

Shattered

January 1958

It certainly wasn't the most romantic movie, especially for a first date, but it was the only show in town. John Kneubuhl's debut horror film, *The Screaming Skull*, had finally made it to the big screen in Elsinore, promising enough chills to give Godzilla goose bumps. Sadly, the low budget creep-show failed to deliver, at least for two fearless teens. Instead, Ralph and Eunice strolled out of Lake Theatre giggling like junior high kids undressing in a locker room for the first time.

"Mom says Kneubuhl writes TV westerns," Eunice remarked. "He needs to stick with cowboys and forget haunted heads, if you ask me."

"C'mon, it wasn't that bad." Ralph objected.

"The whole idea was preposterous."

"Preposterous!" Ralph teased. "You're preposterous!"

"Now, that's no way to treat a lady."

"How bout I treat you to ice cream then."

"I don't know, Ralph. It's getting late."

"That movie didn't frighten you, but you're afraid of the dark?"

"I'm not afraid of the dark." Eunice explained. "I'm afraid of thugs."

"Thugs in this sleepy town?"

"You did hear about those two gals that were kidnapped recently, didn't you?"

"That was a purse snatching, not a kidnapping."

"According to Kominsky they were abducted!"

"Morris Kominsky!" Ralph chuckled. "According to him the sky is falling. He's nothing but a crazy old Jew."

The racial slur went off like a Molotov cocktail in Eunice's head, leaving her with a disturbing ring in her ears. Stuck somewhere between fight and flight, she froze. Ralph turned to look at her, not knowing what to make of her silence. He was clueless as an eight ball. When her tears came, Ralph hoped an answer would float up out of nowhere, but that never happened.

Eventually an apology somehow surfaced from Ralph, but his attempt to square things fell flat. In the spirit his words were offered, Ralph wouldn't have stood a chance, even on bended knee. There was no contrition in his voice. Even his eyes betrayed him. He looked as if his Jewish insult was justified.

When Eunice didn't respond, Ralph scoffed, "Didn't know you had such a soft spot for Kominsky."

"I suppose you think I'm as crazy as he is." Eunice blubbered.

"Now, why would I think that?"

"Me being a Jew and all."

"You're Jewish?" Ralph gasped with visible shock.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

Ralph's shocked reaction was the last straw for Eunice. She dashed off in an angry huff, ignoring Ralph's desperate pleas.

"I'm sorry!" he cried repeatedly, but Eunice wasn't in a forgiving mood. Her only interest was finding someplace where she could be alone, somewhere safe.

By the time Ralph caught up with her, Eunice was sitting in front of the local synagogue, staring at the stained glass window above. Cautiously, he approached her from behind. It was apparent that she was still crying. Ralph never meant to cause such heartbreak. He felt terrible. Finally.

Why did it matter that she was Jewish? Ralph reasoned as if a light came on for the first time in his mind. After he reached out and tentatively took her hand, only love mattered. As for Eunice, it was the Hebrew inscription above her that mattered to her most. Etched in stained glass were words written long ago - The Ten Commandments.

After a long silence, Eunice spoke. "Are you a religious person, Ralph?"

"I believe in God, if that's what you mean."

"So you also believe in the Shalts and Shalt Nots?" Eunice pointed up at the twin tablets in the glass.

"Without question."

"So, you agree we serve the same God?"

"Yeah, sure. I mean..." Ralph hesitated. "Well, you know, I'm a Methodist. We believe in Jesus and all that."

"Oh, of course, Jesus!" Eunice grinned. "He's a Jew, right?"

This time the explosion went off in Ralph's head. He got the point.

Eunice finally accepted his apology. Their reconciliation was sealed with a tender embrace. Ralph wanted to linger in her arms forever, and neither noticed as they snuggled that one of the local high-school jocks and his two sidekicks happened to walk up on the sidewalk behind them. The confidence levels of the bully Daniel and his buddies were higher than their combined IQ's. All brawn. Little need for brain. It soon became obvious that they were strolling through Elsinore looking for trouble.

"Now ain't that cute." Daniel the ringleader heckled. "Will you look at those two lovebirds!"

"Take a hike." Eunice shot back.

"Oh, you got a feisty one there, Ralph." Laughed Daniel. "She bringing you to temple to get circumcised?"

"Mind your business." Eunice scolded loudly.

"The rabbi ain't in, Ralphy." Daniel mocked. "Maybe we can help. I have my trusty pocketknife with me. Sharpened it this morning just for the occasion."

Ralph spoke up. "I'll tell you where to stick that knife." He sputtered loudly.

"Come here and tell me to my face if you got the guts."

Ralph's adrenaline was pumping and his honor was in question. He wasn't in his right mind. No one could have reasoned with him when he charged down the steps to attack his adversaries. He didn't stand a Popsicle's chance in a potter's kiln, however. Within minutes Ralph's bruised and bloodied body lay limp in a bed of gravel. Daniel did a victory dance while Eunice sobbed uncontrollably beneath the "Big Ten".

"I did you a favor, girl." Daniel boasted. "Matter of fact, you owe me a big kiss for clobbering that weasel."

Daniel boldly marched toward Eunice, lips puckering. With every step he was threatening to claim his prize. As Eunice shrunk back in terror, Ralph raised his head. He mustered barely enough strength to pull himself to his feet. By the curb Ralph noticed a baseball-sized rock, and he reached for it with his throwing hand. Still a bit groggy, he carefully took aim and hurled the projectile at Daniel. All five of them watched that night as the rock sailed above Daniel's head,

directly toward the synagogue's expensive, historic, and revered stained glass window. They heard the loud crash. All eyes widened as they stared at the large hole atop the Sixth Commandment.

Then they heard a loud, shrill voice coming from down the street, shouting out from the front door of Lucky's Diner. "I'm calling the cops."

Like scared rats on a sinking ship, Daniel and his two cohorts fled the scene into the night. Ralph, still dizzy from getting the stuffing pounced out of him, didn't know what to do. Eunice insisted he head home while she waited for the police. She'd take care of things. She'd concoct a story. The kind of story that Morris Kominsky, local communist agitator, was known to tell.

The Crescent

On any given day, Morris Kominsky could be found in the center of town, seated on one of several rockers on the porch in front of the huge old *Chimes* building on Graham Street. Morris was a striking man, who may have passed as Humphrey Bogart if not for the crow's feet drooping down from his eyes and trailing the length of his middle-aged face. Years of worry had engraved those lines there, and there were trenches of equal depth on his furrowed brow.

Some people thought Morris had too much time on his hands, puffing away on his pipe for hours and buttonholing anyone who happened to stroll by, talking to them incessantly. Townspeople in a hurry opted to walk on the opposite side of the road. Despite the garrulous reputation that prompted some to avoid him, Morris never ran short of company. Everyone in town agreed that he was the main source for local news. Known for tall tales, Morris especially loved to boast of his chance encounter in the late 1940s with actor Steve McQueen .

"I was sitting in this very chair," he swore. "There was a loud rumbling and roaring. Before I could blink, he shows up out of nowhere on a motorcycle.

"I was a bit aggravated, honestly," Morris would tell his listeners. "And I didn't even recognize this budding film star McQueen. I started chastising him for disturbing my peace. His big motorcycle kicked up a huge dust storm less than a yard in front of my face!

“We don’t need trouble around here, I scolded the lad. But young Steve didn’t want trouble either. He just wanted to take a bath! I had to laugh. He came two years too late, because the bathhouses in *The Chimes* were already closed by then!”

There was a time when *The Chimes* building hosted a steady stream of visitors. It was the most impressive bathhouse within hundreds of miles. Built in 1887 by Elsinore’s founder Franklin Heald, the Victorian-style structure designed by Frank Ferris boasted of Roman tubs, steam rooms, and hot mud baths.

Morris would continue telling the story. “I informed McQueen that this place was called *The Crescent* back in the old days. Folks came from all over to unwind here. Important people like Clark Gable and that fella’ from the Tarzan movies, Johnny Weissmuller.”

Morris would tell his listeners that the young McQueen already knew a lot of these important movie stars. And McQueen also had read all about *The Crescent* and the long list of celebrities who had visited there. That’s what had brought him to Elsinore in the first place—Steve wanted to see the place for himself. Not only that, but he had also heard of those healing waters, and he believed they were crying out for him to experience them.

“I finally broke the bad news to the poor chap,” Morris would recall. “After water levels dropped in Elsinore’s wells, business also evaporated. *The Crescent* soon shut its doors. It’s now an antique store.”

Morris said that McQueen was still curious enough to look inside, however. “Enter at your own risk!” Morris had warned the actor. “The place is haunted!”

Morris wasn’t the only one in town to believe ghosts occupied the aging walls of *The Chimes*. Many such stories were well known, and they existed long before Morris had arrived in

town. Rumors became especially rampant in 1939 after the son of Elsinore's Deputy Sheriff drowned in the courtyard swimming pool. People swore the boy's spirit never left.

Apparitions of another young girl, Gloria, had also been reported. An auto accident in front of *The Crescent* had claimed her mother's life along with the poor child's legs; both legs had to be amputated. Gloria was eventually brought to *The Crescent* for therapy. Sadly, the mineral water failed to prolong her life beyond childhood.

"I warned McQueen that he might hear Gloria crying for her mother," said Morris. "And there was once a teddy bear that someone had put in *The Crescent* in memory of Gloria, but at regular intervals the stuffed bear would change resting places... by itself... unexplained."

Morris would continue, "And I told Steve not to sit on either of those old motorcycles in there either, because spooks watched over those, too!"

According to Morris's description of that day's events, McQueen walked into *The Crescent*, but he bolted out within five minutes. "I could see the sweat dripping from his forehead. That's when I directed McQueen to another place where he could get a bath."

No one ever disagreed that *The Crescent* had opened wide the door of tourism to Elsinore. Even before this large edifice was built, however, the area's healthful waters were well known to earlier inhabitants of the land. The waters for decades had aroused the attention of the many curious seekers of the unusual. Native Americans, Spanish missionaries, and Mexican Ranchers all believed that health and happiness sprang from the magical wells. The fact that the settlement was situated on the bank of Southern California's largest natural lake was a helpful draw, too.

Nevertheless, it was the mineral springs that made Elsinore the esteemed resort city it was soon to become. In time, tourists arrived in droves, soaking in the springs as if they had tapped into a divine resource. Some imagined that the waters were from the Tree of Life itself.

With the railroad station immediately across the street, *The Crescent* couldn't keep pace with all the people arriving. It didn't take long for other businesses to sprout up, helping to accommodate Elsinore's numerous visitors. A host of inns, spas, and swimming holes soon transformed the dusty community into a recreational hot spot. Most of these businesses were Jewish owned, and before long Jews made up one third of the population—although not all of Elsinore's residents were pleased with this statistic.

Around this time a prolonged drought had turned much of Southern California, with the exception of Elsinore, into a land resembling the Gobi Desert. In response, a statewide master plan was developed to import water from the Colorado River, sending it to various areas. Unfortunately, the plan also included the replacement of Elsinore's spring water—and this was a move that would quickly dry up tourism. Business owners adamantly objected. Sadly, their concerns were not shared by the powerbrokers in Sacramento. Elected bureaucrats had other worries, and safety was a chief one. As long as well-water levels in Elsinore remained low, fluoride levels remained high and, according to the government, highly toxic.