a wonderful book. Let's go in and inspect some of the magic.”

We stepped into the tiny library, actually the entire bottom floor of the old Victorian, now mostly one undivided very large room; but with floor to almost ceiling rows of shelving, shelves that to me seemed to continue on and on forever... All lined with books. Never had I seen so many books collected in one place. I was indeed awestruck by the marvelous sight!

“We can borrow these books,” Gramps said, smiling down at me.

After partially collecting myself, I said in a hoarse whisper: “But how many of these can I actually read, Gramps?”

He hesitated just a moment. Then, in his truly engaging and heavily accented rasp he answered: “Oh, laddie, you can read them all...if you only take the time. Each and every one, to be sure.”

He then took my hand in his gnarled mitt, led me to the desk just right of the entry, and introduced me to Mrs. Sullivan. The cheerful-looking, slightly graying librarian made me a card, and explained, with just the trace of her own brogue, the actual procedure for borrowing any of these library books. With Gramps help, I selected and checked out three children's books that afternoon. One was a thick, beautifully illustrated copy of *King Arthur and The Knights of the Round Table*. I dearly treasured that book, and eventually checked it out five more times in the next six months, before I finally received my very own copy at Christmas. A beloved, well-worn book that I still own.

This Branch Library was indeed a magical place. I immediately fell in love with it as Gramps predicted, forgetting about any worries while there that afternoon. During the ensuing years, I would spend a significant portion of my spare time at the library—especially during the long, dark winters. It became a serene sanctuary, where I first experienced my tentative ambitions of a potential future life as a writer. Imagine, me, Sean O'Donnell. An aspiration that Gramps and Grams would eventually strongly encourage down the road.

6.

June 1958—

With the help of Grams and Gramps, I quickly caught up in school during 1st grade. And by the summer after second grade, I was busy reading on my own, but also going fishing, bull-frogging, and often helping on odd jobs with Gramps. And picking wild blackberries from up the creek and different fruit from the orchard out back with Grams. Later in early September on weekends, I helped her can the surplus. But all this while reading at least two books every day that summer.

In the evenings before an early bedtime, the three of us sat out on the wide front porch, munching buttered popcorn and drinking lemonade or iced tea, while flailing away with opened hands at the pesky mosquito dive-bombers. But with relish Grams and I stayed and listened, awed by Gramps' dramatic and wonderful *Red Branch Tales* about the exploits of the fearless hero, Cú Chulainn. An Irish mythical/historical figure, who made the adventures of the Knights of the Round Table or even the great Robin Hood's daring feats seem almost mundane. He lived sometime in the 1st Century B.C. And it was said he possessed the Gaelic heroes' mystical ability during combat to place themselves into a trance-like state called *Riastradh* in Gaelic. Later translated from ancient lore into English as "*wasp spasm*." The hero was figuratively stung and temporarily rendered calm, confident, super-strong, absolutely fearless, and impervious to pain; and it was at least strongly implied that the hero was also invincible. On several occasions, I thought my Gramps might have been in the thrall of *Riastradh*, and much later at two critical times, I think I too was able to invoke this condition of *wasp spasm*. At least at those moments, I believed I was protected by the mystical trance state. Gramps often smiled after orating these glorious Red Branch battle scenes, several times claiming we had direct genetic lineage back to Cú Chulainn—perhaps not in an entirely jesting manner.

As a lad, Cú Chulainn was called Setenta. He loved hurling, the national sport of Ireland, played a little like soccer but with a hurling stick and a very hard ball—actually more of a cross between field hockey and lacrosse, but with no helmets or pads. One evening, when Setenta was twelve years old, he stayed outside his father's friend's stock compound to practice his hurling throws. Unfortunately, the adults busy imbibing, talking, and laughing forgot that the young Setenta was outside, and released the guard dogs at dusk. A pair of massive aggressive hounds that circled the compound at night, protecting against possible surprise attacks by competing clans' stock raiders—the unofficial but real national sport of old Ireland. The hounds immediately attacked Setenta. A fatal mistake. The athletic, strong, and mature lad, undoubtedly entranced in a self-induced *wasp spasm*, caught them each up by their hind legs and swung them around his head, finally bashing their skulls together. Killed them both instantly on the spot. But under Brehon Law back then, if you did damage to a person's property you personally did whatever necessary to make it good. Setenta took the guard dogs' place for a year until two new hound pups were raised and thoroughly trained. By then he was known by his famous adult Gaelic name. His father's friend was called Culann. And Cu is dog or hound in Gaelic. Thereafter the lad was known as: Cú Chulainn—Culann's Hound.

7.

One afternoon early that summer of 1958, I was playing fetch with my little fox terrier, Snip, in the front yard, when someone shouted an order through the black, widely-spaced, wrought iron, fencing bars.

“Hey, you, Big Boy, come over here.”

It was a girl about my age, maybe a bit older but actually quite petite. She was standing with her hands on her hips, leaning slightly forward, wearing an aggressive, serious expression—a stance that I would soon learn was accompanied with a giant measure of better-not-mess-with-me attitude. But even at that time, only eight-years-old, I recognized she was already the most beautiful girl in town. Curly blondish ringlets, faded denim twinkling eyes, and a constant hint of a smile that always looked on the verge of bursting into a raucous guffaw. A Swiss-Italian mixture of pixie princess with generous dollops of a rough and tumble shenanigan-loving tomboy. How could I not be instantly smitten.

I wandered cautiously over to the fence, more than just a little bit curious but also intimidated by this intriguing girl.

She said: “I’m new in town, and my name is Isabella. Isabella Marconi. My dad is the new dentist here in Sutter Creek and over in Jackson, too. My Uncle Dominick runs the pharmacy downtown.” And is partners in half the other businesses along Main Street, too, I thought, but kept a sarcastic chuckle to myself.

“What’s your name, Big Boy?”

I cleared my throat and answered: “Sean O’Donnell.” Then I pointed at the house behind me. “My Gramps and Grams live here.”

“Where do your parents live?” she asked, eyebrows arched.

“Gramps and Grams are my parents.”

“You go to Sutter Creek Elementary School?” she asked, taking my curt response in stride with a slightly dismissive nod and frown, and continuing her interrogation.

“Yes,” I said, feeling a little bit unsettled by this loud and confidently aggressive, but so tiny girl.

“What grade?”

“Going into the third.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m eight...but close to nine,” I answered, stretching up as tall as possible and trying to puff out my skinny chest.

“I’m already nine, had a birthday weeks ago,” she declared in a flippant voice while looking me over carefully, before apparently resigning herself to some kind of important decision. She even nodded to herself, confirming her judgment. A physical trait I would learn to pay close attention to over the years.

“Put your face right here,” she ordered, pointing at a specific spot just on her side of the fence.

I complied, sticking my head clear through the widely spaced, twisted, black, iron fence spikes.

Without a trace of hesitation or even the slightest blush, she put her hands behind my ears, roughly pulled me a bit closer, and kissed me fully on the lips.

“You’re now my boyfriend, Sean O’Donnell,” she announced in a tone that left no room for any kind of argument. She stared sternly at me for a silent moment daring any negative response, then added: “And you may call me, Bell...not Isabella or Bella or anything else girlish like that. Just *Bell*, do you understand?”

I nodded, more or less still too dumbfounded to argue. It was the first time any girl had kissed me on the lips. Bell Marconi was not just any girl either; she was indeed a real force of nature.

She smiled sweetly, recognizing my acceptance of her declaration. Then, she dashed off, leaving me standing with my hands dangling limply at the sides of my bib overalls and partially out of breath, but congratulating myself at having survived intact Bell's direct frontal assault.

And so, I was officially designated Bell's boyfriend and would remain in that favored capacity for as long as I lived in Sutter Creek.

8.

A tiny town like Sutter Creek was somewhat like a later 70s hippy commune, everyone minding everyone else's business. It was expected that all adults watched over all the kids, no one thinking twice about disciplining an errant youngster with a resounding swat on the pants—related or not. So, everyone in town soon knew the adventuresome, charismatic, and feisty pixie; and not long after, they all expected to see us constantly together.

It wasn't such a one-way or unrewarding relationship with Bell either. No, indeed.

When the new comics, everyone called them funny books back then, came in at the pharmacy, Bell always snagged copies of my favorites after the bundles were first cut open and before they were placed for sale out on the stands—usually including issues of the purple-clad *Phantom*, the *Blackhawk* squadron, and always my preferred first read, *Plastic Man*. During those hot summer afternoons when we weren't swimming, playing ball, picking blackberries, wandering about, or doing some kind of chore, we would read those funny books cover-to-cover at her Uncle Dom's drugstore fountain. We sat on adjoining high backless round stools and sipped from frosty mugs of old-fashioned root beer—not from bottles or cans, but made from scratch at the fountain by mixing syrup and soda water. Only two of the many fringe benefits of being Isabella Marconi's boyfriend. Another benefit of vital importance would be access to an unusual piece of equipment that would come in handy at the end of the summer about four years later, an item that undoubtedly saved both our lives.

To be continued in Gene O'Neill's [Frozen Shadows and Other Chilling Stories](#).