

Excerpt from Imprudent Zeal
By Alec Clayton

Preface
Scully McDonald
New York, 1999

Scully's *New York Times* was still on the floor from Sunday when the delivery guy dropped off the Monday paper. *Peculiar*, thought the building superintendent when he noticed the two papers. *Twenty years I been here I ain't never known Scully to spend a night away. Ain't never known him to leave his paper out like this.*

By Tuesday morning the Sunday paper was beginning to yellow and look brittle. By Wednesday the stack of papers had taken on the look of weathered kindling. That was when the superintendent decided to use his passkey and see if anything was amiss in Scully's apartment. He opened the door and called out, "Anybody home?"

The only sound he heard was the humming of a refrigerator. Watery light washed through the single window that overlooked Bank Street. It was light enough for him to see a worn easy chair near the window. On a table next to the chair he saw an empty coffee cup and a stuffed ashtray. Glancing into the kitchenette, he spied an empty table and clean dishes stacked in the drain. Walking into the bedroom, he noticed that the bed was made and a Bible was fanned open face down on the bedside table. It looked as if Scully had just gone out for the day. Manny the super couldn't find any evidence to back up his feeling that something was terribly wrong, but he couldn't get rid of the feeling either. He decided to call the police.

The precinct sent Benny Bardelli around. Benny had been working the neighborhood for years and knew all the building supers. He greeted Manny in his usual way: "Hiya doin', Manny? What's up?"

"It's Scully. He seems to be missing. He ain't been home four five days. That ain't like him. Scully never goes nowhere. And that other guy, too, that homeless guy he took in. He ain't been around neither."

"You talking about that guy looks like Lurch on 'The Addams Family'?"

"Yeah. That's the one. I call him Frankendude."

"Did Scully have any enemies you know of?"

"Scully? Naw. The man was a living saint. He run that outfit down by the meat markets where they took in homeless people and run a soup line and all. Everybody loved him. Used to be he couldn't walk half a block without five six people reaching out to shake his hand. But he shut down his operation about a year ago, and since then he's been pretty much a loner. Don't seem to ever talk to nobody no more, 'cept that crazy he took in. He lost a lot of weight, too. Damndest thing. Musta been one of them starvation diets. Musta lost fifty pounds in practically no time. And he didn't look good at all if you ask me."

"Does he have any relatives you know of? Maybe somebody out of town he might be visiting?"

"He has a daughter. At least I think she's his daughter. Mac ... something or other. Sounds kinda like a man's name. Lives out in Seattle. She come here once maybe three four years ago, but she ain't been back since."

"So maybe he went out to Seattle to visit her."

"He'd a told me."

Benny asked a few more questions and said he would file a missing persons report. "That's about all I can do," he said. "I imagine he just decided to take hisself a vacation. He'll probably show up any day now."

Three thousand miles away in their new condo on Seattle's Queen Anne Hill, Lane Felts and McKenzie McDonald were getting ready to eat one of Lane's infamous egg dishes. "I just had a thought, Lane said. "We should give Scully a call. We haven't talked to him in ages."

"Good idea. Maybe right after dinner."

But right after dinner they got a call from their friend Jamee, and they forgot all about calling Scully.

Chapter One
The Mohawk Gang
Albany, New York, 1946

Smoke hung head high in the auditorium. Chair legs grated the hardwood floor. Men coughed, laughed, shouted across the room at friends. They fidgeted in their seats and crushed cigar and cigarette butts underfoot. As if attached by wires, every head turned when a door in back opened and Scully McDonald stepped out and jogged down the aisle to the boxing ring. Father O'Day followed close behind, his hands kneading Scully's shoulders, man and boy bobbing like marionettes.

Scully heard shouts of encouragement but could not make out the words. He felt hands reach out to pat him on the back. He scurried up the three steps to the ring, bent through the ropes and stepped in. He grabbed the top rope and did two quick knee bends. Deep breaths, loud on the exhale. He dropped to one knee and crossed himself, closed his eyes tight and whispered, "Our Father who art in heaven, forgive me, Lord. I know this is just a sporting event and you have more important things on your mind, but please please be with me now. Your will be done, amen."

He stood up and thrust out his hands to Father O'Day, who shoved the old gloves on his big hands and laced them tight and slipped the little plastic mouthpiece between his lips. Scully bit down on the cold plastic and turned to face his opponent in the opposite corner, a skinny guy, but much taller than Scully. Scully eyed him as he scissored his feet in a dance step that indicated a quickness that would surely give him fits. He looked out over the audience but could not recognize faces. Somewhere out there on one of those hard slat chairs sat Scully's father. Somewhere in Scully's mind his father's voice was droning, "Don't come crying to me, boy. You gotta take up for your own self" —saying, "You pitch like a girl" —saying, "Don't be a cry baby."

Scully's father had left for the war in forty-one when Scully was a chubby eleven-year-old, so shy that pulling words from his mouth was like yanking a Band Aid off a hairy arm and as awkward as a colt learning to walk. He hardly knew his father. Now, taller than his father and no longer so shy and clumsy as he had been then, he still felt that he didn't know the old man, and he knew he didn't measure up to his expectations. Since coming back from the war in forty-five, his father had hardly ever been at home. He worked long hours at the packing plant, pulling in overtime whenever possible, and spent most of his off time hanging out at Clancy's Pub. He was almost a stranger to Scully, yet Scully couldn't help wanting to show him a thing or two. Show him he could hold his own in at least this one manly arena.

He rolled his head and looked out at the spectators, and he felt dizzy. The crowd seemed to be circling him as if they were on a merry-go-round and he was stationary in the middle. Maybe he should have eaten something this afternoon. What else could account for this touch of faintness? Surely not fear. He would not let himself believe he could be afraid. Everything was spinning. It reminded him of a day long ago when a group of boys on bicycles had surrounded him and pedaled round and round in a tightening circle while he turned in place to keep a wary eye on them. It had happened when he was in the seventh grade at St. Bridget's School. He had stayed late after school for a meeting of the Sock and Buskin Club, planning decorations for the homecoming dance. He had joined the group because Sister Donovan had said everybody had to join some extracurricular activity and Sock and Buskin seemed as good as any. Besides, Annie McCarthy was in the club, the only other seventh grader, and he had had a crush on Annie McCarthy since fourth grade. She was the only friend he had in school. All the other kids made fun of him, calling him Blubber Boy because he was a big, fat crybaby whose pudgy cheeks would begin to quiver before he burst into tears.

Through the mere process of growing up, he had learned to control his tears. But the cruel nickname stuck. The other kids didn't see him as he was, but as they remembered him, and that was how he saw himself, too. Annie understood how he felt, because she had also been teased throughout most of her early years. She had red hair and freckles, and she wore glasses. The kids called her Freckle Four Eyes. But Annie had a sharp tongue and knew how to take up for herself. The other kids had long since quit teasing Annie, not so much because she was able to defend herself, but because in the sixth grade she blossomed into a beautiful young woman who seemed to have a natural ability to make friends, and in the seventh grade she became the first girl ever elected class president. Her newly gained popularity began to rub off—just a little—on her friend Scully. Scully was beginning to develop a few rudimentary social skills. Gradually. And even a hint of confidence. But he could not completely break the habit of thinking of himself as the friendless fat boy who broke into tears at the drop of an insult.

He was carrying a stack of books and walking as fast as he could, because he knew he'd be in trouble if he didn't get home soon. It was Wednesday, bridge day, and his mother always expected him to fix dinner on bridge day. He could imagine his old man saying, "Your mama said you didn't get home till nearly dark. Whaddaya think? You're some kind of society kid that can run around all hours without even thinking about your poor old mama sick in her bed?" *Why?* Scully asked himself over and over again. *Why does the old man always say she's sick in bed, even when he knows she's up and about preparing for her bridge club?* The fact was, both Scully and his father thought of her as sickly, even during her better days. She complained of headaches and mysterious female problems, of sweats and nausea, and many days she would not get dressed until late afternoon. Sickly or not, she never failed to complete a seemingly endless list of household chores—washing her men's clothes and neatly folding each and every item, even handkerchiefs and underwear; scrubbing floors, washing the blinds, pushing her old shopping cart six blocks to the store, and putting a hot dinner on the table every night but Wednesday when it was Scully's turn to cook the family dinner.

He stepped off the sidewalk and onto a field where boys from the neighborhood often played ball. Crossing the field was a quicker way home. He broke into a run, leaning forward with that awkward gait of his that made him look as if he was going to take a nose dive any moment, which he did all too often. He saw the boys coming on their bikes, three of them cutting across the field toward him in a sweeping arc. They were Carson Culpepper and Ray Goodnight and Rodney Laughlin, local toughs who called themselves the Mohawks. Culpepper was in the lead. He was pedaling hard in a red and white blur on one of those Arnold Schwinn Streamline Aerocycles, steamers flying from the handle bars and bits of cardboard stuck in the spokes going blip-blip-blip-blip like a taunt. Culpepper cut in front of Scully and hit his brakes, going into a skid. Goodnight and Laughlin followed close behind. They might have smashed into Scully if Scully had not tripped and splashed head first to the ground with a scattering of books.

They circled him on their bikes, leaning hard with feet scraping the ground on the turns. Scully pushed himself up and brushed off his pants. There was a bloody scrape on his elbow with dirt ground in. Grass stains on his white shirt. He picked up his books and began to turn in place, looking for a way to break free of the circle of bikes. Nobody said anything. They kept circling and circling. Going slow now and half pushing their bikes with their feet, then speeding up whenever Scully made a move to break free.

It happened that Annie McCarthy was passing by about then on the sidewalk that fronted the field. She saw the Mohawks tormenting Scully, and she cut across the grass, picking up a large stick and wielding it as a weapon as she approached them. She stopped outside the circle for a moment, waiting for an opening to jump inside. Culpepper skidded within inches of her. "Stay out of this, Annie," he shouted.

She darted behind him and rushed to Scully's side. "Stay close to me," she said, "and we'll get out of here. They wouldn't dare hurt a girl." Culpepper braked to a full stop. Goodnight and Laughlin piled up behind him, a full accordion stop of three boys on bikes. They stood each with one foot on the ground and one foot on a pedal, and they didn't say anything when Scully and Annie slowly walked between them. They kept a wary eye on her because she was gripping a weapon, and they couldn't attack her because ... well, because she was a girl. You don't hit girls.