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Omaha

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OMAHA

Dawn leaves a highway of blood running down the bluffs into the Missouri.

At the Union Pacific roundhouse, the doors roll open with a screech of metal, and great engines haul the heat of August out into the day.

A block away from St. Frances Cabrini church in Little Italy, the face of Christ grows on a Big Boy tomato in Mrs. Antonia Cabriatti's garden. She sits at her kitchen window, drinking coffee with cream and eating anisette toast, wondering whether to cook the tomato or report it to Father Vitelli. She would like to eat the face of Christ as a sauce on a nice fritatta, but she could never confess that to the priest.

Down Tenth Street at the Praha Bakery, Jim Kovar puts another ball of rye dough on his baker's paddle and places it into the brick oven. It is the same motion his grandfather used when he was an artilleryman in the army of Emperor Franz Josef. Whenever people eat Kovar's rye bread they bite into caraway seeds, and that little shell bursts into a cloud of remembering: the bread at the older Preshyl girl's wedding feast, the roast duck with skin goose-pimpled as boys skinny-dipping in an early May stream, steam rising from potato dumplings and kraut, tart Pilsener beer, the prune and apricot kolachy. Ah, memory is a fat midwife, they say, and the future is a thin bride.

Over on Thirteenth Street, Maria Kutzowski sells a Tootsie Roll to the Cantu kid, whose father Hector works in one of the packing plants. She remembers when this whole neighborhood was Polish and Lithuanian, but her children have all moved to the west side. At least these Mexicans are good Catholics, she thinks, not like all the apostate Lutheran Danes up around north 30th Street. She went up there once, she says in Polish to her friends over beers at the Vistula Tavern, and felt like she was in a foreign country. Not a kerchief to

be seen on the heads of the women! But she would like to go again, because the men are handsome . . .

It is like that all over the rest of Omaha this morning: in the black community north of Dodge Street, where people are having breakfast and thinking about what they will do after work this evening; in the old Jewish neighborhood over by Central High; in the Serbian blocks by the foundry; in the dwellings of the Swedes and the Germans and the Irish and the Greeks, all the way west to Boys Town.

In every house, in every heart is a packing plant built of the slow-fired bricks of experience, where dreams hang on steel hooks in cold storage.