

BOYS' OWN ADVENTURE STORIES

What are they putting in the water?

RANDALL R. SAVAGE

Little Karl Pink was a plucky young fellow who lived with his momma and poppa in the quiet little town of Niceplace. Little Karl's poppa was the odd one out in the neighbourhood. While all of Little Karl's friends' daddies had been in Germany and Asia fighting in the war, everyone knew Mr. Pink was the only one who'd stayed behind. Little Karl used to ask Mr. Pink why *he* hadn't joined the army and fought for America's Freedom. Mr. Pink would laugh pleasantly every time, adjust his glasses and ruffle Little Karl's hair and say, "Well, son, I have a really, really important job at the water treatment plant. If I'd gone and gotten myself killed out in Okinawa or somewhere who'd have made sure you and your mother had safe water to drink?" He would then stroke his goatee, adding: "Not everyone is a soldier, Karl. We must each of us contribute to the good of the State with the skills we have acquired."

Now, Little Karl was a pretty sharp boy and he wasn't fooled by his poppa. His schoolteacher Mr. Eagle and his scout leader Mr. Iron had both taught the boy good, old-fashioned American sense and values. His father's words were distinctly un-American. They were cowards' words, and they weighed on his heart. He began to confide his worries to Mr. Eagle, but Mr. Eagle shushed him, turned off the classroom lights, made sure no one was standing outside the door and only then addressed the boy. Mr. Eagle's sky-blue eyes bore into Little Karl's. He spoke, "Son, what we're going to talk about now, no else can ever know. Do you understand?"

"Of course, Mr. Eagle, I ain't no [redacted]." [We can't print the word he used because they had more Freedom in those days.]

"Good. Karl," Mr. Eagle's square jaw and strong mouth twitched unpleasantly around the name,

"Karl, haven't you ever wondered why I carry *this* with me?" He indicated the leather flask on his desk.

"Well, the boys and I always thought it was your whiskey, Mr. Eagle."

The school teacher chuckled darkly. "Hah. No, more than my job's worth to drink at work. This is water, Karl. Drinking water. Fresh river water that Mr. Iron and some others who know the truth go out and get in secret."

Secrets? The truth? "Gee, Mr. Eagle, why don't you use the tap water? My pop works hard to —"

"Ah, yes. Your father. Well, I used to, Karl. We all used to. But that's before we came back from the war. That's before your father was put in charge of the water treatment facility. Before the government started flouridizing our water supply."

"I don't understand."

"It's time you knew your father, Karl." The teacher's eyes gleamed with purpose. An eagle's cry echoed from the mountains.

That night, after dinner, Little Karl asked Mr. Pink if he could visit him at his workplace. Mr. Pink froze with his glass halfway to his lips, and set it down. Regarding him over his heavy spectacles, Little Karl's father said, "Oh, I don't know, son, we're really busy there, all 'round the clock. We can't have a little tyke like you running around, getting into trouble hahahaha."

Mrs. Pink gave a tinkling laugh as well, and patted her son's head.

"You'd be so bored there, dear. All they do all day is move chemicals, measure chemicals, use chemicals... only an egghead like your father would enjoy it."

"Well, I don't enjoy it —"

"Well you certainly spend more time with your water than you do with me." She reached forward and curled a finger around her husband's goatee. "I'm starting to miss you."

Little Karl blushed and protested:

"Eww, mom! Gross!"

"Oh, eat your borscht, dear."

Mr. Pink grinned. "Maybe I *should* be spending more time at home. Still, I think we should continue this discussion *after* dinner." He winked conspiratorially at Karl, who didn't get it.

Mrs. Pink got up, her plate half-full, and stretched theatrically.

"I'm so tired all of a sudden. I think I'll head upstairs early. Karl, honey, could you do the dishes tonight?"

"Yes, ma'am." Karl was a good boy.

"And remember to drink your glass of water before bed, young man."

"Oh. Um.

Uh. Uh. Yeah, yeah I will."

Karl deliberately avoided his father's gaze.

So he didn't see Mr. Pink's body stiffen and his eyes go narrow.

"That's my little man. And as to my other man..." she smiled at Mr. Pink. "... Don't keep me waiting."

Distractedly, Mr. Pink said, "Oh, right, of course not, I'll be upstairs in a bit." He downed his vodka. His eyes never left his son's face.

With his wife snoring contentedly, Mr. Pink crept in the darkness to the kitchen phone. He dialled a certain number and waited. At the third ring, someone picked up.

"Da?"

"He knows."

