

Read an excerpt from the book *That Punk, Jimmy Hoffa*:

“Quick, the Lights”

Dad called me, yesterday, and all but begged me to come home from Kearney State Teachers College. It was October 21, 1955. I didn't want to.

At Kearney, I had become my own person, not Tom Coffey's daughter, daughter of the mayor, the state senator, owner of the biggest business in town. I loved my new freedom.

On the other hand, Dad rarely asked me for anything. So, I plunked down my \$1.82 fare for the Slowpoke Special and rode the bus sixty miles home.

While I lived at college, my mother and I corresponded daily, so I knew all about Teamster goons polishing their shotguns.

“This fight is taking its toll on your dad,” she wrote. “Don't expect him to look the same. He's lost some weight.”

But Mama's letters didn't prepare me for the scarecrow that rose gaunt from his recliner to hug me. His clothes hung on him like a drape.

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“Gee, Dad,” I mumbled into his shoulder. “How much have you lost?”

“Twenty-five pounds. Since I saw you last.”

I stepped back and looked at him. His cheeks caved inward, and flaps of skin hung from his lower jaw. And his gorgeous head of hair, raven black, had turned snow white.

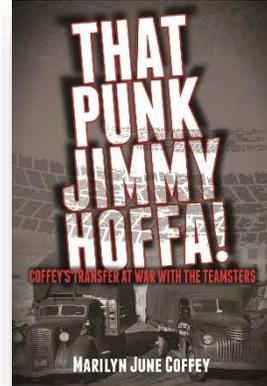
I patted Dad's cardigan. Sure enough, I felt, under his sweater, the outline of his pill box in his shirt pocket where he habitually carried it. It contained nitroglycerin pills.

When he showed me the pills a couple of years ago, he pounded his fist against his chest. “If I have another heart attack, I'll take one of these little pills and stick it under my tongue.”

“That will stop the attack?”

“Should. But you better not punch my pillbox. Nitroglycerin is the same stuff you find in dynamite. You wouldn't want me to explode.”

“Go on,” I said. I rarely knew whether he was serious or joshing. Later I found out that, since the 1860s, manufacturers had used nitroglycerin as the active ingredient in making



explosives, including dynamite. But Dad's tiny pills had been diluted with some inert material, so punching him wouldn't set off anything but his temper.

I gulped and hugged Dad, tight, my stomach hard as a rock. I knew he'd been under terrible pressure, of course, but I hadn't expected this. Dread filled me. My calves shook. I couldn't speak. For the first time I thought it might be possible for the Teamsters to kill him, if they didn't let up.

The Strike Seemed Far Away

We gathered that autumn evening in my family's recently redecorated living room to watch TV. My dad, not yet snoring, stretched in his recliner, eyes closed, while Mama perched on her favorite armchair, crocheting. My sister Margery, thirteen, and I, eighteen, draped ourselves along the overstuffed couch, our knees butting the glass-topped coffee table.

The transformed room, with its soft roses and greens, soothed me. My classy mother had designed it herself. The couch matched the rose draperies, while the chairs echoed the pale green carpet; leafy patterns spattered the walls. I couldn't imagine a more harmonious place.

None of us had much to say. The awful Teamsters' strike at Dad's Omaha office had escalated that week from picketing to guys smashing the tops of Coffey's Transfer Company trucks with rocks dropped off viaducts. Jimmy Hoffa and Dad had been fighting, off and on, since 1946. No one knew what Hoffa's Teamsters might do next. In other places, the union had fought with baseball bats, knives, guns—even bombs.

But Dad's strike seemed far away to me that evening. After all, Omaha lay four hours from our home in a vast rural area in south central Nebraska, so far south we almost lived in Kansas.

We settled in to watch some programs, Dad's choice, of course. It was his TV, although it had lost the splendor that exalted it last year, 1954. Then it was the first set ever seen in our tiny town of Alma. Dad had been so proud of it; he raced home from work every night to watch the only program then playing: test patterns.

When the long-awaited programs materialized, our family rarely viewed them together. In our house, the folks watched prime time, my sister the late-night movies, and I ignored the fabulous machine, preferring books. However, this Saturday evening we watched together because Dad had summoned me home for the weekend from Kearney [Nebraska] State Teachers College. To disappear to my upstairs room with a novel, as I often had, would be rude.

Ike out of His Oxygen Tent

That evening we worked our way through the usual Saturday night assortment of shows, laughing at Jimmy Durante's gigantic schnozzola, the crazy antics on *The Life of Riley*, and the low life depicted in the *Damon Runyon Theater*. Watching Dad laugh felt good. I hadn't seen much of that this weekend.

At 10 p.m., we switched to the news to catch the latest about Ike, whose recent heart seizure had landed him in the Denver hospital. Things were looking up. The doctors hadn't let the president watch the World Series, but he was no longer in the oxygen tent and could even sign his full name.

Then, without a smidgen of warning, we heard a sharp crack. A rock hitting the front porch, I thought, but Dad slammed out of his recliner and barked, "Quick, the lights." I glanced at him, startled to see fear etch his face.

In an instant, the room was dark, and Dad was hustling us, like a sheepdog herding a flock of ewes, to the back of the house. Silent, we watched him flip on the backyard lights and peer out the kitchen window. Nothing. We listened as he made his way to the front of the house. I heard the snap of the porch light switch and listened to the front door creak open. He's so brave, I thought. What if it's a bomb?

His footsteps echoed on the wooden front porch while, in the kitchen, we held our breaths. The night lay around us so quiet, I flinched when the refrigerator motor kicked on.

Then we heard his call, "All's clear," and saw the living room lights go on. We rushed to see him.

"It was nothing," he said. He crumpled into his chair; his chin dropped to his chest.

"Nothing?" I still felt frightened. "It had to be something: it was so loud and sounded so close. What could it have been?"

"I don't know." He gave me a blank look. "Maybe a car backfiring. Or some kids being funny."

Later, Dad shuffled off to the kitchen with Mama to unplug the perpetual electric coffee pot and grab a late-night snack. I heard Mama say, "You're sure jumpy tonight, Tom." "I know," he replied as they disappeared around the corner. "And I feel like such a fool."

I headed toward the sanctuary of my bedroom. To get there, I stepped over Margery's body sprawled on the living room rug, already hooked into a late-night show.

Halfway up the staircase, I stopped and glanced back down at the peaceful living room. It seemed smaller, somehow.

How vulnerable we are, I thought. Events miles away have touched our lives.

I didn't know it then, of course, but Dad's war with Hoffa's Teamsters would not just touch our lives. It would transform them, beyond recall.