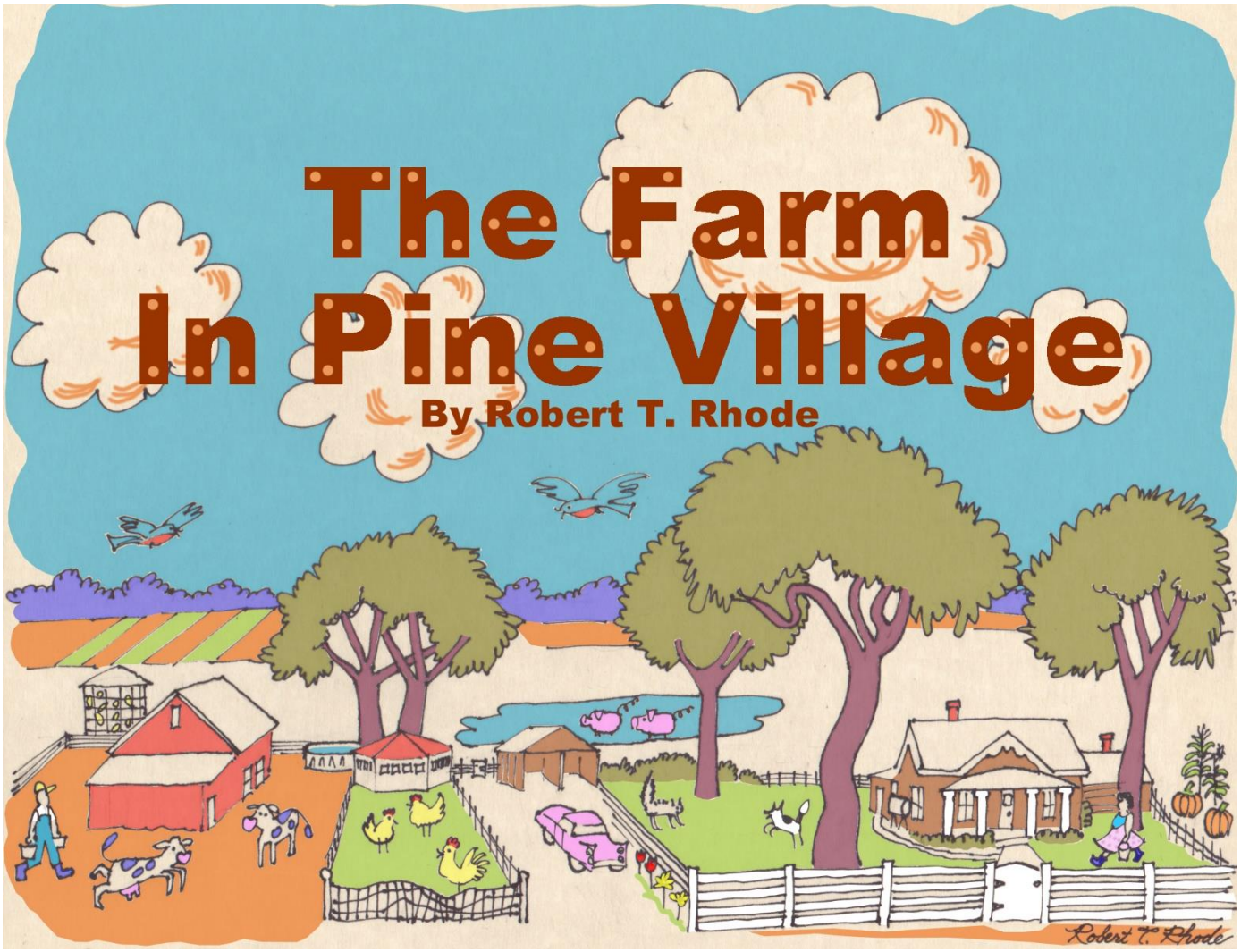

The Farm in Pine Village offers stories grandparents can read to their grandchildren without having to fear the consequences. Follow Robert, the central character, as he grows up in the 1950s and 60s in a Hoosier farming community.

Chapter 1: The Discovery

This novel is dedicated to my dear friend Eleanor Yeager Stewart, who helped me realize that the worlds of our childhood were never somewhere else but always right within us. Here is part of my childhood world—almost exactly the way it was!

The tall foxtail of July waved like ornamental grasses above him. Across the road to the northeast stood the school with the grades and the high school all in one building made mostly of metal. Two long, angling sidewalks approached the two sets of doors spaced along the south front of the red-roofed one-story school. The white paint on the exterior walls made dusty spots on the fingertips when it was touched, and the scrubby evergreens along the foundation gave off a pleasant mid-summer scent. Straight to the north, dappled shadows played across the porch of Beulah Jones' house surrounded by old maples. The drive to the parking lot between the school and the gymnasium curved past sawed-off poles spaced to deter traffic from entering the playground. Behind the gym was a fringe of trees bordering Pine Creek. Had he been taller, he might have seen Beulah in the vegetable garden tucked behind her home. She wore a straw hat and pretty gloves made for gardening. Her white hair curled stylishly beneath the hat's broad brim. She seemed perfectly at ease bending over her tomatoes and hunkering down to pull the weeds among her onions.

The sky was the pale blue shade of a hazy summer. Rows of cumulus clouds floated slowly toward the east—so slowly that their motion was almost undetectable. Now and then, the rasping crescendo of a cicada in the nearby catalpa tree caught his attention before the sound trailed away. His mother, Ida, was hoeing industriously in her large garden. Plenty of hoeing was needed in July, for the ground had hardened under the baking sunshine and firmly gripped the roots of the weeds that were shooting upward and outward at an alarming rate each day. Unlike Beulah, his mother wore no hat. The tight curls of her "perm" glistened black while she threw her sun-reddened shoulders into the work of hacking away at the pigweed and the lamb's quarters.

He couldn't see his mother, either, even though she was only thirty feet away. He couldn't see the houses of Pine Village in an arc from the north to the west. His mother's garden on the south side of State Route 26 and the playground on the north side defined the east edge of the town. The cozy homes nestled securely among the shade trees. Robins sailed down from the low branches to pull worms from the lawns, and katydids droned pleasantly in the foliage. Occasionally, pickups with curving fenders and livestock

panels around the beds ambled along the highway. Horses in the narrow meadow behind Jim Eberle's house whinnied happily.

He saw only the nodding brushes of the foxtail all around him and a spot of blue sky and white cloud above. Ida had stamped her sandaled feet in the thick growth of foxtail until she had hollowed out a "playpen" for little Robert, who had just turned two. The weeds were impenetrable there in shade of the lone catalpa on the south edge of the garden, and she knew that Robert could go nowhere. He sat with his feet almost together and his dimpled knees to either side. He indolently played with the long stems that his mother had trod.

Suddenly, the weeds parted and eyes stared at Robert. His blue eyes must have registered just as much surprise as he saw in the blue eyes that looked back at him. To get his mother's attention, Robert shouted. She dropped her hoe and came running as fast as she could between the rows of potatoes. Soon, her face with the glasses almost slipping off her nose peered down from the circle of sky above Robert.

"It's a kitty!" she exclaimed, reaching downward and scooping up the ivory-colored kitten, which mewed, much to Robert's delight. The fur was scarcely any lighter than Robert's hair, for he was a towhead. Ida set down the kitten only long enough to lift Robert in one arm while she reached for the kitten again with her free hand. Taking long strides so that Robert wouldn't get too heavy, Ida rushed toward the house. When she reached the gate that leaned from the corner of the old smokehouse, her steps were easier in the mowed grass on the other side. She swung open the screened door of the breezeway between the smokehouse, now a storage room, and the kitchen. She was glad to set Robert down while she kept a firm hold on the kitten.

"We'll feed him some cream," she said, disappearing into the kitchen and soon reappearing with a saucer in hand. There in the breezeway, she placed the saucer before the wobbly kitten and poured a little cream that she had drawn from the separator just that morning. It was a Marvel Gravity Dilution Cream Separator made by Superior Sheet Metal Works Company of Indianapolis, as a silvery plate on the dark blue three-legged can proclaimed. Even though Robert's feet hurt, as they did whenever he stood, he hardly noticed the ache because he was so entranced with the kitten, which overcame its fear and flicked its little pink tongue into the fresh cream. "After he has drunk all he wants, you can pet him a little," said Ida.

Silently, she and little Robert watched the kitten contentedly lapping the surface of the liquid. It drank almost every drop. Then Ida showed Robert how to pet the creature lightly so as not to hurt it.

“What shall we call him?” Ida asked Robert. Because the kitten was so soft, Robert said, “Fuzz.” Ida laughed. “That’s a good name for him!” she agreed.

At that moment, Robert’s father came to the porch on the opposite side of the kitchen from the breezeway. “Joe, come here,” Ida called to her husband. “Look what Robert found!”

In his dark blue overalls and short-sleeved shirt, bleached almost white, Joe hurried through the kitchen and out to the breezeway. He took off his seed corn cap and ran his hand over his balding head. His eyes twinkled and his face broke into a smile. “Well, where did you find a kitten?” he asked his wife.

“Robert found him,” Ida explained. “I heard Robert yell, and here was the kitten standing by Robert in the weeds. His name is Fuzz. Robert named him.”

“We’re going to keep him, are we?” Joe wanted to know.

“He’s Robert’s kitten,” Ida answered.

Robert looked up at his father’s merry eyes and his mother’s big smile. He could hardly believe his luck in getting to have such a miraculous thing as a soft, warm kitten, which had begun to purr under his careful touch. Robert would remember that day for the rest of his life.

Chapter 2: The Incubator

For hours each day, Robert played with the kitten he had named Fuzz. Robert tantalizingly pulled a long piece of yarn, and Fuzz pounced on it, over and over. Robert sat with his pudgy knees out. His feet hurt too much to stand. Once, he overheard his mother speaking in worried tones to his father about how Robert was becoming too big to carry and that, at two years of age, he should be walking. After all, he was tall enough to see over the edge of the kitchen table! Ida thought Robert would not understand what she was saying. In her diary, she had expressed her fear that Robert was not as bright as his older brother, Charles. "Robert doesn't say much," she wrote. She acknowledged that, at the same age, Charles had been quite talkative.

But Robert *did* comprehend what she was saying, and he knew that, inevitably, he would be taken to Dr. Virgil Scheurich in Oxford, the town five miles to the north of Pine Village. During the consultation, Dr. Scheurich advised Ida and Joe to consult with a doctor in Lafayette who had enjoyed success with youngsters who could not walk.

Within a few days, Robert and his parents were seated in the office of the doctor, who said, "Why, his arches are as flat as pancakes! He needs corrective shoes with arch supports." Right then and there, Joe drove to the B & W Shoe Company on the east side of the square. Proprietor Mr. Marion R. Baker took measurements of Robert's feet and wrote an order for the shoes. Charles likewise was to receive a pair.

Several days later, when Mr. Baker ensured that the boys' shoes fit them, Robert took his first walk in the style of black shoes with arch supports that he would wear until he entered college. (He continued to wear a pair when he performed as a member of the Indiana University Marching Hundred.) As a toddler, Robert found that he could walk without the same degree of pain that he had been feeling. With wide eyes, he looked up at his father, as if to say, "It's a miracle!" Soon thereafter, Robert was walking routinely, and his parents did not have to carry him.

What of Robert's reluctance to speak? Again, there were conversations in undertones between his parents. They decided to take him to a Lafayette clinic specializing in speech defects. He was tested, but so was his brother. Charles' answers were to serve as a comparison. After the testing, the expert sat down with Ida and Joe. He began by saying, "There is nothing wrong with Robert's intelligence. He recognizes more words than his brother knows—probably because Robert has been listening carefully. Robert's reticence originates in his having a palate that is a bit higher than normal; for this reason, he says 'wabbit,' instead of 'rabbit.' You can help him to say

his *r*'s by asking him to say 'er' first, then the rest of the word. 'Er'-abbit, for 'rabbit,' or 'Er'-obert, for 'Robert.' Avoid correcting him for mispronunciation; that makes him afraid to speak."

Ida and Joe took the specialist's advice to heart, and, little by little, Robert began talking without hesitation. At first, his "er" was drawn out, but, gradually, it shortened. Eventually, he was uttering the proper sound of the *r* at the beginning of words such as "reading." He always felt a trifle self-conscious of the *r* sound whenever it fell at the beginning of a word, and that feeling never left him.

All too soon, Robert celebrated his third birthday. That Thursday, Ida invited his grandmother, named Kosie Rhode, and his great aunt, named Margaret Goddard, to the noon meal, called "dinner." Everyone gathered around the five-leg drop-leaf table covered with an oilcloth in the kitchen. There was barely room for the six people to pull up their chairs. The windows and doors were open to permit the faint breezes of late July to waft through the hot room. On the table were platters of steaming roasting ears, fresh yeast rolls. Big bowls were filled with fluffy mashed potatoes and glistening green beans fresh from the garden. In the center was a mound of fried chicken. Sweet iced tea was poured over crackling ice cubes in the glasses with weighted bottoms that were used only for special occasions. Using a wooden mold, Ida had made a big block of butter from the fresh milk of the Holstein cows, and the yellow brick was topped with the shape of a rose. Beside it stood dishes filled with Ida's crabapple jelly and wild grape jelly. The conversation flowed freely, with beloved Great Aunt Margaret telling stories from her childhood so humorous that laughter repeatedly burst forth. She had the gift of making any story amusing. Grandma Rhode listened intently and smiled prettily. Great Aunt Margaret's first husband had been Grandma Rhode's brother, who passed away many years earlier. Margaret's second husband had been the veterinarian in town, and he, too, had gone to his reward. Grandma Rhode and her husband, Seymour Alfred Rhode, had divorced, and he lived in Indianapolis.

Dessert was an angel food cake with pink peppermint icing, which became Robert's favorite cake, requested for his birthday year after year thereafter. Not long before the 25th of July, Robert had learned a stunt of which he was very proud. He would begin on all fours then lift one leg into the air. He would then waddle as quickly as he could on both hands and one foot while keeping the other foot as high as he could. He wanted to show Great Aunt Margaret and Grandma Rhode his newly acquired skill, so, after dinner, his mother moved her rocking chair to one side, thereby opening just enough floor space for Robert to demonstrate his acrobatic talent.

“Look at him go!” Great Aunt Margaret exclaimed. After taking a few rolling and rollicking steps on two hands and a foot, Robert stood up and accepted the gracious praise of his great aunt and grandmother. The company retired to the living room, but, finding it too hot for comfort, everyone gratefully sat down on the front porch, which faced the north and was less steamy than anywhere else. The adults took the metal chairs and the swing that hung from the ceiling, while Robert and Charles sat on the cool concrete floor. Family stories poured forth—tales of long ago that Robert and Charles absorbed and would remember years hence.

After Robert turned four, he began to feel as if everything were even more memorable than before. His life on the farm in Pine Village seemed permanent and secure. One morning, he awakened to the touch of something lightweight and soft brushing his face.

“Peep, peep, peep,” went the something.

Robert slowly opened his eyes. He saw his mother’s smiling face above an indistinct yellow blur. He focused on the blur. Just then, it moved.

“Peep, peep,” the blur said.

Robert focused more closely. The outlines of a duckling taking its first steps on the edge of the covers that Robert had pulled across his chin became clear.

“Careful!” Ida urged, as Robert abruptly slid upward to free his arms. “Don’t squeeze him! Hold him in the palm of your hand.”

Robert’s mother had a large Farm Master incubator, in which she hatched ducklings, goslings, and some of the chicks that Joe raised in his chicken business. Robert’s father purchased the majority of his chicks from Henderson Poultry in Oxford.

“He just hatched,” Ida said, while Robert held the downy yellow duckling in the palms of his hands. Its bright eyes sparkled. Its orange bill curved upward in what appeared to be a smile. “Come see the others,” said Ida, taking the duckling from Robert’s outstretched arms.

Robert followed his mother to the breezeway where the incubator stood. An early summer breeze carried the not unpleasant scent of eggs hatching in the warmth of the brown wooden box on green painted legs. Ida unlatched the door with its slender glass window on one side of the box and let it swing downward on its hinges. She slid the tray forward. Among the eggs on the

tray were several that were pipping: that is, the bills of the ducklings inside were breaking away the shell on one end, so that the ducklings could emerge from the eggs. Robert stared in wonder at the tiny bills pushing at the inner lining where bits of the outer shell had fallen away. One damp duckling was all the way free and was drying while resting from her effort to escape.

Ida soon slid the tray back into position and swung the latch around. She had removed the damp duckling, which she gently set in the same bushel basket where she had placed the happy creature that had awakened Robert. Even though the morning was warm, a red heat lamp hanging by its black cord from a hook in the ceiling was suspended not far above the basket, which was lined with newspapers.

"Peep, peep, peep," said Robert's duckling. "Peep, peep," replied its slightly damp, tired nest mate.

Chapter 3: The Stage

Just then, Robert heard his father whistling as he opened the screen door to the east porch. Robert ran to help Joe put the round white filter in the special galvanized funnel that perfectly fit the opening in the top of the tall milk can. "Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's home from work we go," Joe whistled, while he lifted the white enameled milk bucket with its red rim and poured the morning's fragrant milk into the funnel. Robert heard the merry pinging of the filtered liquid dripping and splashing within the can.

Rubbing his sleepy eyes, Charles stood in the kitchen doorway and yawned.

"Let's sit down to breakfast," Ida said.

Tumblers of fresh milk with a layer of yellow cream having risen to the top were arranged around the table. Halves of pink grapefruits rested in bowls at each place around the table. Mounds of sugar on top of the grapefruits were slowly turning a pale gray as the juice mingled with the granules. While Joe, Robert, and Charles spooned out the pink segments, Ida fried eggs until the edges of the whites were crispy brown. As the toaster popped with a pleasant "ker-ching" sound, she quickly slathered homemade butter on the slices and distributed the hot toast to each person.

"Joe, I'm worried about the cows," Ida said. "If they get out, they'll fall in that hole."

A deep hole ….

"There's nothing to worry about," said Joe. "They're not going to get out. If they *were* going to break through the pasture fence, it wouldn't be there. It'd be where that old panel is by the hog lot."

By this time, Robert was walking well wherever and whenever he wanted. He was talking much more often and fluently. He had practically forgotten the fact that, only two years earlier, his parents had to carry him everywhere while his feet ached. He had indeed forgotten his preliminary reluctance to speak.

As Charles had begun to attend first grade at the school across the road from home, Robert wanted to go to school, but his mother said he couldn't.

"You're only four. You have to wait another year," she said, repeatedly.

Every afternoon, Robert stood in the window in his parents' bedroom and watched for his brother to come home from school. The window in that room commanded the best view of the long sidewalk that ran to the southwest door of the school from a point across the highway from the driveway where Joe's 1950 Chevrolet was parked, and it permitted Robert to see Charles striding past the automobile in the driveway to the gate through their white-board fence into the yard, thence along a narrow sidewalk to the porch east of the kitchen. Robert could hear the new Zenith television airing a telecast from its position atop a green Formica table with silvery tubular legs in the kitchen corner.

The television had not yet entirely replaced the dark brown 1949 Philco Bakelite radio standing amid the strands of white pop beads on Ida's dresser, but the newfangled "TV" had certainly captured the family's attention.

While Robert pulled back the white gauzy curtains to wait for Charles to appear, he wondered what Charles was learning that day and why he, Robert, was not allowed to learn the lessons at the same time. He felt miffed that he had to stay home through the long mornings and the boring afternoons while Charles got to participate in what must surely be the pleasures of schooling.

Then Robert would see Charles walking down the driveway, and envious thoughts were shoved aside by eager anticipation of playing until suppertime. Robert would run around the foot of the bed, through the kitchen, to the porch to greet Charles as he came through the screen door.

On this day, Robert scurried to welcome Charles home from school.

"What do you want to do until it's time for chores?" Robert asked.

"What did you learn at school today?" Ida asked.

Charles smiled while he unzipped his gray jacket and hung it up. "We learned to subtract, but then, I already knew how to do that," he replied to his mother.

Ida, who had taught elementary school, cast a worried glance at Robert. "Maybe I'm teaching you too much at home," she said.

Robert tried to get his brother's attention. "But what do you want to do?" he prompted.

"We'll make a stage out of Tinkertoys," Charles finally answered.

While Charles changed from his school clothes to his everyday clothes, Robert poured the Tinkertoys from their cans onto the rug in the living room.

"We'll need a way to hang curtains on both sides of the stage," Charles said, as he began to place green sticks in plain wooden disks. Robert handed the stage-maker whatever parts he needed as he called for them.

In a short time, a representative proscenium arch and stage stood before them, although they did not yet know the term "proscenium arch." It was rather unstable but functional.

Robert and Charles were familiar with stages because their parents had taken them for lessons at Allen's Dance Studio across from the *Journal and Courier* newspaper office in Lafayette.

Charles brought two plastic toy cows from the shelves where the toys were piled, and he held one in each hand on the stage. To Robert's delight, he made them dance.

"Now we need curtains," Charles said. "Mom," he called, as he strode into the kitchen, "we need curtains for our stage."

Ida was up to her elbows in suds while doing dishes. She turned and smiled at her son while wiping her hands on a towel. She returned to the living room and admired the stage before going to her room to pull material from a basket. She cut the curtains from leftover lightweight cotton and showed Charles how to pleat it while Robert looked on. Next, she used a knitting needle to pull a string through the pleats of both curtains. When she held up the curtains by the string, both boys were enchanted.

Charles carefully tied the string to both sides of the proscenium arch. He and Robert gently pulled the curtains closed and applauded their work. Obeying Charles' instructions, Robert pulled the curtains open while Charles held the dancing cows on the stage. The effect was dramatic! They could hardly wait to show their father when he came in to get them for the evening chores.

Joe was generous in his praise of the stage. He kindly sat through a matinee performance of the dancing bovines. Then he announced that it was time to feed the real cows. Robert thought that maybe, when all human beings were out of sight, the real cows danced.

Chapter 4: The Cow

The blustery weather of November was at hand. The wind moaned beneath leaden skies, and the branches of the twin oaks near the barn tossed and creaked. Robert and Charles helped scatter ground chicken feed from a repurposed coffee can along the tin feeders inside the old chicken house. Next, it was off to the barn to milk the Holstein cows, which had already come in from the pasture on their own without having to be herded. Fuzz watched from the high threshold of the door of the corn crib within the barn while Charles and Robert used other discarded coffee cans to scoop ground feed from a sack and to pour it in the shallow boxes in the stalls. Their father said, "Watch out below," and, shortly thereafter, dropped a hay bale through the rectangular hole cut in the bottom of the mow. He followed down the ladder that was nailed to the wall there and began to scatter last summer's sweet-smelling clover and timothy in the deep hay boxes that ran the length of both sides of the alley down the middle of the barn and that held a shallow feed tray in each stall.

While Joe balanced on a one-legged milking stool and rhythmically squirted the milk into an enameled bucket, Robert and Charles sang songs in the alleyway.

I've been working on the railroad
All the live-long day.
I've been working on the railroad
Just to pass the time away.
Can't you hear the whistle blowing?
Rise up so early in the morn!
Can't you hear the whistle blowing?
Dinah, blow your horn!

Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow your horn?
Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow your horn?

Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah …

… and on went the rollicking song and others like it, until Joe had finished milking the few cows that needed to be milked. He had almost a full bucket, which he had to carry carefully so as not to spill a drop.

Back at the enclosed porch to the east of the house, the boys and their father unsnapped the line of buckles down their boots, kicked them off, and hung their wraps before sitting down to dinner.

Ida had prepared buttery grilled cheese sandwiches and a huge batch of chili. The conversation flowed without cessation while the four of them ate and ate.

After dinner, the television was turned on so that the family could watch *Gunsmoke*. All too soon, it seemed, everyone had to go to bed.

In the middle of the night, Robert slowly awakened to unaccustomed sounds. He rubbed his eyes and tried to comprehend why light was coming down the hallway from the kitchen to the boys' bedroom. He heard his parents' anxious voices.

Charles was already out of bed, so Robert tossed back the warm covers. Following his brother's lead, Robert pulled his jeans over his flannel pajamas and put a flannel shirt over the flannel pajama top. In the cool darkness, he accidentally put pajama buttons through the shirt button holes and had to start over. By the time he had found his shoes and socks, he was well behind Charles.

Robert was frightened. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

"I suppose I ought to wake up Glen Bisel," Joe was saying to Ida when the boys came running into the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" Charles asked.

The boys' mother replied, "The cows got out, and one of them fell in the hole."

Robert suddenly became aware of a distant bellowing. The mournful sound seemed blown by the gusts of wind. The hole was almost as deep as a cow was tall and had been dug to fix a tile problem. It could not be backfilled until Joe could be assured that the difficulties had been resolved.

Joe put on his denim coat and his cap with the ear flaps. Soon, he was driving his GMC pickup to the Sinclair gasoline station to awaken his friend Glen.

Before long, the GMC returned. Behind it came Glen's wrecker. Joe parked the pickup so that its headlights illuminated the scene. To Robert, the

occurrence felt like a weird dream: beams from headlamps casting fantastic shadows, groaning wind, black-and-white cow mooing in distress, Glen carefully lowering his truck's heavy chain with a canvas sling attached, struggling to position the sling under the belly of the terrified cow, and slowly lifting the cow from the hole that had swallowed it.

As the sling came away, the cow scrambled to trot away. Joe herded it and the other cows through the broken fence before setting a metal fence post and using pliers to splice new wire around the breaks.

"Would you come in for a cup of coffee?" Ida asked Glen.

"No, thank you," Glen smiled in the light from his wrecker. "I think I'll go back to bed." It was—after all—the middle of the night.

While Robert, Charles, and their mother trudged back to the house, Joe drove the pickup around to the driveway.

"I guess Dad should have listened to you," Robert said.

"Don't find fault with your father," Robert's mother warned. "Once there's a problem, it's time to fix the problem. It's never the time to say, 'I told you so.'"

Charles and Robert went back to bed while Ida and Joe had a cup of Nescafé instant coffee to settle their jangled nerves. It had been an eventful night. Robert lay awake for some time, listening to the roar of the wind. He thought about how his father was an excellent farmer, and Robert wondered how his father could sometimes make slapdash fence repairs that anyone could see would not hold back cows for long. Robert guessed that his father had much to do and could not give every task the same degree of attention. Thankfully, his father had fixed the fence properly on this night! Then Robert thought about how his father worked hard throughout each day, including hours before sunrise and after sunset, and Robert remembered what his mother had said about not finding fault. He felt embarrassed that he had been critical of his father's fence-mending. With a sense of guilt, he tossed and turned until he finally fell asleep. Inspired by his mother's frequent readings of Winnie the Pooh stories, Robert dreamed that a Horrible Heffalump had fallen in the hole.

Chapter 5: The Holidays

After Charles returned from school one day, he and Robert were playing Blob when their mother announced that they were going to the Masonic Lodge to see Santa Claus that evening. Blob was a game that the boys had invented. In previews at the movie theater in the nearby town of Oxford, enough of the plot of the movie by the same name had been revealed to suggest the game, without necessitating a viewing of the horror film—which their mother would never have permitted, anyway.

One of the brothers was designated "the Blob." He covered himself with an old blanket and huddled on the floor while the other brother hid. Then the Blob searched for the hidden brother. While he searched, he periodically knelt and rolled around on the floor while keeping the blanket over him. When he found the brother, his object was to cast the blanket over him while making horrifying snarling sounds. If he failed to get the blanket to fall over his brother, he had to crouch beneath the blanket and make muttering noises until his brother had a chance to hide again. The search repeated. If he was lucky enough to drop the blanket over his brother, the brother became the Blob, and the proverbial tables were turned.

With a visit to Santa Claus in the offing, the brothers soon found themselves having to dress in their Sunday best. Because temperatures were chilly, they had to don long underwear. Robert had trouble folding the bottom of the leg of the underwear and stuffing it inside his sock. After he had pulled on his woolen trousers, he had to put on his corrective shoes and tie their laces. His mother had repeatedly demonstrated how to form a loop and to hold it in one hand while doubling the other end through the loop so as to form a second loop. Robert could almost achieve that much, but, when he tried to pull the two loops tight, the end of the one he had doubled invariably slipped through the first loop. He was left with one loop, a loose knot, and a long strand of lace that he would trip over, if he were to leave things as they were.

On his own, Robert had learned to form one loop in one hand and a second loop in his other hand and to tie the two loops together. He assumed (incorrectly) that speed was important, so he practiced forming the loops as rapidly as possible. That way, he could tell his mother, "See? My way is just as fast." Ida wanted him to tie his shoes the way she had shown him, and she made him try and try again. Finally, Robert's father said, "Ida, he gets his shoes tied just as nicely his way as our way. Why not let him have his way?" Reluctantly, she consented. (Robert would tie his shoes his way for the rest of his life!)

On this occasion, Robert tied his shoes successfully. Next, his brother and he had to zip up their parkas, put on their stocking caps, slip the hoods of their parkas over the stocking caps, wrap their mufflers around their faces, and put on their gloves. Charles and their mother climbed into the back seat of the 1950 Chevrolet, and Robert and their father took the front seat. Robert always got "car sick" in the back, so he had to ride in the front. His mother thought it was a reasonable concession to put Robert in front.

The boys were perspiring under their parkas, even after the short drive to the Masonic Lodge. The two-story building was on the south side of an alley that led westward from State Route 55 not far from the intersection of State Route 26. Some thirty years earlier, the first floor had served as Ray Ogborn's garage and automotive repair shop. The boys' grandmother Kosie had a brother, Charles Albert Cobb, nicknamed Charley or Cobbie, who died in 1931. His widow, Margaret Wagner, was the beloved family member that the boys and their parents called "Great Aunt Margaret." She eventually had married the veterinarian, Doc Goddard, but he, too, died before the boys were born. Residents of the town continued to refer to her as Mrs. Margaret Goddard. Ray Ogborn had purchased the automotive business, but not the building, from Charley, so Great Aunt Margaret transferred ownership of the first floor to her sister Louise and Louise's husband, Pete Thurman.

To reach the Masonic rooms on the second floor, the boys and their parents trudged down the dark alley. Robert kept turning his head from side to side so that he could see beyond the fake fur that surrounded the hood. Half dead vines shuddered in the cold breeze along the brick wall. Traces of snow highlighted the weeds along the foundation of the building across from the Masonic Lodge. The family passed through a doorway at the very back of the old building and started up the dimly illuminated stairs. Robert tripped more than once. Several of the steps creaked.

They entered the main hall. A huge potbelly stove stood in the center of the room. So much wood had been fed to it that it was glowing red in places and was radiating a tropical heat that melted the frost on the tall windows. Chairs were pushed back around the walls. The boys were thankful to remove their coats, but, even then, they were too hot. They waited patiently for Santa Claus. Well, they knew that this was not the *real* Santa. He came without being seen on Christmas Eve and left presents for the boys in their very own home. This Santa was a well-meaning member of the lodge. Soon, they heard him ho-ho-hoing. To the adults' applause, he burst upon the gathering. He was wearing a flimsy Santa costume with a rather poor excuse for a cotton beard, but he was most certainly jolly! He handed small gifts and candy to all the children. The leader of the lodge said a few inspiring words about Christmas, and the event was over. The adults stood

conversing with one another far longer than Robert's patience could hold out, but he knew better than to tug on his mother's sleeve. Eventually, Ida smiled down at Charles and Robert and asked, "Are you boys ready to go home?" They nodded politely.

On went the parkas, the stocking caps, the mufflers, and the gloves. Once the family was back inside the Chevrolet, Ida suggested that they see the Christmas lights. Joe drove around Pine Village, which took relatively little time, as the town was quite small. Next, he headed north on State Route 55 all the way to Oxford. The stores that year were carrying GE "ice bulbs," which were pale blue Christmas lights that were shaped like globes and covered with "ice crystals," as they were called, and Elvis' recording of "Blue Christmas" had been playing on radio stations for two years. Even so, the family was surprised when Joe drove past Doc Scheurich's ranch house in the woods just to the south of Oxford. All blue lights outlined the home! The blue was such a departure from the multi-colored bulbs that the boys and their parents were impressed.

Once the family was home, Joe played 45 RPM records on the Victrola, which resembled a piece of furniture and which had an honored place in the living room. Twin doors with ornamental ovals in the gleaming finish swung open to reveal a radio and record player, as well as a fabric-covered speaker, on the right and shelves for storing 45 records on the left. Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" was a favorite!

Christmas Eve fell on Wednesday, and the family went to the Methodist Church for the evening service. Joe's father, Seymour, had come from Indianapolis to spend the holiday with Joe, Ida, and the boys. Grandpa Rhode gave everyone a ride in his black 1951 Hudson Commodore 8 Sedan. The family disembarked from the comfortable car and took the stairs to the sanctuary. For the remainder of his life, Robert would retain a detailed memory of how holy the church appeared that night. Candles stood in the windowsills, and their flames reflected from the undulations in the stained glass. Real evergreen boughs surrounded them, and the scent of pine filled the room. People spoke softly as they took their seats along the pews. Mrs. Brutus, the organist, launched into "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Everyone stood and began to sing. Robert long remembered the twinkle in his father's eyes and the sparkling light reflected in the glistening eyes of his mother, whom the song touched deeply.

Chapter 6: Christmas Morning

Robert was squirming to get out of bed long before anyone else was awake on Christmas Day that year. His wish to see what Santa had brought bordered on anxiety. When he heard his mother gathering dishes in the kitchen, he threw back the heavy covers and raced to the living room to be sure that Santa had left presents. Robert's eyes grew round as saucers when he confirmed that Santa had paid a visit during the mysterious night of nights. Next, he sprinted to the kitchen.

"Shhh!" his mother said with her forefinger to her lips. "You'll wake Grandpa!" The way the rooms of the house were arranged, Robert had run through his parents' bedroom to get to the kitchen. He had dashed past Grandpa Rhode, who looked so much like Joe that Robert had assumed it was his father asleep in the bed.

"Santa came!" Robert exclaimed in a spluttering whisper.

"He did?" Ida responded, while she prepared fresh side meat for frying. Even though Robert preferred side meat to bacon, he could not be bothered to notice that side meat was on the morning's menu. He was too excited to find out what Santa had brought him.

"Go back and put on your slippers!" his mother said quietly but emphatically. "You'll catch your death of cold."

Robert was prone to head colds with ear aches, so he took his mother's command with extra seriousness. He tiptoed back to the room that he shared with Charles and put on his slippers before tiptoeing to the kitchen and resuming his conversation.

"I wonder what Santa brought me!" Robert said to his mother.

"Shouldn't you be wondering what Santa brought *everyone*," Ida prompted.

Robert understood that he was being selfish. "I *do* wonder what Santa brought everyone," he acknowledged. "When can we open the presents?"

"You'll have to wait 'til after breakfast," his mother said.

Robert was uncertain he could delay so long as that. For a moment, his face registered his dismay. Then he took joy in watching his mother creating biscuits from a mound of flour. Soon, the fragrances of baking and frying filled the kitchen. When Robert heard his grandfather roll over, he

considered whether he might have awakened the family's guest, but, when Grandpa Rhode suddenly snored loudly, Robert felt less guilty.

Robert wondered how Charles could be so calm as to remain in bed when there were presents to unwrap and fun to experience. Almost as if he were talking to himself, Robert shook his head. All at once, he realized that his father was sleeping on the sofa that squeezed between the heating stove and the kitchen table. Say, rather, *trying* to sleep amid the commotion! Joe sat up, yawned, and gradually pulled on his trademark blue overalls—right over his pajamas. Carrying his socks and other garments, he stepped inside the bathroom and closed the door.

The house was one of the first in town to have a bathroom with indoor plumbing. By now, the fixtures were antiquated, and the room was impossibly small. A person almost had to suck in the breath to shut the door. Robert heard his father bumping the walls of the bathroom while he dressed. Eventually, Joe struggled to open the door and slipped past it. He was wearing his customary farming clothes and was carrying his pajamas neatly folded over one arm.

"Robert, go get dressed," his mother said. "Get Charles up and tell him to get dressed, too. We're about ready to eat."

"Had I better wake Grandpa?" Joe asked Ida.

"We're going to eat soon, so I suppose you might," Ida replied.

Robert walked quickly past his sleeping grandfather, returned to his room, and shook his brother. "Get up!" he ordered.

Robert wriggled out of his pajamas and into his flannel shirt and jeans. He was so excited that he had extra trouble tying his shoes.

By the time Robert came back to the kitchen, his parents had moved the sofa perilously close to the heating stove so that everyone could sit around the kitchen table. Wearing a white shirt, a green tie, and gray slacks, Grandpa Rhode took the chair Ida offered him. With a yawn and a big smile, Charles sat down next. Soon, everyone was ready for Joe to say grace.

"As we gather together this Christmas Day," Joe began, "we remember the Christ child, the greatest gift of all. Lord, we ask thy blessing on this food and the hands that prepared it. We promise to keep the spirit of Christmas alive in our hearts throughout the year."

Then there came platters of steaming biscuits, glistening side meat, and scrambled eggs. At each place setting was a half an orange—a real treat at Christmas! The biscuits were slathered in homemade butter and piled high with Ida's jellies and jams. It was a feast fit for a king—with the promise of more only a few hours later!

Robert waited politely until the adults were finished eating breakfast—so slowly, it seemed to him!

"Well, should we open our presents?" Joe asked, finally!

Robert jumped down from his chair and practically ran into the living room. His parents and Grandpa Rhode came, eventually!

Robert sat near the Christmas tree, which scented the room with the lovely fragrance of pine. He took mental snapshots of the bubble lights and the ice bulbs. The ornaments were often doubled: one that was designated his and one that was designated his brother's. The largest globes hung from the bottom branches. A large one with bands of magenta was Charles' ornament, and a similar one with stripes of blue was Robert's. At the top of the tree were tiny ornaments that had been on Joe's first trees in the late teens and early 1920s. There were tiny bells and clusters of grapes made of glass. The oldest, Joe always said, was a delicate ornament with slender white and blue and cranberry-colored beads strung in a diamond shape.

Joe began to hand out presents. Suddenly, the room filled the sounds of rustling paper and exclamations of surprise. Robert and Charles' grandfather and father received new ties and monogrammed handkerchiefs. The boys' mother modeled her new robe and pocketbook. Robert and Charles had a variety of toys, but the two that really caught their eye were relatively large, heavy police cars to which flexible tubes could be attached. Their hands held battery packs that were at the ends of the tubes. By pushing buttons on the battery packs, they could make the cars roll along the carpet. A light in the center of the roof of each car flashed red, and a siren whirred. The police cars were Grandpa Rhode's gift to the boys. He always gave the best presents!

No one could have been happier that Christmas!

Later that morning, Grandma Rhode and Great Aunt Margaret brought gifts and received theirs in turn before joining the family for "dinner," as the noon meal was called. And what a magnificent dinner it was! The table was laden with soft yeast rolls made of flour that had been rising all night, ham, peas, carrots, corn, and every good thing that Ida had canned from her garden!

Despite having eaten a huge breakfast, the family dug into the dinner with a will. Grandma Rhode and Grandpa Rhode spoke politely to one another but said relatively little directly to each other. They had been divorced for many years. Robert had not been told that fact, but he might not have understood it anyway. All he knew was that Grandma Rhode lived in a small house in town while Grandpa Rhode lived eighty miles away in Indianapolis. Later, Robert learned that his mother had told his father to make amends with his father so that the boys' grandfather could take an active role in their lives. From Robert's point of view, everything was exactly as it should be!

With his capacity for memorization, Robert took a long look around the table. It was as if he were a camera recording every detail in photographs that he would cherish many years from now. He wanted to be able to recall the happy faces, the laughter, the sunlight glinting from the glassware, the pattern of the china, the way the freshly ironed tablecloth fell in pleats across his knees.

In the window near Ida's rocking chair hung a crinkly red cellophane wreath with a silver socket resembling a candle and a single orange bulb glowing. In his thoughts and feelings, Robert compared the wreath with the circle of his family around the dinner table and the orange light with the joy they shared. He wished he could express his analogy to everyone, but he lacked the words. He remained content to notice the correspondence on such an important day.

Chapter 7: The Winter

When snow deep enough to build snowmen finally arrived, Ida chose a Saturday afternoon to take the boys outside to help her roll the snow and sculpt a snow*woman* with arms akimbo and head tilted. She added an apron. She tied a scarf over the head and under the chin. She stuck walnuts for blouse buttons from the waist to the neck. More walnuts made eyes and a mouth. From across the street, Beulah Jones called, "Is that you, Ida?"

"No," the boys' mother said. "I'd have a dust rag in one hand and a mop in the other." Beulah laughed.

"A woman's work is never done," Beulah commented.

Having returned to the kitchen to get warm, Ida and her sons laid their brown gloves in a row along the top of the heating stove to dry. While dollops of snow slid sizzling from the gloves, their fingers tingled.

Later that same day, Robert and Charles went back outside and shuffled along, making trails in the snow so that they could play Fox and Goose. One trail ended in a circular area that they tramped down and that they called the goose's nest. Robert was the goose. He waited in the nest until Charles was at the point farthest away. Robert then came out of the nest and ran along one of the trails. As the fox, Charles chose interconnecting trails to try to catch Robert, who tried to outsmart him and get back to the nest before he could be tagged. Eventually, though, Robert *was* tagged, and became the fox for the next round.

On January days with the thermometer dipping below zero, Joe used a butter knife to work raggedy strips of torn flannel cloth into the cracks around the doors so as to try to conserve heat from the stoves.

There were two Norge dark-brown stoves that burned heating oil. One was in the living room, and the other was in the kitchen. Both stood on squares of metal with rolled edges that were made for the purpose. The stove in the living room had a mica window on the side. Whenever Robert had a nightmare and wanted to be with his parents, he had to go from the boys' bedroom through the corner of the living room to get to his parents' bedroom, but Robert was afraid to pass by the stove window. In the dark, the wicked flames scared him. Sometimes, he knelt shivering for what seemed an hour before he could summon the courage to run past the window. He would shake his father's elbow until Joe would awaken enough to reach over, pick Robert up, and put him between him and Robert's mother. Sandwiched between his parents, Robert felt safe.

On wintry weekends, if the sun were shining on powdery snow, Jim Eberle would harness his horses to a sleigh and go riding around the school playground. Robert watched in fascination from across State Route 26. With bells jingling, the pair of light brown horses appeared to enjoy the exercise, and the riders in the sleigh obviously had a great time. Their laughter drifted across the road on the breezes that made the dust of snow twinkle in the sunshine. It was quite a picture: the red sleigh sliding along, the tan horses with a lively step, the feathery patches of snow sailing down from the pine boughs, and the bluest of blue shadows here and there.

Among Joe's winter chores was keeping what he called the "horse tank" free of ice long enough for the cows to drink water. From the middle of the large galvanized metal tank protruded a rusty iron stove. With a poker, Joe would slide the lid open, toss lumps of coal inside, and stir up the fire before shoving the lid back in place. During the coldest stretches, even the water nearest the stove would glaze over. Joe used a hatchet to chop through the thinnest ice. The cows would nudge him out of their way so they could slurp the water with frozen chunks bobbing on the surface. The Holsteins had to stretch their necks to reach the watery circle surrounding the stove; the thick ice of the tank's perimeter jutted up in places like a miniature version of Pine Creek.

Sometimes, to Robert's delight, Charles would consent to pull the sled that their father had been given as a Christmas gift in 1926. Robert would ride while Charles tugged on the clothes line tied to the handle bar. Going on thirty-three years of age, the sled still pulled fairly easily when the snow was sufficiently slick. The other sled, which had been given to the boys' grandmother in 1890 and had been built by her uncle, the blacksmith Tommy Eleazer Fenton, resisted being pulled. While there were hills for sledding near Pine Creek, Ida prohibited the boys from participating in such activity that she felt was too dangerous. When he was a boy, Joe hit his chin on the sled while dashing down a slope named "Loop the Loop." Snow kept the cut from bleeding, but, when Joe returned home, his mother had to put gauze and a bandage on it. The boys' father had a scar from that cut, and that was enough for the boys' mother to warn them away from leaving the fenced yard to visit the hills along the creek.

Once, on a drive toward Rainsville, Ida pointed and yelled, "Stop the car!" Joe brought the Chevrolet to a halt. "It's a deer!" she whispered in tones of awe. Robert and Charles looked in the direction of their mother's hand. Standing on a bank of snow at the edge of a wood was a doe. If her ears had not twitched, she could have been described as a statue. There were no laws protecting deer. For many years, they had been hunted. Seeing one

was a rare event! The family waited as long as the deer waited. The scene resembled a magnificent stage. The backdrop was the purple and tan and blue forest with snow lining the branches. In front, there arose the drift sparkling with millions of multicolored spangles. With grace and dignity, the deer watched with her soft, alert eyes. Eventually, she turned and slipped silently among the trees. "Wow!" Charles muttered.

On another occasion that winter, the boys were riding with their father in his GMC pickup. It was rated a half-ton model, but it had a ¾-ton bed. It was painted a pale silvery blue. It boasted a 1940s underdash heater that was an aftermarket installation by Glen Bisel, who had found it in a wrecked Oldsmobile car. The heater was shaped like a shield and had two doors with round metal doorknobs. When a door was opened—or even when the doors were closed—the heat poured out. Robert always sat between Joe and Charles on the bench seat. The heater was close to Robert's knees. He compulsively drew his legs back into the seat as far from the heater as he could get.

Joe had driven north onto the true prairie that was even flatter than the land in the vicinity of Pine Village. He crossed a rail line that stretched perfectly straight in both directions and pulled onto the gravel in front of the tall elevator at Templeton.

"I thought you should see the steam engine while you still can," Joe said to his sons, as they tumbled from the pickup.

In a building attached to one side of the towering elevator was a whispering steam engine with quietly revolving flywheel. Robert watched as the connecting rod transformed linear motion into circular motion. What seemed to Robert a massive mound of corncobs awaited use as fuel, along with coal as iridescent as ravens' wings. Now and then a drip sizzled somewhere.

"It won't be long before we switch over to a gasoline motor," the engineer said to Joe.

"It won't be half as much fun," Joe said, smiling.

The engineer grinned and shook his head.

Joe had ensured that Charles and Robert would remember steam power. When Robert was only two, Joe had booked his family on one of the last trips of the steam locomotive named *James Whitcomb Riley* (after the famous Hoosier poet) from Lafayette to Indianapolis, where everyone had lunch with Joe's father, Seymour, whom the boys always called "Grandpa

Rhode.” Further, Joe was always pleased when the family car had to stop at the railroad tracks on the west side of West Lafayette to let a steam locomotive pull its train through the intersection. The occurrence happened often enough for Robert to remember the shiny black boilers and the distinctive sounds as the last of the steam locomotives chuffed through the crossing. Soon, diesels replaced the steam engines. Now Joe had gone the proverbial extra mile to have Robert and Charles witness a steam-powered elevator.

As the days grew gradually longer, Old Man Winter loosened his grip on the countryside. Icicles crashed to the ground, spots of black earth showed through melting snow, and everywhere were sounds of trickling water. Joe began to talk of plowing and disking. Robert thought how he would soon turn the ripe old age of five!

Chapter 8: The Barn

On a summer day, Robert had gone with his father to crack corn for the cows. Joe stepped up into the crib that was just inside the main door to the barn. He knelt down and took an ear of corn from the mound that slanted downward from the back of the crib to the front. Holding it just right, he banged it down on the edge of an old wooden box, and the ear snapped in two. While his father was busy breaking the ears, Robert pet Fuzz. "Lieutenant Fuzz," Joe's nickname for the cat that was based on the Beetle Bailey cartoon strip, was not the only cat on the place. A sleek black female cat had taken up residence. Robert called her "Blackie." She was crouched on a hay bale at the far end of the alley between the stalls.

All of a sudden, Fuzz leapt up and grabbed both sides of Robert's leg with his claws. Robert winced from the pain. Then Fuzz rolled and pitched, scratching Robert's other leg. Robert wanted to run but, each time he took a step, Fuzz grabbed Robert's leading leg, leaving long red marks. Robert began to scream. Joe came to the door of the crib to see what could be the matter. Taking in the situation in a glance, Joe lightly kicked Fuzz to one side and picked Robert up. When they were outside the barn and away from the cat, Joe walked Robert to the house.

Ida took one look and exclaimed, "What happened to him?"

While Joe told about Fuzz, Ida guided Robert toward the bathroom. She helped him take off his shoes, shirt, and shorts while she ran water in the tub. Once Robert was seated in the warm water, she poured rubbing alcohol in the bath.

"Ow! Oh, ow!" Robert yelled, thrashing around. His legs were on fire.

"Sit still!" his mother commanded.

After a time, the agony of the cuts began to subside. Ida gently bathed Robert's legs, which were crisscrossed with bloody red lines.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Robert asked, "Why did Fuzz do that?"

Robert felt betrayed by the cat that he considered his best friend.

"Well," Ida began, "Fuzz is in love with Blackie, and he was afraid that you would steal her from him."

Somehow, that explanation made sense to Robert.

"You'll have to keep your distance for a while," Ida advised.

Whenever Robert saw Fuzz, he stayed far back. Lieutenant Fuzz never attacked again, but Robert remained wary of him. Robert never could trust Fuzz after the scratching incident.

One day, Robert was preparing to scatter ground feed in the cows' boxes along the north side of the alleyway. As he climbed onto a hay bale to reach the central box, he thought he heard tiny sounds coming from beneath the wooden box, which rested on the edges of the manger. Hay was packed fairly solidly beneath the box, but Robert detected a small tunnel. As the cows had not yet entered the barn on that side, he jumped down, ran to the latched doorway, unhooked the door, swung it open on its hinges, and stepped up into the stalls. He hurried around the back of the barrier wall to enter the central stall. Now he could easily reach beneath the box. Sticking his hand in the tunnel, he felt soft, warm bodies hiding. Gently, he pulled one out. It was a black kitten with its eyes shut. It mewed loudly. From somewhere in the barn, Blackie answered. Robert knew enough about cats to know that Blackie would come running, so he put the kitten back. Sure enough! Blackie jumped up on the edge of the manger and let herself down to the hay before squeezing under the box.

Robert ran to the house and told his mother about the kittens. She followed Robert back to the barn to see how many there were. Ida pulled out four. There were two black kittens and two cream-colored kittens.

"Blackie will find a new place to hide them now," Ida said to Robert.

"Why?"

"Because she doesn't want us to know where they are until she thinks they're able to fend for themselves."

His mother was right. The next day, when Robert stuck his hand under the box, he felt only an empty hollow where the kittens had been.

By the time he had celebrated his fifth birthday, Robert was scurrying up the ladder to the haymow right behind his brother. There, they piled the new fifty-pound hay bales to make forts: one on the north and one on the south of the mow. The old bales, which weighed a hundred pounds each, were too heavy to move, but a different baler had made all the difference. Each fort had secret passageways, or tunnels, through which the boys could crawl, getting plenty of chaff down their necks while they were at it. Both forts had

parapets high up near the ceiling. As the barn was small, the parapets were not widely separated. The ammunition that the boys "fired" at one another consisted of the occasional walnut along with corn cobs having the kernels shelled off, leaving only the pink, lightweight cob. When either brother showed his head above the parapet, the other rapidly threw cobs his way. It was great fun!

The mow had the fragrance of dried flowers and spices. In those days before homes had air conditioning, the mow was hot in the summer, but the boys took no notice of the heat. For hours each day, they designed and built their forts.

Down below, barn swallows sailed in and out of the open doors on the southeast and northeast corners of the barn to gain access to their nests in the stalls. The males had touches of bright orange above and below their bills. There markings made it appear as though they were wearing a pale orange cowboy handkerchief tied around their necks. Their undersides were almost white. The females were similar, but the orange was not as brilliant. Both had backs and tails that seemed black in the shadows of the barn but shimmered blue in the sunlight. The tails were gracefully long and opened like scissors. The birds' nests adhered to the sides of the ceiling beams. They appeared to be made with tiny mud bricks. Along a few of the beams were rows of nests. Every summer, Robert could hardly wait to see the open beaks of the baby birds awaiting food from their parents, aunts, and uncles. The adult swallows circled low above the meadows to the east and south as they caught insects on the wing. They glided effortlessly, now and then pumping their wings a few times so as to dart after bugs.

One of Robert's favorite activities was to help his father to bring in the cows whenever the Holsteins remained in the meadow at milking time. Often, they came to the barn of their own volition, but, when they did not, Joe and the boys took the path the cows had made: a dusty line curving through the timothy and clover. Cabbage, alfalfa, and sulphur butterflies flitted and bobbed—especially near any puddles left from a recent shower. Monarch butterflies and black swallowtails sailed on updrafts. The pasture smelled like rich chamomile tea. Often, the dozen or so Holsteins were to be found standing in the shade of an old elm tree. The cows would be chewing their cud as they turned their deep blue eyes toward Joe and the boys. Now and then, their tails swung to discourage flies.

At Joe's urging, the cows launched forward like swaying ships. Black-and-white spotted flanks and rumps tilted to one side then the other. The cows were so tame that they required almost no persuasion to come to the barn to be milked at feeding time.

While farm life could certainly be hectic—with work that never ceased—it also danced to slower rhythms such as the strolling of cows on summer paths.

Chapter 9: The Threshing Reunion

On Labor Day Weekend each year, Joe drove the family the hundred miles to Pontiac, Illinois, to attend the Central States Threshermen's Reunion. The event featured around fifty steam engines, half a dozen OilPulls, and several big prairie tractors. Every day, a steam engine was belted to a thresher for a demonstration of steam-powered threshing. As the threshing ring to which Joe had belonged had only recently disintegrated, Robert was familiar with threshing machines. His parents had photographed him standing beside the Nichols & Shepard Red River Special the last year that Joe had threshed with his friend Don Akers. Then Joe had bought his first combine, an Allis–Chalmers, which replaced the threshing machine. Had the family not attended the Pontiac show each year, Robert might not have been acquainted with the steam engines that originally supplied the power to the threshers that separated the wheat and other small grain from the stalks on which the grain had grown. Joe's mother's brother, Uncle Charley, who had died in 1931, had taught Joe how to run farm steam engines, which Charley had run professionally. Joe loved to see the steam engines at work again—if only for a weekend in Pontiac. Robert and Charles looked forward to the annual trip to the threshing reunion.

The family scurried around before dawn to get ready to go. Ida packed a picnic lunch of tomato soup, which was kept warm in thermos bottles. She wrapped a big block of cheddar cheese with a sharp knife to make cheese sandwiches. Other bottles held milk and coffee. A loaf of bread and a freshly baked apple pie were carefully deposited in the basket. Finally, a red blanket was folded and placed on top of the basket in the trunk of the car. Cookies, as well as other snacks, were arranged beside Ida where she could monitor them.

When Robert was five, the family was scurrying around before dawn on a Sunday. Usually, the family made the trek to Pontiac on a Saturday, but, in that year, Joe had chosen Sunday so that he would not miss an important Masonic meeting on Saturday. The week before, Joe had ensured a safe trip by having Glen Bisel put plenty of air in the spare tire. Glen also made sure that the coolant passages throughout the engine were not blocked. Even though Joe would not be sitting anywhere in stopped traffic—and even though his trip was not all that long—it paid to be sure that the radiator would not overheat. Many drivers carried a jug of water to refill a radiator whose heat (and, therefore, pressure) increased beyond the pounds of resistance from the cap. Cars with clouds of steam streaming out from a raised hood were common sights along roadways. The drivers of such vehicles were forced to wait until the car cooled down before refilling the radiator.

In those days, people dressed up to attend any fair. Accordingly, Joe wore a pair of pleated slacks, a starched and ironed short-sleeved shirt having a pattern of light green fish, and a wide-brimmed straw fedora hat. Ida wore a full skirt with a green and blue floral print and a light blue blouse. The boys put on their best tan shorts and new shirts with horizontal red-white-and-blue stripes. When everyone was ready to go, the sun had not yet awakened.

"Are all the animals fed?" Ida asked Joe.

"Yes," he replied. "I gave the cows enough feed to hold them until we get home."

Joe and Ida had not bothered to lock the doors to the house. In those times, no one in the town had a reason to lock a door.

"You did shut off the light in the kitchen, didn't you?" Ida asked Joe.

"Yes," he answered, "and I made sure the light was off in the boys' room."

The car pulled out of the driveway and headed west.

For the first many miles, Robert was too excited to nap, but, after a while, he felt drowsy. His head nodded, and he leaned into a corner of the front seat. He remembered hearing Ida asking Joe "Are you sure we will make it there?" and Joe replying "We have a good spare."

The next thing Robert knew, the car was parked along a road in the middle of Illinois and Joe was using a jack to lift the flat tire off the ground. The sun had arisen. Charles and Ida were standing behind Joe and watching. After Joe had changed the tire and everyone was back in the car, Ida said, "I hope the spare will get us there—and back. There won't be any place open to work on a tire on Sunday."

"Glen looked at the spare and said its patches were good," Joe reassured Ida.

On went the car. Just outside Chatsworth, an all-too-familiar bumping sound began. Joe looked grim.

"What will we do now?" Ida asked.

"Somebody in Chatsworth will be able to fix a tire," Joe said.

The car limped into town. Joe stopped at a closed service station. A couple walking to a nearby church noticed the flat.

"Bill can get you back on the road," the man said to Joe. "He'll be at church."

The couple went into the church, and, soon enough, another man came out and introduced himself as Bill.

He opened the door to the service station. Before long, he had patched both tires. When Joe took out his wallet to pay Bill, Bill waved his hand and said, "You folks just go and have a good time at the reunion."

Joe pulled into the parking area of the Pontiac 4-H fair at 11:00, giving an hour to look around before the noon whistle. Ida said she wanted to see the crafts on display at the ladies' building while Joe and the boys walked along the line of engines. Joe and Ida agreed to meet at the car for the picnic lunch at 12:00.

Robert, Charles, and Joe strode beneath the tall trees that shaded the park. As they neared the engines, smoke scented with cylinder oil drifted among the sun-dappled leaves. Robert was a little ahead of Joe and Charles. He wandered behind an engine and watched as a woman put a shovelful of coal in the firebox. She was wearing a plaid blouse and jeans. An engineer's cap was perched jauntily on the back of her head. She turned around, saw Robert dawdling there, and asked him, "Do you like steam engines?"

Robert was delighted that such a great person as a steam engineer would take notice of him. "Y-yes," he stammered.

Joe and Charles stepped up.

"Does he belong to you?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Joe replied. "His name is Robert, and this is Charles. I'm Joe Rhode."

"I'm Doris Lindenmier, and this"—she pointed a gloved hand toward the engineer on the platform of the engine next to hers—"is my husband, Lester." Pulling the glove from his right hand, Lester reached down from the platform of his engine to shake hands with Joe.

"I'm pleased to meet you both," Joe said. "We've been coming to Pontiac every year for several years, and I've always enjoyed seeing your engines. My uncle was the engineer for a Reeves outfit in the teens and twenties."

Doris nodded smartly. “They’re good engines!” she said.

Both Doris and Lester ran Reeves engines, which were parked beside one another under the trees. Lazy billows of smoke rose from their stylishly shaped smokestacks. An RN, Doris had the additional responsibility of serving as the reunion’s nurse.

Robert felt a growing fascination for farm steam engines—a fascination that would last throughout his life.

Doris, Lester, and Joe talked briefly about Joe’s uncle’s experiences on various threshing runs, and then Joe said, “I suppose we should be moseying on.”

Doris and Lester waved as Joe, Charles, and Robert walked farther down the line of steam engines. They crossed an open area, and Robert was amazed at how quietly a steam engine could come up behind them so that Joe had to take the boys’ hands and move to one side, allowing the engine to pass. “Chuff, chuff, chuff,” the engine sounded, as if it were breathing.

Just before the noon whistle, Joe brought the boys back to the car. Ida had already spread the red blanket on the soft grass in the shade of the tree beside the Chevrolet. Soon, everyone was eating lunch.

Robert did not care for tomato soup, but, on such a special occasion as getting to go to the steam engine show, he could tolerate it without complaint. He liked the cheese sandwich, and he especially liked the apple pie!

The boys laughed and covered their ears with their hands when the noon whistle took place. From the area where the steam engines were parked, the madcap whistles shrieked and tooted in deafening abandon.

Later that afternoon, Joe and the boys watched as steam threshing was demonstrated. “Rumble, rumble,” the thresher sounded, as its numerous pulleys and belts came to life. Men with pitchforks stood atop two wagons piled high with bundles of wheat. Alternating from one man to the other, their forks lifted sheaves and dropped them on the feeder with its conveyor belt that brought the bundles to the chomping knives and the spinning cylinder teeth, which knocked the grain loose. Eventually, the grain made its way through a loading tube into a wagon while the chaff and straw blew from a big tube in back onto a straw stack. The threshing machine received its power from a big belt that crossed over the flywheel of the steam engine

and over the thresher's main pulley. The two machines were separated some sixty feet. The crowd of onlookers was so large that Joe had to thread his way to the front so that Robert and Charles could get a clear view of the thresher in action. The nicely dressed members of the crowd smiled and politely made way for the boys to work their way forward.

When the threshing crew stopped so that the throng could go to the reviewing stands for the daily parade, Ida joined Joe and the boys, and they sat on the lowest bleacher. One of Robert's favorite engines was a Keck–Gonnerman owned by Joe Weishaupt; it had Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse painted on the bunkers! Ida had spent her earliest years within a short walk of the Keck–Gonnerman steam engine factory, so she loved the Kecks exhibited in Pontiac. While Joe often stayed for the whole parade, on this occasion he said that the family might want to get an early start on the return trip to Indiana. When almost the last of the steam engines had rumbled past, Joe, Ida, Charles, and Robert left the stands and started toward the parking area.

Joe must have had a premonition. On the way home, the thumping noise returned. Another flat! As before, Joe slowly changed the tire. Eventually, the Chevrolet pulled into the driveway and parked. There was still enough light to make it easy to milk the cows. The next day, Joe bought two new tires.

Chapter 10: The Carnival

"Don't forget that you're taking the boys to the Carnival this evening," Ida reminded Joe, as he prepared to spend the afternoon picking corn.

Robert had not forgotten! He could hardly wait to go!

Sponsored by the Lions Club, the Carnival was held each year in the gymnasium of the Pine Village School. It featured games and prizes, and everyone attended from miles around.

After supper that evening, the boys put on their jackets, and Joe guided them across the state highway that ran in front of their farm. The occasion was so important that school officials had placed the Coca-Cola life-size lithographed tin policeman signs at the entrances to the school. The smiling policeman in his blue uniform and white gloves held a yellow shield bearing the words **SLOW** SCHOOL ZONE. Joe, Charles, and Robert followed the driveway around the back, or north, side of the school and through the parking lot filled with the rounded forms of older cars and the streamlined forms of newer cars, some sporting fins over the taillights. Adults and kids of high school age milled about the doorways of the gym.

Construction of the gym had begun in 1940 and was completed in 1943 as a Works Progress Administration project. When the brick school building burned on Sunday the 21st of November in 1943, the gym had been spared.

While Robert had been inside bigger buildings, such as the Edward C. Elliott Hall of Music on the campus of nearby Purdue University—which was an enormous auditorium—he considered the gymnasium to be big enough. High above his head, dark brown rafters formed aesthetically pleasing diamond patterns across the square-based elongated-dome ceiling. The bleachers rose on three sides from concrete tiers that met in parapets sporting iron railings above ramps that sloped down to the double doorways on the southeast and southwest corners. In Robert's imagination, the parapets, with their additional seating, arched above drawbridges, as if the gym were a medieval castle.

Outside, the autumn air was crisp, but, inside, the crowd made the atmosphere warm. Joe bought tickets for the boys to redeem at the booths. The throng of families and children was elbow to elbow within the gym, and the noise made it almost impossible to hear what anyone was saying. Robert loved the commotion! Booths manned by volunteers stood everywhere on the giant rumpled canvas that covered and protected the varnished basketball floor.

Robert's favorite game was to go fishing. Two members of the Lions Club stood behind a metal tank made for livestock. Joe handed them a ticket, and one of the men offered Robert a dowel rod for a fishing pole. At one end of the rod was a shiny steel hook. The object was to reach into the water and hook a wooden fish that was about three quarters of an inch thick and six inches long. Each fish had a screw eye at its nose. Logic would dictate that it would be easy to snag the hook through one of the screw eyes, but, for a boy of only five years, hooking a fish was tricky. Robert held the pole almost straight up and down while he leaned against the edge of the tank. The fish, which were painted various colors, bobbed up and down. With all the patience that he could muster, Robert slowly twisted the rod until the hook seemed to line up under the screw eye just beneath the surface of the rippling water. Then he gently pulled the rod upward. Happy day! He had snagged a fish! The volunteers quickly grabbed it, so that no water would drip on the canvas.

His prize was a thin bamboo cane painted dark green. Everywhere, boys and girls who had won games were twirling similar canes. A few splintered remains of canes were underfoot.

Charles likewise won a cane.

Other booths invited contestants to toss balls at wooden targets about the same size as the fish but cut in the shape of milk bottles and painted white. At the milk bottle game, Robert and Charles won *crickets*, which were brightly colored tin noisemakers equipped with a rectangular piece of metal acting as a spring. By squeezing the spring to bring its end closer to the oval colored top, the owner could make a loud click–click sound. From everywhere could be heard the "click–click, click–click, click–click" of hundreds of crickets, adding to the overall din.

All evening, Joe smiled, as he met neighbor after neighbor for friendly conversation. How he could hear what the other person was saying was miraculous, given the cacophony in the gym. He was a little hard of hearing anyway. He always said that, as a child, he had developed an infection of the inner ear and that, when the doctor had lanced the eardrum to release the pressure of the infection, the result was a loss of some of Joe's hearing in that ear. Somehow or other, he managed to understand what his friends were talking about while the crickets sang all around him and the volunteers at the booths sang out to patrons.

With a ringing in their ears, Robert and Charles went with their father across the parking lot to the one-story school that had replaced the two-story brick

one that Joe had attended. Joe treated the boys to slices of pie in the cafeteria. The fluorescent lights seemed especially bright after threading their way between parked cars in the night.

Robert was sorry for the fun to have come to an end. Joe led Robert and Charles back across the street, and Ida told them it was time for them to change into their pajamas and go to bed.

"Did you win anything?" she asked the boys.

"Oh, yes!" they replied. They demonstrated how loud their crickets were. Ida knew that she would have to put up with the noisemakers for a few days, until their novelty wore off and the clicking mercifully stopped.

As Robert pulled the heavy blankets up to his chin, he turned toward the window near the foot of his bed. The panes looked out on the school driveway. The headlights of cars came to a stop before turning right or left onto State Route 26. For several minutes, Robert watched the light that swelled in the bedroom from each automobile that arrived at the intersection and that dimmed again as the car made its turn. He had had about as much fun as he could stand, so he eventually fell asleep.

Chapter 11: The Diastema

The 1950 Chevrolet was black. In front of the regular windows on the driver's side and passenger's side were triangular windows (wing vents) that could be turned in such a way as to force a blast of wind against the face. The breeze felt so good on a hot day! The windshield was in two halves joined by a thin metal connector moulding. When Robert was sitting in front (which was most of the time because he suffered from motion sickness when seated in the back), his eyes would focus first on the metal moulding then on the distant view then on the connector again, until he was well on his way toward nausea!

Joe and Ida drove differently. Joe was far-sighted and enjoyed perusing fellow farmers' fields to his left. While doing so, he slowly veered the car to the right until the right wheels were off the road and onto the berm. Miraculously, he never lost control of the vehicle but gradually brought it back onto the pavement, only to repeat the experiment immediately afterward. Ida, meanwhile, played with the throttle. Her small foot, usually wearing a sandal in summer, wore out the gas pedal by depressing it and lifting up right away, depressing it and lifting up right away. The car lurched forward and hesitated, lurched forward and hesitated in response. Robert was anxious when Joe drove, nauseous when Ida drove.

When most of the corn had been picked, Robert was riding with Ida at the wheel. She was driving out to visit with Robert's great uncle Marshall and his great aunt Anna. Down went the gas pedal, up went the gas pedal, down went the gas pedal, up went the gas pedal.

Robert had developed the bad habit of standing in the front seat. On this occasion, he swayed backwards and forwards in time with the motion of the throttle.

"Sit down," Ida told Robert.

He disobeyed.

"Come over here where I can put my arm around you," Ida said.

He disobeyed.

Frustrated, Ida said, "Alright! See if I care if you lose your balance."

Robert was near the passenger door and was having a hard time keeping his balance while the car briefly gained speed and momentarily slowed, gained

and slowed, gained and slowed. He felt slightly dizzy. He smelled his mother's new permanent. (Ida had to have curls in her straight hair!) The Chevrolet was lurching and hesitating while heading east along the gravel road that ran in front of the McFatridge farm. The car dipped down the slight hill leading to the intersection with the gravel road that ran south past the Anderson farm.

Tall corn in the fence corner blocked the view to the right. Ida obeyed the stop sign, but the corn was planted so close to the road that she could not see around it. The tan leaves rustled in the cool breezes of autumn. Ida slowly entered the intersection only to discover that a road grader was bearing down on the intersection from the right. The corn had hidden the big machine! Ida slammed on the brakes, and the road grader just missed the front bumper!

Robert flew headfirst into the hard metal dashboard. He ricocheted back toward the seat and slid onto the floor. He was watching stars sparkling and spangling before his eyes.

Ida put the car in parking gear and muttered, "Why don't you ever stand close enough so I can grab you?"

Ida did not yell at Robert. She felt terrible about what had happened.

She gently lifted Robert back into the seat. Using her hankie, she stanched the blood flowing from the gums where Robert had knocked out his two front upper teeth. Robert was beginning to see his surroundings again, and the pain was starting. He knew he had been wrong to stand on the seat. Now he sat where he was supposed to sit, and he whimpered.

Ida turned the car around and went home to ask Joe what should be done. Joe and Ida took Robert to Dr. Sullivan, their dentist in Attica, a town ten miles to the south. Dr. Sullivan explained that there was nothing to do but to wait for Robert's permanent teeth to come in.

At first, Robert's pronunciation changed to a lisp, but, instead of retreating into his early fear of talking, he pushed through the obstacle and learned to place his tongue a little farther back so that he could say the consonants that otherwise would become hisses. By degrees, he was learning to be more confident and assertive.

A little less than a year after the incident—and just in time for Robert to enter the first grade without embarrassment—Robert's permanent teeth came in. Owing to the injury, they were separated by a gap, or *diastema*.

Whether Robert liked it or not, his diastema became a trademark. Terry–Thomas was a popular British comic film actor in American movies. Robert always enjoyed his performances because, like Robert, he had a pronounced diastema.

Robert's teeth were somewhat yellow from the antibiotics he had been given for his frequent earaches. Worried about his diastema and his yellow teeth, his parents took him to see an orthodontist in Lafayette, Indiana. Taking children to an orthodontist was a very modern thing to do. The orthodontist had offices in a very modern building not far from Smitty's, a large independent grocery store near Purdue University. The very modern orthodontist said that he would apply hydrogen peroxide and heat to whiten Robert's teeth. When the very modern orthodontist told Joe and Ida that correcting Robert's diastema would cost $2,000, they asked Robert if he really wanted to have his incisors properly aligned through wearing very modern braces. Robert hated dentists, so the answer was easy. With vast relief, Robert said *no* to the very modern era. Also relieved, Joe and Ida did not have to pay $2,000 for a closed diastema and whitened teeth.

Ever after that, whenever Robert brushed his teeth, he recalled the hard old dashboard of that 1950 Chevrolet.

Chapter 12: The Cottage Cheese

Robert enjoyed watching his mother make cottage cheese. She began pouring boiling water over a large stainless steel bowl to discourage bacteria. Carefully holding the lip of the bowl with a towel, she shook the water droplets out so that no water remained in the bowl. Next, she let milk fresh from the cow sit for a day or two in the bowl covered with a muslin cloth. During the first few hours, Ida removed the cloth and used a spoon to skim off the thick yellow cream that rose to the top of the milk. She skimmed the cream at least twice and saved it in the refrigerator for other recipes. After the first day, she again lifted the muslin and gently shook the bowl. If the milk looked lumpy, it was ready. If not, it waited another day. The hotter the weather, the faster the milk turned lumpy.

Ida warmed the milk on the stove on low heat for ten minutes.

Ida next set a colander into a deep bowl. She lined the inside of the colander with a muslin cloth, and she poured the warm milk slowly into the colander. She covered the colander and bowl with yet another muslin cloth, and let the milk sit for two hours or so. She then used a spatula to encourage the curd to come loose from the cloth-lined colander. The whey in the bowl was saved and mixed in very small amounts with the dry ground feed that was given to the chickens. (Too much of a dairy product was deemed harmful to poultry, while a little was considered beneficial.) Meanwhile, Ida salted the curd and poured some cream on it. The cottage cheese was ready to eat!

… and that was the sad moment for Robert.

He hated the taste and the smell of the homemade cottage cheese.

"Eat it!" Ida told him. "It's good for you."

She said the same thing at every meal when she served cottage cheese—and that was at least once a day each time she made a batch. (She made batches all too often!)

"Eat it! It's good for you," Robert heard over and over.

He could hardly get the stuff past his nose! The curd was hard, resembling little gummy rice pellets. The dollop of it on his plate held its shape, but the creamy puddle that slowly spread out from the bottom of the mound invaded the other, good food nearby, tainting otherwise desirable items with the bitterness of the cheese. Robert would eagerly lift a delectable piece of

fried chicken only to discover that the bitter pool had seeped underneath and had soaked into what should have been the chicken's crispy surface.

In Ida's kitchen, children were to eat everything that she put on their plates. Robert was frankly astonished that Charles could eat the cottage cheese day after day, week after week. How was it possible?

"Eat it! It's good for you."

The creamed corn looked succulent, but oh no! The nasty cottage cheese puddle had sneaked into the creaminess of the corn, ruining the taste.

His mother did not allow Robert to get up from the table until he had eaten every morsel on the plate that she had served him. He would make his way through the chicken and the creamed corn—even though they had been contaminated by the seeping cheese. Ultimately, only the sinking mound of cottage cheese remained on Robert's plate. What could he do with it?

He tried to hand part of it to Lady, the family's dog whose name was inspired by Walt Disney.

"I saw that," Ida said. "Don't you give that cottage cheese to the dog! Eat it! It's good for you."

He put one granule of the cottage cheese on the tip of his spoon, held his breath, and deposited it in his mouth. He swallowed it without chewing it. Even so, the taste was disgusting. He sat for several minutes and stared at the dollop sitting on his plate. It seemed to grow larger.

"There are hungry people in the world that would love to have that cottage cheese," Ida said. "You can't get up from the table until you've eaten it."

Everyone else had left the table long before. Everyone else had cleaned his plate. Robert sat by himself, spoon in his motionless hand, while his mother did the dishes. Every now and then, she turned back from the sink with the suds clinging to her wrists and falling onto her apron. "Hurry up and eat that!" she said.

Robert would scoop another hard, bitter, nasty granule onto his spoon, push it past his nose, clamp down on it with his jaw, and swallow it as fast as he could. Ugh!

He could not repeat the process until several minutes had elapsed.

“Do I have to eat it?” Robert pleaded.

“Yes,” Ida said. “You have to eat everything on your plate. Now hurry up!”

Robert consumed one more icky granule—an especially tiny one. He often spent an hour in this way, incrementally working his way through the mound of cottage cheese. During the hour, Robert wondered what Charles was doing. Whatever it was, it probably was fascinating. How did he manage to eat his cottage cheese so fast? Robert had ample time to ponder such questions.

Ida never relented. She was determined to teach Robert not to waste food and to appreciate the healthy food that had been prepared for him.

Robert never developed a taste for homemade cottage cheese. He always took a long time to choke down the unpalatable substance. He hoped his mother would want his plate for washing and would excuse him from the table, but Ida had an iron will. If she ever were tempted to let him forgo the cottage cheese, she certainly did not show it. She could outwait him.

No, Robert never came to like homemade cottage cheese. His revulsion toward the sour concoction carried over to store-bought cottage cheese. Although he could choke it down, store-bought cottage cheese—the taste of which was very different (far blander)—was similar enough to the homemade astringent variety that he disliked commercial cottage cheese, too.

… and so, for years—for as long as Joe had dairy cows—Robert sat at the kitchen table and stared at a mound of homemade cottage cheese. Staring at the stinking, wretched curds became one of his principal memories of growing up.

Chapter 13: Christmas Returns

As another Christmas drew near, Ida and Joe took the boys to Purdue University's Christmas show matinee performance. After the long walk from the parking lot to the doors of the Edward C. Elliott Hall of Music, the family passed through a series of foyers. The boys and their parents waited in the innermost foyer until the doors would open. As Ida had seen to it that they were early, they were near the door on their right. More and more people entered the foyer and stood expectantly, speaking in low tones that steadily grew in volume as the crowd grew in numbers. The women's perfumes were strong all about. Here and there, the scent of a cigarette came wafting through the fragrances.

Suddenly, black-suited ushers opened the many doors across the foyer's inner wall, and Ida made a mad dash for the aisle beneath the balcony along the right of the ground floor. She had her boys' hands in hers, and they were practically tripping as she sprinted down the carpeted ramp. Ida wanted seats as close to the front as possible. Other mothers were springing forward ahead of Ida, so she accepted seats in the center of the second row. Joe was farther back, as he did not want to appear too eager. Eventually, he caught up with the rest of his family.

The auditorium was huge. Robert turned to look at the balconies. He stared at the big organ on the platform at the left. He watched the well-dressed crowd quickly filling all the seats.

At the appointed hour, a hush fell over the throng. Almost simultaneously, the lights dimmed. The velvet curtains rustled back from the immensely tall stage, and a winter scene unfolded. Fluffy snowflakes were falling. A full-sized house decorated for Christmas stood at the right, and an ever-so-tall Christmas tree covered in lights was catching snowflakes in the front yard. Snow-covered fields stretched back exactly as they would in the real outdoors, and horses pulled a sleigh into view at the left. Carolers singing "Jingle Bells" jumped down from the sleigh. Their trained Glee Club voices reached into all the corners of the gigantic hall.

Robert was in awe of the set, and it was only the first of many to move in and out, across, and up and down the massive stage. He watched in wonder at the baton of Al G. Wright, the orchestra conductor and widely recognized director of bands at Purdue University. It caught the yellow light from the brass lamps on the musicians' stands and flashed to the right and left of Al's tuxedo shoulders. Gladys Wright, the conductor's spouse, ably played bells and other percussion instruments.

When the renowned Al Stewart strode onto the stage, applause erupted immediately. He was the beloved choral conductor whose genius for entertainment lay at the heart of the annual Christmas extravaganza. He brought on soloists and various groupings of singers for number after number as the sets established mood after mood commensurate with Al's vision of the scope of Christmas and its meaning.

The whole event was grand on a grand scale. Just when people in the surrounding counties thought that Purdue could not possibly exceed the glories of a Christmas show twelve months later, the next year would unveil a magnificent entertainment even more spectacular than the one before.

At the end of the performance, a spotlight illuminated the organist, a scrim became nearly transparent. What appeared to be a cathedral with stained glass windows lit by candles could be seen through the misty scrim. The organist played a solemn introduction, and voices singing "O Come, All Ye Faithful" arose behind the audience.

Robert swung around to look back. Down all the aisles came robed singers carrying candles. At the same time, the words to the hymn appeared in ghostly translucence on the scrim. A voice from somewhere invited the audience to sing. More and more voices joined those of the robed choir members, who just kept coming. There were so many singers! As they arrived at the stage, they took steps to the tops of multi-tiered risers in front of the cathedral windows. In dignified procession, the singers slowly filled the risers. Verse after verse lit the scrim before them. By the end of the song, hundreds of robed singers filled the stage in towering rows from one side to the other. The effect was breathtaking.

The crowd sang several traditional Christmas melodies along with the choir and the thundering organ. At the end came "Silent Night." When the last chord trailed away, the robed singers blew out their candles, the stage was dark except for the central stained glass window with its depiction of the nativity, and the announcer's voice said, "All of us at Purdue University wish you and your loved ones a very merry Christmas."

The lights in the auditorium came up, and the crowd burst into a standing ovation.

Filled with Christmas joy, Joe, Ida, Charles, and Robert drove the twenty miles to their farm on the edge of Pine Village. All the way home, they talked about the sets, the singers, the clever dialog, Al G. Wright, Al Stewart, and the majestic ending.

Twilight was falling, and Joe plugged in the wreaths hanging in the windows and the lighted Santa Claus head that hung in the window at the foot of Robert's bed. Then Joe plugged in the Christmas tree. The decorations seemed all the brighter and more beautiful because the Purdue show had put everyone in the perfect holiday spirit.

Chapter 14: The Birthday

During the year before Robert began his formal schooling, his father bought a used car that was almost new. It was a 1957 two-door Chevrolet Bel Air Hardtop Coupe. Robert was glad to see the 1950 Chevrolet go. After all, it had knocked out his two front baby teeth! The new car sported fins and futuristic hood ornaments reminiscent of rockets. The roof was white and the body was pink. The abundance of chrome made Robert blink on a sunny day! What a splendid show the automobile made at the drive-in movies and drive-in restaurants!

Toward evening on Robert's sixth birthday, the family drove to Boswell, a nearby town, for so-called "ice cream cones" at the Tastee Treet. The late July temperature of 84 degrees Fahrenheit felt a little on the hot side, and frozen custard was the perfect remedy. Robert was permitted to have the largest size. The challenge was twofold: to consume the swirled goodness without getting a so-called "ice cream headache" and to do so before the bottom of the cone became so soggy as to leak and drip down Robert's shirt.

While Joe, Ida, Charles, and Robert were enjoying their cones, the topic of hair color came up in conversation. Everyone had dark hair, except Robert, who was blond. "I suppose Robert got his blond hair from you," Ida said to Joe.

"Dad has dark hair," Robert said, not really meaning to sound so contradictory.

"He does," Ida agreed, "but it was blond when he was your age. It turned dark later."

Actually, Joe was bald on top: a fact that embarrassed him. He liked wearing caps, which the seed corn companies provided, because they covered the bald area. The fringe of dark hair around the edges of the cap made him appear to have no baldness.

"I was somewhat younger than Robert when my hair grew darker," Joe said.

Meditatively, Robert licked the frozen custard. He hoped his hair would remain blond.

At that moment, a man of high school age strode into the filling station that stood next door to the Tastee Treet. The young fellow's hair was light blond.

"My hair is never going to turn black," Robert asserted. "It is going to be that color." He pointed at the blond high schooler through the open window of the car.

Even though she was laughing, Ida said, "It's not polite to point."

Robert's prediction was accurate. Years later, he often pondered if, on that day at the Tastee Treet, he had willed himself to retain his blond hair.

Back home that evening, Robert asked his mother if he could practice reading *The Little Engine That Could*. She readily consented. Until September, there would be no new programs on the TV, and, in those years, Ida would not let the Zenith dictate what the family spent its time doing. There were only three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), and by 1960, they had become chock full of Westerns, which were becoming just alike. The Zenith with its remote-controlled antenna on a scaffold up the side of the house pulled in two stations well and a third station reasonably well, but, as there was nothing that Ida wanted to see at that hour on the clear stations (that is, those free of static), she sat down beside Robert on the davenport in the kitchen. Together, they held the book that was so red that the blue locomotive on its cover almost blended into the red. It was the version retold by Watty Piper and published by Platt & Munk.

Robert sounded out the words again: "THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD … Chug, chug, chug. Puff, puff, puff. Ding-dong, ding-dong. The little train rumbled over the tracks. She was a happy little train for she had such a jolly load to carry. Her cars were filled full of good things for boys and girls." Robert felt that he might be a little too old for the story, but he was learning to read and had to begin somewhere. As he had witnessed steam engines in action, he was ready to read about the confident little engine in the story.

Ida was a little worried that Robert might be starting to read too soon, but she remembered what the speech impediment specialist had said about Robert's wide vocabulary. She did not want to hold Robert back. He would just be ahead in reading, and that was how it would be.

Robert read each word slowly for a page but was stuck on "giraffes" for a long time. "Yellow" threw him, as did "bobbed." When he bogged down on "aeroplanes," Ida said that he had read enough for one day, and Robert wanted to stop anyway. He glanced out the open window at the White Pekin ducks in the lot beyond the wire fence that ran along the south side of the yard. They were dabbling their bills in their water tub and preening themselves.

“It’s time to help your father feed those ducks and do the chores,” Ida said.

Having birthdays did not give one a pass to avoid chores on the farm! Besides, Joe was sure to be in a pleasant mood. He always was! He probably would join in a game of cowboys.

While the chores of feeding the chickens, feeding the ducks, feeding the geese, feeding the turkeys, making sure the pigs had enough feed in their feeders, feeding the Herefords (the beef cattle), and feeding and milking the Holsteins were underway, Robert and Charles could hide briefly and, when Joe passed nearby, leap out of hiding and “fire” an imaginary gun by tossing a corn cob shorn of its kernels. Joe would duck or sidestep the “bullet” that the cob represented. He carried a similar cob in a pocket of his overalls, and he would spin and “fire” his cob at whichever “cowboy” had “shot” at him. Whenever they were hit by one of Joe’s cobs, Charles or Robert would groan, “Oh, he got me,” hold hands over the spot where the cob had so lightly struck, and slowly fall to the ground. Then it was back to work.

The summer days seemed delightfully long. At the conclusion of his birthday, Robert felt he was living in an ideal world with the ideal car, the ideal ice cream cone, the ideal books, the ideal family, and the ideal hair color!

Chapter 15: The School

At long last the day arrived! Robert was to enter the first grade at Pine Village School. He had spent the past two years wanting to go to school, and now he was finally going.

Ida had rehearsed with him everything that he was to do. Charles accompanied Robert to the pair of doors where he was to wait with the other children until the doors were opened from the inside. With his heart beating fast, Robert stood expectantly. He said hello to a boy who was also coming to school for the first time. His name was Mitch. He had a happy personality. Then Robert saw Susan, whom he already knew from church. She, too, would be in his class.

Suddenly, the doors were flung open, and the children crowded into the hallway. A teacher guided Mitch, Susan, and Robert to Mrs. Yvonne Hail's room. It was at the far west end of the hallway. Mrs. Hail was friendly, but her demeanor made it clear that she expected compliance. Her eyes sparkled behind her pointy-framed glasses. Her red lipstick matched her red blouse worn beneath a stylish gray-checked short jacket and narrow skirt. When the room became too warm, she hung the jacket over her chair at the desk that stood in the front.

Mrs. Hail directed each student to an assigned seat. She wanted the class in alphabetical order by last name because she had so many students. Robert's class was one of the largest in the school's history! It was a huge elementary class by any standard and would have been split in a larger school. In the opening weeks, the students became acquainted with one another and bonded closely, forming many lifelong friendships. Robert liked everyone, and he liked learning. Mrs. Hail kept everything lively but orderly. Privately, she may have confessed that she had no idea how she would manage such a big class, but, in her room, day by day, she led her charges through the lessons with businesslike precision. In Mrs. Hail's world, everything was shipshape!

Attending school measured up to Robert's intense hopes.

Every noon, he walked briskly home to have dinner. Several of the children who did not ride a bus but who walked to school also walked home for dinner. Most farmers still preferred to call the noon meal "dinner," rather than "lunch." The former word implied a large meal, and farmers needed the energy from such large meals to continue their hard physical work throughout the afternoon. So Robert went home for dinner. Before long, though, he was calling the meal "lunch" because his classmates whose

parents bought them tickets to eat in the cafeteria were on what was called the "school lunch" program. In the change from the word "dinner" to the word "lunch" could be detected a shift in farm life.

Robert had to hurry back so as not to be late for the resumption of lessons in the afternoon. Typically, he had finished eating in time to join his classmates for the recess after lunch.

Mrs. Hail had been Yvonne Lafferty when she attended the same school. She had married John Hail, who ran the elevator. When Robert was in elementary school, married women customarily were called by their husbands' names. Accordingly, Mrs. Yvonne Hail should have been called "Mrs. John Hail," but her first name was unusual in the town—so much so that people could not resist using her name. When she was called something besides "Mrs. Hail," she was "Mrs. Yvonne Hail"!

Ida had given Robert strict orders that he was not to brag that he could read. She had told him that he was to take the reading lessons seriously, even if they repeated what he already knew. Had she only known it, Robert's mother had no reason for concern. Robert had no desire to boast, and he enjoyed starting at the beginning and learning exactly how to read. For him, learning was the greatest joy.

One day at recess, Robert's friend Dennis said there had been a fight on the playground between two older boys in his older brother's class. One of the boys had sustained a bloody nose, and he had wiped his hand on a telephone post beside the road. Dennis, Robert, and a few of their friends took time out from the games to see the post. Sure enough, a red handprint was visible on the dark brown wood of the post. The sight turned Robert's stomach. He wondered how anyone could willingly inflict such pain on a fellow human being. To him, a bloody handprint was a symbol of a terrible injury.

Robert's ancestors were Quakers. They left South Carolina to come to Ohio in 1806, when Ohio had been a state for only three years. They migrated to Indiana in 1826 and 1827. Later, many would migrate onward to Iowa, but Robert's ancestors stayed in Indiana. His great grandfather was raised in the Methodist Church, which had succeeded in attracting several of the Quakers. Even though there had been three generations of Methodists before Robert, several Quaker beliefs lay just beneath the surface of his upbringing. One was a determined belief in the efficacy of peace. The red handprint stood for whatever was the opposite of that peacefulness, and it was abhorrent to Robert.

Robert looked forward to the recess in the afternoon. Quite often, Mitch's mother, who ran the cafeteria, brought trays of lettuce sandwiches to the playground for the children. The crisp lettuce, the fresh butter, and the soft white bread were delightful.

The girls' restroom was adjacent to the classroom, but the boys' restroom was all the way to the east end of the school. Those were the high school rooms. Again and again, Mrs. Hail told the boys to walk quietly in a line to the restroom, but, every now and then, a few of the boys would be boisterous—especially when cranking brown paper towels from the dispensers. The boys' noise brought Mr. Taylor from his classroom. He always appeared in the doorway of the restroom as a towering giant with a yardstick in his hand. He slapped the wall of the restroom with the stick. The sound got the attention of all the boys. Mr. Taylor then patiently explained that they needed to remain quiet so that the high school students could learn their lessons. Robert was frightened of Mr. Taylor, but, years later, when Robert was in high school, he came to know and like him.

Mr. Horn was the principal. He demanded discipline, and his presence called for respect. One of his mannerisms was to slip his glasses from his nose, hold them in one hand, and wear a dignified expression on his face while gesturing with the hand that held the glasses. If he should step into the hallway from his office, an instantaneous hush would fall on any child otherwise inclined to cause a ruckus. He was known to paddle the worst offenders. Years later, Robert began to realize that Mr. Horn was a gracious gentleman who simply brooked no nonsense from students in his school.

Susan's mother, Mrs. Brutus, was the secretary, and she, too, commanded respect. Robert knew her from church, where Mrs. Brutus played the organ, and he recognized that she had a kind heart.

In only a short while, Robert had settled into a pattern of schooling that would last for twelve years. He never regretted a moment of that time.

Chapter 16: The Junior Fire Marshals

Robert and Charles thoroughly enjoyed the Hartford Junior Fire Marshal Program. Joe might have been less enthusiastic, but he didn't let it show. A member of the Pine Village Volunteer Fire Department visited Robert's first grade class and Charles' third grade class to explain that all the students must take a thick booklet to their parents, who would help them examine their homes for fire safety violations. When the booklets were returned, the students would be declared Junior Fire Marshals.

Robert and Charles skipped happily homeward that evening. Joe, who had already been through the process twice for Charles, was not necessarily looking forward to a third occasion. He hurriedly milked the cows and fed the chickens and other poultry while Ida set the supper table early. Fortunately, she did not serve homemade cottage cheese! Robert was ready to take part in the examination of the house as soon as the supper dishes were cleared.

"Alright, boys," Joe said, "we'll start with the bathroom." The bathroom had been added on to the old farmhouse, and it jutted out beyond the main wall as a tiny room all to itself. When the snowflakes were flying, the space was always cold. Joe had the boys look at the light fixtures and the one outlet, which passed their inspection.

"Isn't that a violation of fire safety?" Charles asked, pointing to a heat lamp that Joe kept hanging above the pipes of the water heater during the winter.

"Well," Joe said, "nothing can go wrong with it, and we use it only when it's cold enough to freeze the pipes. Let's assume the inspection is trying to find longstanding problems."

"So which box do I check?" Charles asked.

"Check that the bathroom passes our inspection," Joe said, removing a pen from the pocket of his overalls so that he could check the box in Robert's booklet while Charles checked the box in his booklet.

The three moved on to the corner of the kitchen where a toaster, an electric wall clock, and a coffee percolator were plugged in.

"Could the circuit be overloaded?" Charles asked.

"Well, we've never blown a fuse, and the circuit is designed to carry enough watts to permit what you see there."

“Do I check that the kitchen has a safety violation or not?” Charles asked.

“Check that there is no violation,” Joe said. Again, he took the pen from his pocket so that he could do the same in Robert’s booklet.

Robert had already concluded that you had to be older before you could understand the intricacies of electricity. He had no idea what a circuit or a watt was. Robert wondered if he would comprehend the safety of electricity by the time he was in third grade.

The group moved on to the heating stoves with their pipes that went up and over to the chimneys. Where the pipes entered the chimneys, doughnut-shaped metal plates that were painted in ornamental designs surrounded the pipes.

“If we weren’t already using the stoves,” Joe said, “we’d take off those rings and pull the pipes out to see if there might be any obstructions in the chimney or where the pipes make that angle, but the pipes are already hot. Besides, you’ve seen me clean them every spring at the end of the heating season.”

“So there’s no violation, right?” Charles asked.

“That’s right,” Joe said. Again, he marked Robert’s booklet.

Eventually, the three of them had reached the attic. Robert was a little afraid. One night three years earlier, the fire siren had sounded from the station in town. Joe and the boys had run to the GMC pickup to try to catch up with the firetruck. It was heading west on State Route 26 toward Rainsville. Where the road made a bend, a house was afire. Others who had chased the firetruck parked their vehicles and stood watching and conversing in groups. Although no one was hurt in the fire, the event was frightening. Robert vividly remembered the smoke filled with sparks and the orange flames casting weird shadows that danced in demonic patterns on the cars and the outbuildings. In his recollection, Robert could see the hoses spraying water to save the barn as the trees caught flames in their branches that were too near the house. He recalled glass in the upstairs window of the home shattering and a ball of flame rolling out. Now he glanced worriedly at the window in the upstairs of his house.

Joe, meanwhile, had slid the attic entry panel to one side. He switched on his flashlight and aimed it into the darkness. There was a conch shell that a relative had brought back from Florida. There was a Gilbert wind-up clock from the late 1800s. A dusty violin lay near the clock. A potato bug mandolin

with broken strings caught the beams from the flashlight. A pair of antiquated tennis rackets leaned against the wall. There were so many interesting items, all stacked and piled together, that Robert almost forgot his fear.

"This cord," Joe said, "runs from one side of the house to the other through the attic." He pointed to the cord, which was attached to the rafters. "The electrical service divides fairly evenly with half of the fixtures on one side of the house and the other half on the other side of the house. My uncle Charley—your great uncle—probably had a say in the plan, which is logical and sensible. Also, there is almost nothing hidden that we need to see for our inspection."

The inspection had lasted until bedtime.

Joe, Charles, and Robert felt much better, knowing that everything was in tiptop shape.

When the boys submitted their booklets, they received badges made of red plastic with gold lines radiating outward from a black circle proclaiming the words "Junior Fire Marshal." In the center of the circle stood a white stag against a red background; it was the symbol of the Hartford Insurance Company. Charles and Robert also were given red plastic hats shaped like those that real fire fighters wore. The front of the hat had the Hartford trademark, as well as "Junior Fire Marshal" in large letters.

Every afternoon, the boys played "fire marshal" by wearing their hats and putting out imaginary fires outdoors. Soon, the hats cracked and were no longer usable, but they had been fun while they lasted.

Chapter 17: The Persimmons and the President

American persimmon trees grew naturally in southern Indiana. Before Robert's memory, Joe and Ida had brought one to their yard, where it grew a nice, tall, straight trunk.

That autumn during Robert's first-grade year, Ida chose an ideal time to make persimmon pudding. The first frost had not yet arrived, but it was not far off. The nights were becoming chilly but the days were still warm. Ida, Robert, and Charles gathered the persimmons from the ground while their mother shook the slender tree. The fruits were relatively hard, and their skins were frosty orange with a purplish or bluish tint. They were too bitter to bite into. Ida divided the persimmons into quart size strawberry boxes made of thin wood with eight staples around the upper border. Robert and Charles helped. Robert caught a thumb on the point of a staple. "Ouch!" he exclaimed, putting his thumb in his mouth. The persimmons spent a few days in their cartons on the enameled counter of the Hoosier in the hot kitchen. Then they had become fully ripe and soft. It was time to make pudding!

When the delectable fragrance of the pudding, with its cinnamon, nutmeg, and allspice, arose from the oven, the tantalizing scent permeated the house. Then, when the dark, rich pudding was spooned, still warm, into bowls and topped with whipped cream from the family's milking cows, manna from heaven would have had tough competition!

Near the beginning of November, Ida announced to Robert that he would be keeping an appointment with Dr. Scheurich that afternoon for his last booster shot. When Ida drove Robert to the white house in Oxford that was Dr. Scheurich's office, storm clouds were already overhead and rain was beginning to fall.

Robert knew he could not escape what was about to happen to him, so he went along compliantly. He sat on a red-upholstered chair in the waiting room on the south side of the house. When the familiar nurse stepped up to the counter, looked at a clipboard, and called his name, he went with his mother into the inner office, which reeked of cigar and rubbing alcohol. Had Norman Rockwell been invited to paint an ideal image of a small-town doctor, he would have painted Dr. Scheurich. Even though Dr. Scheurich wore a serious expression on his face and peered through his glasses sternly, he was as roly-poly as Santa Claus. The belt to his trousers was almost lost beneath the bulging white shirt that was always decorated with a stethoscope hanging around his neck. Ida chatted with the doctor while holding Robert's coat. Quickly and efficiently, Dr. Scheurich brought out the

large stainless steel device terminating in its long needle. He sat heavily down on his swivel chair while Robert loosened his belt. Before long, the shot was administered. It hurt like the very devil!

With tears in the corners of his eyes, Robert walked down the concrete steps leading to the front door of the doctor's office and into the car. His coat was wet from the rain.

While Ida drove back to Pine Village, the sky grew darker and the rain fell faster. The landscape was forlorn. The trees had lost their leaves. They stood gray and rain-soaked. Flat land stretched far away until becoming lost in sheets of rain.

When Ida reached home, she told Robert to wait in the car while she got Charles. Robert wondered what was to happen next. Soon, Ida and Charles ran out to the car. Ida drove the short distance to Joe Dan's Restaurant in town. By the time the three of them had taken their seats in a booth near the window, the sky was almost as dark as night. Rivulets of rain glinted down the plate-glass window.

Robert felt that the day had definitely taken a turn for the better. Even though his posterior still felt sore, he knew he could have a breaded tenderloin sandwich with mustard: one of his favorite treats. He could also have a chocolate milkshake.

For some reason, Ida ordered a sandwich for the boys' father, even though he was not there. At about the time the sandwiches were served, Robert saw a figure running across the street from the volunteer fire station. It was Joe, who slid into the booth beside Ida.

"I'm supposed to be using the restroom, so I have to gulp this down," Joe said. When Joe hung up his coat, Robert noticed that his father was wearing good slacks and a Sunday shirt. The slacks were wet up to the knees. "The plumbing at the station broke yesterday, and the election board decided we could take turns coming to the restaurant to use the restroom."

Joe lifted his sandwich and took a big bite.

"This rain may keep voters at home," Ida said. "It's been raining cats and dogs ever since I took Robert for his booster shot. He was good about it this time. He didn't cry. Doctor Scheurich said Robert's shots are all up to date."

"Did it hurt?" Joe asked Robert.

"Yes," Robert said before trying to suck chocolate milkshake up through the big paper straw, which collapsed.

"You need another straw," Joe said.

"You may have to use your spoon," Ida suggested.

Gusts of rain beat against the windowpane.

Having overheard the conversation, Joe Dan, the owner of the restaurant, brought Robert another straw from a tall glass container full of straws and topped with a silver lid. The container stood on the horseshoe counter surrounded by silvery stools that could spin around.

"Who's winning?" Ida asked Joe.

"You know we're not allowed to discuss anything about the election," Joe said, grabbing another big bite of his sandwich.

Ida nodded, accepting his answer.

Then Joe said, "I can tell you that the early reports on the radio say the election's close."

Joe had wolfed down his sandwich. He excused himself from the table, dashed to the restroom, returned to get his coat, wriggled into it, and splashed back across the street to the polling booths in the fire station.

Later the next day, Robert learned that the new President of the United States was John Fitzgerald Kennedy. After having seen only President Dwight David Eisenhower, who looked old to Robert, Robert was surprised that a person as young as Jack Kennedy obviously was could be elected President of the United States.

The sun was shining. Robert's parents talked about how the election was the dawn of a new era. They were excited about the prospects of a bright future, which Alan Shepard's flight in a spacecraft in May seemed to promise.

No one could foretell how dramatic events would dampen those prospects. No one could predict the assassination of the young President in 1963. The slow turning of the tide of public opinion against the Vietnam War, the escalation of the Soviet threat, the racial unrest, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the massive demonstrations in

cities and on campuses were storm clouds on the horizon, but no one saw them yet.

Instead, life on the farm in Pine Village seemed a happy continuation of the happiness at the end of the 1950s. Everything seemed secure. Everything seemed like an innocent way of living not destined to change.

Chapter 18: The Piano and the Pictures

Earlier that year, Robert and Charles had begun taking piano lessons from Miss Ella Beegle, who had a studio at the top of a building that housed Allen's Dance Studio across from the *Journal & Courier* newspaper headquarters in Lafayette. Older than Joe and Ida, Miss Beegle was a kind, gracious woman who could hardly bring herself to correct a pupil. She was well-dressed and well-spoken. After awaiting his turn in a room filled with wicker furniture, Robert would hear Miss Beegle saying goodbye to Charles as the two of them walked down a short hallway. Then it would be Robert's turn to follow Miss Beegle into her studio.

Robert enjoyed the lessons, although he seldom practiced enough. By this time in his first-grade year, he could begin to read simple scores in the beginner's book. One of the short pieces had an illustration of kittens that Robert liked because he had found kittens in his father's barn on more than one occasion. Each week, Miss Beegle asked Robert to write another scale in his booklet of music paper. Robert tried his best to form each note perfectly. "Your scales are better than print," Miss Beegle often said, complimenting Robert's handiwork. Of course, his notes were not better than print, but it was Miss Beegle's method to be unsparing in her praise of a pupil's accomplishments.

Miss Beegle's studio boasted a grand piano. At home, Robert and Charles practiced on an old upright piano that was taller than many similar instruments. To Robert, it seemed harder to play than Miss Beegle's grand. The keys of the old upright offered a little more resistance.

Ida was proud of her sons' progress on the piano, and she insisted that they practice—although both slipped off the piano bench all too soon every day. Whenever Ida and Joe entertained guests, the boys had to play one song each on the piano. While the poor playing in general and the wrong notes in particular must have made it difficult to listen, everyone always applauded rapturously afterward.

Robert spent his time at the piano learning to read music, rather than playing "by ear," as the saying went. He never developed the capacity to reproduce at the keyboard any song that he heard. He had a penchant for exactness, and playing a musical score required the satisfying precision that Robert felt would be lacking, were he to indulge in playing by ear. Many years later, he would wish that he could automatically play any song that he could hear.

For Robert, music lay at the heart of drawing. Ever since he could remember, his mother had provided a seemingly endless supply of crayons, pastels, and watercolor paints. Ida bought numerous large packs of oversized paper and encouraged the boys to make as many pictures as they could. When Robert was three, he sketched Grandma Rhode, and it actually looked like her! He felt that, if he could "hear" the inner music of a surface accurately, he could reproduce that surface in a two-dimensional drawing. No actual sounds were emitted from such surfaces; Robert had to imagine the sounds each surface would make. If he wanted to draw someone's nose, he peered intently at the way the skin stretched across the bridge and imagined what sounds would best express the skin as it came over the bridge and swept toward the cheek—as a stream or a breeze might do. When he heard the sounds as clearly as possible, he put his pencil or his crayon or his paintbrush on the paper and made his hand move in harmony with the sounds he was hearing. Essentially, he was transferring the sounds to the paper, which, in turn, changed three dimensions into two.

So music and visual art were really the same! Visual art was music seen in shading and lines.

Robert had a small chalkboard that had been part of an easel but was now separate from it. He spent many hours drawing with white chalk on the dark green chalkboard.

He sat in a large armchair upholstered in a fuzzy fabric that was nearly knobby and bristly. With the chalkboard across his knees and steadied by his left hand, he drew sequential pictures to accompany stories that he invented and told himself. As soon as one was finished (sometimes even *before* it was finished), he erased it with a handful of dusty tissues and continued on to the next. The drawings were like the major pictures in an animation storyboard. Quite often, he took his inspiration from the TV westerns and from Disney movies. He drew stagecoaches in the desert with mountains in the background, log cabins, forts, and Indians. He never missed an opportunity to sketch Indians and frequently made portraits of them with their feathered headdresses.

Making countless chalk drawings meant that a thick ridge of white dust developed across his jeans. Where he set down his tissues, a broad pile of dust formed on the fabric of the armchair. Mysteriously, his mother never complained about the chalk dust permeating the chair. She periodically brushed and vacuumed the dust away. Robert gained the impression that visual art was approved, no matter how messy it might be.

On many joyous occasions, Ida sat down with Robert and his chalkboard on a davenport in the living room. She invited him to tell a story aloud while he illustrated it, and he complied.

"Your story needs an ending," she always said. "You're reaching a place where you stop, but that's not an ending."

"What should it be?" Robert always asked.

"You can end a story in many ways," his mother would answer. "You can surprise whoever is listening to your story."

"What would a surprise be?"

On one such occasion, Ida replied, "You could have the tribe make the boy in your story an honorary member because he rescued their pony from the deep hole that his father had dug."

Robert quickly drew a picture of smiling Indians standing around the boy and the pony.

"That's right," Ida said. "Another way would be to make a point. You could tell why it's important to keep fences around deep holes so that ponies don't fall into them."

Robert hurriedly rubbed away the existing sketch, set the handful of tissues to one side, and drew a hole with a fence around it. For good measure, he added several trees in the background.

"That's good!" his mother said. "You could also return to what you said in the beginning and make it mean more at the end. Do you remember when you said that the boy wished he could do something for his Indian friends?"

"I see," said Robert. "'So the boy got his wish,'" he proclaimed in a louder voice, to show that the sentence was his ending. At the same time, he drew a close-up of the boy's face with a big grin next to several faces of Indians, also with big grins.

"That's very good!" his mother said. "Whenever you begin a story, think what your ending is going to be. Make everything in the story count toward the ending."

Robert smiled with satisfaction. "I will!" he agreed, but, by the next time his mother sat with him and invited him to tell a story with his chalkboard, he

had forgotten about endings. Patiently, Ida would guide him through various ways to end whatever story he had been telling her.

Eventually, there came a day when he remembered.

"And the puppy that nobody had wanted had grown up to be the prettiest dog of all!" he said, as he put the finishing touches to his sketch of a dog. He could hear the music of its pointy ears, its soft nose, and its twinkling eyes.

Ida smiled and said, "Now you know how to end a story!"

Chapter 19: The Flu and the Visits

Robert's class rehearsed a Christmas song to be performed during a school-wide convocation to occur just before school was dismissed for a few days during the holiday season. Robert struggled to find the correct pitches when he and his classmates were singing a wide variety of incorrect pitches. He worried about what the quality of the song would be on the day when the class had to sing it before the school.

He need not have worried. A day before the concert, Robert came down with the flu and had to stay home. He hated missing school almost more than he hated being sick. He felt he was letting down his classmates, but nothing could be done about the situation. He was sick, and that was that.

This, moreover, became a pattern for almost all of the six years of grade school. Robert would come down with the flu just before the school's observance of Christmas, and he would miss the convocation. After the first few years of catching the flu, he began to dread the beginning of rehearsals of the school's Christmas programs, for he knew he would become ill. And, like clockwork, he caught the flu bug at that same time year after year.

"No, you're going to be well this year," his mother would reassure Robert.

Shortly thereafter, the fever and the sneezing would begin.

"You'll have to stay home," his mother would have to admit.

Year after year …

When 1961 began, Joe took the boys to visit Jim Hooker. It was a short drive into town; if it had not been so cold, they could have walked. Jim accompanied them to his workshop in the small barn beside his house. Windows along the south and east walls met in the corner where the door was. Inside, heavy work tables stretched the length of both walls. The tables were laden with homespun wood carvings.

Jim stood back with his coat open enough for him to rest his thumbs under his red suspenders. He grinned with pride while Robert and Charles stared in wonder at Jim's creations.

Robert felt he could spend all day looking at the carvings and not grow bored. They were intricately detailed yet not photographically real. Each displayed an element of Jim's fanciful imagination. There were miniature wagons with working wheels that were pulled by twenty teams of mules. A

few of his earlier renditions of the theme had mules that were more or less alike, but his later versions featured mules that were all different, with some glancing to one side and with others switching their tails.

Many Conestoga wagons stood among the carvings. They were covered in canvas and pulled by oxen yoked together. Teams and teams of draft horses were hitched to a variety of farm wagons.

Robert did not want to possess a carving as a toy. He understood that these were works of art not to be played with and to be treasured for their beauty. They revealed the talent and the skill and the genius of their creator.

While the boys ogled the mules, horses, oxen, and wagons, their father talked with Jim about the news from around town. Robert paid no attention to their conversation; he studied the carvings with rapt admiration. Although he remembered seeing them when he was younger, he felt he was seeing them for the first time. He had arrived at an age when he could appreciate the deft movements of Jim's carving tools recorded in the wood of the figures.

Next, Joe took the boys to see their great aunt Margaret. With a big smile, she invited them to step inside her warm kitchen. The air was balmy with the fragrance of raisin cookies, which she was baking in her black iron oven. A coal oil lamp that had been converted to electricity hung on the wall above an antique table. The light bulb within the glass chimney gleamed brightly because a mirror-like reflector fanned out behind it. The light hurt Robert's eyes, but, as long as he kept his back to it, there was no problem. He enjoyed looking out the windows and seeing the well-manicured houses across the street. Traces of snow clung to their eaves. One large house was Dutch Colonial and featured a gambrel roof with dormers.

Aunt Margaret offered everyone a cookie as big as a saucer. She leaned forward to hand Robert his cookie. He thought her happy face above her starched apron resembled her cookies. Here and there were little wrinkles embroidering her countenance, and her eyes gleamed in the same way that the raisins sparkled in the bright light from the coal oil lamp!

"The meat should be ready in Otterbein," Joe said. "In the next day or two, I'll drive over to pick it up, and I'll bring you the cuts you wanted."

"Just this morning, I was wondering what I was going to cook this week," Aunt Margaret said. "I had about made up my mind to walk up to Terrell's Market to buy some pork chops, but I'm glad I put it off. Come see my Christmas cactus."

Aunt Margaret led the group into her living room. In the south window on a fern stand was an enormous Christmas cactus with many magenta blooms.

"It was the fullest just before Christmas," Aunt Margaret said, "but it's still giving a good show."

The notched branches hung in all directions. The plant was larger than a bushel basket. The blossoms were white near their centers, but the rich magenta hue was what caught Robert's eye.

"You certainly have good luck with your Christmas cactus," Joe said.

"I don't know why it does so well there," Aunt Margaret said, "but it seems to like that window. All I have to do is to remember to water it."

"I'm considering driving up to Claude Martindale's to see if he has any apples left. Ida wants to bake a pie."

"If he has any, could you get me a dozen?" Aunt Margaret asked. "Did I ever tell you what Claude did when we were children? We attended the same one-room school out there not far from Marshall Rhode's house. Claude got the idea to tie a kernel of corn to a piece of string. It was warm outside, and the window was open. When the teacher wasn't looking, he threw the kernel out the window and held onto the string. There were chickens all around the school. He would tug a little on the string and tug a little more on the string. Before long, he had the kernel up on the window sill. Right then, a big fat chicken that was trying to get the corn flew up, grabbed hold of the sill with its talons, and squawked. At first, everyone was so startled that nobody said anything, then the children were so tickled that they laughed and laughed. The teacher made Claude stand in the corner."

Robert and Charles chuckled along with Aunt Margaret.

"Well, I suppose we should be going," Joe said.

"Don't stay away so long the next time," Aunt Margaret chided in a joking fashion.

The boys and their father climbed back in their car for the short drive to Claude Martindale's orchard in "Oklahoma," the nickname for a group of houses near where there had been a railway that passed the elevator east of Pine Village. Claude wore his customary black cap that resembled those the

newsboys of an earlier generation had worn. His blue denim coat hung loosely on his overalls.

"Yes, I still have some cooking apples in my cellar," Claude said in reply to Joe's question. While the boys stamped their feet to keep them warm, Joe waited until Claude reappeared with a basket under his arm.

"These are mostly winesaps," Claude said, as he handed the half-full basket to Joe.

"Claude, there are many more here than I asked for," Joe said.

Claude raised his hand and shook his head slightly. "I have more than I can use before they go bad," he said.

"What do I owe you?" Joe asked.

"This late in the season, you owe me nothing," Claude said. "Just tell Ida to bring me a slice of her pie."

"Well, thank you most kindly," Joe said. "I'll make sure you get a piece of pie."

Joe set the basket in the back seat. There would be plenty of apples to divide with Aunt Margaret and with Grandma Rhode, as well.

Joe, Charles, and Robert had enjoyed their visits. Robert had learned that people are makers. Jim Hooker made carvings, Aunt Margaret made cookies and Christmas cactus blossoms, and Claude Martindale made apple orchards and baskets of apples that appeared from his cellar.

Chapter 20: The Cereals and the Baked Goods

Robert had an intense dislike for rolled oats, which his mother often served for breakfast. He despised the texture, and he found the taste repulsive. He was forced to choke down many a bowl filled to the brim with the disgusting stuff. Cream of wheat was almost as bad, but he could swallow it with less trouble. During the year when he was in Mrs. Hail's class, Ida began to give up the fight for rolled oats and occasionally set a Kellogg's Variety Pack in the center of the table.

Robert felt a huge relief! Even if his brother took the best cereals (Sugar Smacks, Sugar Pops, Raisin Bran, or Rice Krispies), Robert could easily eat Sugar Frosted Flakes or Special K. Robert found Corn Flakes marginally acceptable. OKs were—well—OK!

On the happy mornings when the Variety Pack made its appearance on the breakfast table, Robert emptied the cereal into a china bowl, put two heaping teaspoons of sugar on top, and poured the fresh milk straight from the cow around the mound of sugar. He was fascinated to watch the milk soak into the sugar, transforming it from white granules to gray layers that gradually slipped below the creamy surface. He spooned the cereal carefully, so that, by the end, the bottom of the bowl would have a thick layer of sugar that he could spoon out with the last of the milk. Kellogg's had been offering variety packs as long as Robert had been alive, but Ida did not yield to their convenience until Robert was in school.

Jell-O was a different story. Ida had fallen fast for the convenience of Jell-O dishes, and she was quick to use all the recipes in the women's magazines. Jell-O (a mixture of gelatin, fruit flavors, and sugar) was served at almost every dinner and every supper.

Orange Jell-O packed full of shredded carrots and chopped raisins was a popular item on Ida's menu. Lime Jell-O featuring crunchy chunks of celery was another. Robert greatly preferred fruit in his Jell-O. Black cherry Jell-O harboring large bing cherries was one of Robert's favorites. Then came lime Jell-O with crushed pineapple and heavy cream mixed together on a bed of crumbled graham crackers and topped with a layer of whipped heavy cream and chopped walnuts. The latter dish became a staple.

On special occasions, Ida made a mold of a fruity Jell-O with mandarin orange slices. A topping of whipped cream was available for most of the Jell-O dishes made with fruit.

Ida bowed to convenience when it came to international cuisine, too. Italian food was Chef Boyardee from cans. Asian food was LaChoy's Chop Suey Vegetables with chunks of pork added and with the dish poured over LaChoy Chow Mein Noodles. Mexican food was Van Camp's Tamales with Sauce (also from a can). Ever since the Korean War, Ida had witnessed a time of a burgeoning variety of foods and ever-greater convenience—a convenience that she embraced enthusiastically (sooner or later).

Even though Ida was a skilled baker, she enjoyed buying doughnuts and bread from Graves Bakery on the State Street hill near Purdue University in West Lafayette. Almost every week, she successfully made the turn from State Street, across the oncoming traffic, over the gravelly hump just beyond the sidewalk, and down into the parking lot, where she moved her foot back and forth from the brake to the gas pedal to the brake and to the gas pedal until she felt the car was parked well enough. Once Robert's nearly carsick vision had cleared, he waited in the Chevrolet Bel Air while Ida gained the sidewalk and hurried out of view toward the front door of the bakery. Robert looked up in fascination at the large billboard on the side of the building.

Regularly, the billboard changed, but it always announced the delights of baked goods from Graves Bakery and it always included a painting, usually a child with rosy cheeks and an endearing smile who was enjoying a jelly-filled doughnut or similar sugary treat. The painting on the huge poster always exhibited a heartwarming realism reminiscent of Norman Rockwell's work but lacking a complete background so that the words could be prominently displayed against a plain backdrop. Robert studied the colors and the ways the artist fashioned the facial features, the clothing, the hands, the light, and the shadows.

Soon enough, Ida returned with two big bags of doughnuts and sweet rolls.

"They had a sale on cinnamon twists, and I bought extras," Ida said with evident glee, as she carefully placed the white paper sacks in the back seat.

The bakery items usually were devoured before the next week's trip to West Lafayette, but, when they were gone, Ida might make cinnamon toast for breakfast.

After many glum mornings staring down a bowl of rolled oats, Robert was ready to dance a jig whenever he awoke to the fragrance of cinnamon toast. Ida mixed butter, sugar, and cinnamon and lightly toasted it on slices of bread that were spread on a cookie sheet and placed in the oven. The satisfying crunch when he bit into the caramelized sugar was only part of the

pleasure of eating his mother's cinnamon toast. The sugar coating would flake slightly to reveal the hot buttery toast beneath. On especially fortunate mornings, Ida served mugs of hot cocoa. Dipping half a slice of plain buttered toast in hot chocolate was a delicious experience, but dipping half a slice of cinnamon toast in cocoa would make anyone over the moon!

Yes, Ida could bake cookies with the best of them, and her persimmon pudding was out of this world. Her forte, though, was pie. Robert could not remember a time when there was no pie cooling beside the meat grinder attached to the enameled counter of the Hoosier. Apple, peach, banana cream, cherry, blackberry, sugar cream, pumpkin, lemon meringue, chocolate, mince (but not made with meat), rhubarb, gooseberry, and even mulberry (on rare occasions) were only a few of the pies that came hot and mouth-watering from Ida's oven. Almost every dinner was fortified with a generous slice of pie for dessert. It seemed she never missed! Ida's pies never failed!

In addition to being baked in a pie, rhubarb took several delightful turns toward the dessert side of the dinner plates: rhubarb cobbler (sometimes mixed with strawberries), rhubarb coffee cake, rhubarb sauce (sometimes mixed with cherries) for ice cream, rhubarb crunches, and rhubarb crisps.

Ida's gooseberry shortcake stole the show.

Quite often, Ida brought her brown cups of custard hot from the oven. Using a rasp, she grated nutmeg on top of each. Sometimes, the custard cups were filled with butterscotch pudding, chocolate pudding, or vanilla pudding.

Cakes were plentiful, too. Ida, Aunt Margaret, and Grandma Rhode all made delectable German chocolate cakes. Robert's favorite birthday cake was a white layer cake with pink peppermint icing, but black walnut cake was also high on his list.

With the butter and cream that were fresh from Joe's Holstein cows and with lard that was truly lard and with flour that knew how to behave, the baked goods that flowed from Ida's oven were delicious beyond anyone's powers of description. They more than compensated for the rolled oats and the cream of wheat that Robert had to consume at the start of the day now and then.

Chapter 21: The Ice

That winter, there had come a spell of light snow that would melt a little before the temperature dipped below zero, producing a sheet of ice over the ground. Joe walked into the kitchen and spoke in a low voice to Ida, who promptly told the boys to put on their parkas, stocking caps, and gloves. She had to take Joe to see Dr. Scheurich.

Robert felt a wave of apprehension as he quickly followed his mother's instructions. He had thought that only he and his brother ever had to visit the doctor, not one of his parents. When he saw his father sitting in a strange posture on one of the kitchen chairs, his face pale and gray, Robert felt his apprehension deepening into anxiety.

Ida ushered the boys toward the car. Joe came slowly from the house. She held open the passenger door for him. He ever-so-slowly sank into the seat. Ida slammed the door, ran around the car, and, with considerable agitation, put the key in the ignition. When the Chevy started, she did not wait for it to warm up. She backed fast down the driveway and out onto the state highway. In a heartbeat, she was driving to Oxford.

Joe had been checking on the Chester White sows that were soon to have litters. One young sow had been pushing against the wooden panels that held her captive in a small exercise area beyond the door of an individual hog house on skids that Joe had pulled into place with his Minneapolis–Moline Z tractor. Painted red, the house had a V-shaped roof, half of which consisted of hinged doors that could swing over, permitting a view of the interior. Joe bought his hog houses from the grain elevator, where they were built at the lumberyard. On this day, Joe had decided that he needed to sink one more metal post to support the panel that the sow had been abusing. He had brought a tall fence post and a sledge hammer. After looking over the situation, he had decided to put the post on the inside of the small lot, so he had climbed over the panel.

Hammering the fence post into the frozen ground was a time-consuming job. Ping–ping–ping! His hammer had sounded a short bell-like tone each time that he had struck the post. Finally, he had driven the post into the ice deep enough to prevent the sow from working on the panel.

He had brought several strands of baling wire, with which he had secured the panel to the post, being careful to push the ends of the wires to the outside so that the sow would not be scratched. With a snap of his wrist, he had used a heavy pair of pliers to give each twist of wire two additional

twists, tightening the wires. Finally, he had taken his sledge hammer and had climbed back outside the panel.

That is when it had happened. His feet had become cold, even though he had been wearing boots, high-top laced shoes, and brown woolen socks. He could barely feel where he put his toes in between the boards of the panel. As the gap between the bottom two boards was narrow, he had not pushed the toe of his boot through far enough. His foot slipped and dropped down on the ice. His balance thrown off, Joe had lost his grip on the panel but not on the hammer. Meanwhile, the foot that had suddenly reached the ice skidded out from under him, pivoting him. He had fallen on his side. As bundled up as he was with long johns, a flannel undershirt, a work shirt, a lined denim coat, and a regular denim coat over the lined one, he might have withstood the fall, but he had landed on the handle of the sledge hammer. He had writhed in pain for a few minutes before he had realized that, pain or no pain, he would have to get back on his feet and go to the house.

For the first few steps, standing had felt somewhat better, but then the pain had intensified. He felt certain that he had broken a bone.

Before he was married, he had been helping the members of the threshing ring to separate his wheat, and he had fallen from the grain wagon. His left upper arm had gone between the wooden hound that supported the wagon tongue behind the doubletree, and he had broken the bone with a spiral break. On this day, he remembered that pain.

While Dr. Scheurich examined Joe, Robert and Charles sat quiet as church mice in the waiting room. Before they had entered the doctor's office, their mother had told them to behave themselves by sitting still and not causing trouble. She had accompanied their father into the examination room. Robert's fears were mounting. Tears were gathering in the corners of his eyes. He had never seen his father look so pale, so gray, and so unsmiling. Robert still did not know what had happened, although Charles had whispered to him something about ice.

Eventually, Joe emerged. Ida was at his side. The nurse was close behind. Ida and the nurse walked with him down the front stairs to the car. Robert and Charles followed. On this occasion, Robert had ridden in the back seat of the two-door car so his father could sit in front. Robert had managed not to have motion sickness, but, on the way home, he felt the dizziness starting. Still, he listened carefully to his parents' conversation. Little by little, he felt his worries subside as he began to understand that his father had fallen on the ice, that he had cracked some ribs, and that there was nothing that

could be done except take aspirin and wait for the bruising to heal. Dr. Scheurich had wrapped a stretchy bandage around Joe's side and over one shoulder to keep Joe steady, as much as anything; otherwise, the bandage had no effect, as the doctor had readily admitted.

"You'll have to milk the cows and feed and water the sows," Joe was saying to Ida. The doctor had advised him not to move about much for the first two days and for Ida to handle the chores. "I'm sorry for you to have to do my work," Joe said.

"It's only for a few days," Ida reassured him. "The boys can help me."

After school, Robert and Charles helped their mother all they could. They threw down hay from the mow. They scooped ground feed into buckets to be carried to the sows, each sow in her own paneled lot. They mixed feed and water for the ducks. They scattered feed for the chickens and the turkeys. Robert thought it was funny to watch Ida at work. She wore four-buckle boots that made her feet seem too big for her body. She did everything differently than the boys' father did. She positioned the stool differently when she sat beside the cows to milk them. She spoke more jokingly to the cows—as if they were people! "You like that clover, don't you, Flossy!" Ida would say. At the end of each day, Ida had completed all the same jobs that Joe would have accomplished, even though she had done them in her own way.

Eventually, Joe had begun to move about in a gingerly fashion and had resumed doing the chores himself.

"Don't let your dad try to use his sore side," Ida had warned the boys. "Think ahead, and help him lift things that he shouldn't be lifting!" she ordered. Robert and Charles were good about providing as much assistance as they could to their father.

Then, one cold night, Ida set a bushel basket in front of the Norge heating stove in the kitchen. She arranged an old blanket in the bottom. Joe came through the door to the porch. The gloved hand on his good side was holding something that squirmed. He put it in the basket.

"She may have another one before I get back out there," Joe said, as he went through the porch and out into the night, a flashlight in the hand on his sore side.

Robert peered into the basket. A pink piglet was standing on the blanket. It looked up at him with its inquisitive eyes beneath white eyelashes. Soon, Joe brought another pink piglet and deposited it in the basket.

The boys' mother prepared a second basket. Later that night, there were nine piglets all in all.

"I think they could go back to their mother now," Joe said.

Robert put on his coat, hat, and gloves and walked with his mother as she carried the first basket out to the hog house containing the sow that had just had her litter. It was the sow that had given so much trouble. Robert stood on a straw bale to look down through the doors that Joe opened in the roof of the house. A heat lamp cast a reddish light around the inside, which felt warm on Robert's face. Ida was handing each piglet to Joe, who was setting them down in the fresh straw inside. When the first basket had been emptied, Ida brought out the second basket of piglets. Before long, the newborns were lined up along the belly of the sow and were having their dinner.

"We'd better close the doors now," Joe said to Robert, who stepped down from the bale. The piglets were so cute that Robert silently questioned why his parents never kept one for a pet. Then he thought about how big the sow was and how it was not nearly as cute as a piglet, and he answered his own question.

Chapter 22: The Masons

In April of 1961, Grandpa Rhode died.

Seymour Alfred Rhode had been born in 1884. After growing up on his father's farm on the road to Independence, Seymour had graduated from Attica High School. Briefly, he had taught school. The remains of the one-room schoolhouse, nicknamed "Rock College," stood in a gloomy tangle of weeds across the road from College Rock. Joe and Ida had taken Charles and Robert past Rock College on Sunday afternoon drives. The boards of the building were gray with age. For a time, Seymour had sold musical instruments in Lafayette. A few years after his marriage to Kosie Ruby Cobb in 1909, he had served on the Board of Directors of Standard Live Stock Insurance Company of Indianapolis.

Rue J. Alexander, born as James Ruevelle, had had a direct influence on Robert's life because, before World War II, he had helped nudge Seymour into political posts in Indianapolis. Beginning in the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, Seymour had later become an examiner for the Indiana Department of Insurance. He had been named Chief Examiner after fifteen years in the department. When he had begun accepting what were largely political appointments, he had become much more successful than he had been previously.

The family of Grandpa Rhode's beloved sister, Bertha, and her husband, John Claypool—who lived in New York—mourned the passing of Seymour and sent condolences to Joe. Over the years, they had made several excursions to visit the Rhode clan in Indiana, and they now planned another to keep the far-flung family as close together as possible.

Grandpa Rhode was to be buried in the Pine Village Cemetery after services at Shipps Funeral Home in Oxford. As Grandpa Rhode had been a Mason, he was to be given Masonic rites.

It was the first time Robert had seen the members of the Masonic Lodge wearing their aprons, and it was the first time that he had heard his father give the funeral oration.

Joe had memorized the entire oration, and he was nearly always the one who spoke it at a funeral for a Mason from Pine Village. In the years preceding Grandpa Rhode's death, Robert had often heard Fred Holdcraft and Robert's father conversing quietly in the living room. Fred and his wife, Glynalee, were members of the Euchre Club that Joe and Ida played in and the parents of Joy and Jenny, two of Robert's friends. Fred was a Masonic

Past Master and member of the Scottish Rite Valley of Indianapolis. The purpose of his talking in low tones with Joe was to make arrangements for Joe to present the funeral oration for a fellow Mason. For the next few evenings, Robert's father was not to be bothered, so that he could practice, ensuring that his memory of the speech was perfect.

At the services for Grandpa Rhode, Joe and his fellow Masons wore over their suits the white aprons trimmed in blue with the all-seeing eye symbol above and the symbol of Freemasonry below. Robert found the aprons strange. They were so out of the ordinary as to make Robert doubly conscious of the solemnity of the occasion.

Robert knew that his father wanted to make no mistake in the oration, and, indeed, Joe made none. His sentences flowed effortlessly with perfect cadences and emphases.

Seymour's brother Marshall C., who was born in 1888, was a 32nd Degree Mason in the Scottish Rite. Great Uncle Marshall stood near Joe during the ceremony.

The Masons had memberships in the Order of the Eastern Star, to which women could also belong. Ida was a member. Throughout the year, she attended Eastern Star meetings, which were held in lodge rooms on the second story of the Brick Block, a row of shops on the north side of Lafayette Street that had been built in 1902 and 1903.

At the funeral, Ida wore her five-pointed Eastern Star pin with its red, blue, yellow, white, and green triangles.

A few days after the funeral, Joe took his family in his GMC pickup to Indianapolis to attend to the apartment where Grandpa Rhode had lived for many years. Joe's first cousin Jay, a son of Charles J. Rhode, Seymour's older brother that was born in 1882, drove his own pickup so that there would be two trucks to haul furniture and boxes. Jay's wife, Claire, who was a Cajun from New Orleans that Jay had met while he was in the Navy in World War II, remained at home.

It rained cats and dogs almost all day long!

Ida had given Charles and Robert strict instructions to be useful but not in the way. Robert stood quietly in corners of rooms until he was called upon to carry lightweight boxes to the trucks. When it was time to clear Grandpa Rhode's desk, Ida asked Joe and Jay if the boys could have any of the small items that decorated the desktop. Jay nodded.

“You boys can pick out something for yourselves,” Joe said.

Robert took an iridescent conch shell, and Charles accepted a small metal horse that he later gave to Robert.

Robert clutched the seashell all the way home in the dark of night as the rain pelted the windshield and the tarp that had been tied down over the furniture and boxes in the bed of the pickup.

The death of Grandpa Rhode plunged Robert into a solemn frame of mind. Robert’s pensive mood lasted for a week. He overheard his mother asking his father what should be done. She said that, perhaps, Robert should not have attended the funeral. She added that, maybe, Robert should not have helped carry boxes from Grandpa Rhode’s apartment. Joe suggested giving Robert time to work out everything in his mind.

Robert held the shell in his hand. He was fascinated with the way the mother of pearl tones reflected the light. It was as if the shell were glowing while light was passing through it—as if he were holding the moving light itself in the palm of his hand. Suddenly, he felt that the shell pointed to something greater: a transcendent force just beyond what can be seen. His grandfather was still alive somewhere, sustained and protected by the same light. Were not angels portrayed as beings of light? Could the shell correspond to everlasting life in other dimensions linked to this world through light and its meaning? All at once, Robert thought he knew what was meant in First Corinthians when the Apostle Paul writes, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

Robert emerged from his contemplative week a more cheerful boy. Ida could not figure out what had brought about the change.

Chapter 23: The Battle of Tippecanoe

Robert, Charles, and their parents were seated around the dinner table when Ida asked Joe, a student of history, to tell the boys about the Battle of Tippecanoe.

"The battle took place in the early morning hours of November 7th in 1811," Joe began. "The town of Battle Ground north of Lafayette is named for it. The Shawnee leader, who was named Tecumseh, had been gathering many tribes between where the Tippecanoe River flows into the Wabash River and where Wildcat Creek meets the Wabash River. Tecumseh wanted to block American settlers from expanding further into Indian territories. The Governor of the Indiana Territory was William Henry Harrison. He learned that Tecumseh had gone to the southern states to recruit more tribes, and he marched his troops northward from the territorial capital at Vincennes to fight a pitched battle against the Indians. He wanted to break up the confederation that Tecumseh had been forming. You remember the historical marker that we stopped to read near the Andersons' place about four miles from here. That marker designates where Harrison's army marched. Harrison had about a thousand men. When Harrison arrived at the Indian village on the 6th, Tecumseh's brother met him. Tecumseh's brother was called 'the Prophet.' Harrison accepted the Prophet's offer to camp on a stretch of wooded, narrow, triangular ground between two ravines."

Ida had percolated coffee, and she poured a cup for Joe. He dipped a teaspoon into the coffee and blew on it to cool it before sipping the coffee from the teaspoon. Robert and Charles waited expectantly.

Joe continued, "That night, representatives of the tribes discussed what to do. The Prophet wanted to negotiate with Harrison to buy time for Tecumseh to return, but most of the other leaders wanted to attack. The Prophet felt outnumbered. He agreed to attack the soldiers just before dawn the next morning. A half mile southwest of Battle Ground, there's a rocky cliff high above the low land where the rivers and creeks flow together. The Prophet, who was a spiritual leader, said he would stand there and offer holy chants to protect the Indians from the soldiers' bullets. Today, the cliff is called 'Prophet's Rock.' It is said that Indians crawled unseen through the underbrush to within a few feet of the sleeping soldiers and that some of the Indians silently climbed the trees at the perimeter of the army's campground. Just before daybreak, the firing began almost simultaneously at the northern and southern ends of the triangular point of land. The fighting soon spread throughout the soldiers' encampment. Many lives were lost on both sides. After about two hours, the Indians withdrew because they were running low on ammunition. Harrison regrouped and buried the dead

soldiers on the spot. The Indians had dispersed because they expected Harrison to come after them. Harrison ordered his men to burn the empty Indian village, which he referred to as Prophetstown. On the return march to Vincennes, Harrison buried a few more soldiers who died of their wounds along the way."

"How many were killed?" Charles asked.

"Some sixty soldiers were killed and well over a hundred wounded. The Indians carried off their dead, so no one knows how many were killed. Harrison's first estimate was that about forty Indians had been killed. The country decided to blame the British for inciting the Indians, and the Battle of Tippecanoe was one of the factors that led to the War of 1812. After the battle, the Indians rebuilt Prophetstown, and Tecumseh managed to keep the confederation together, but Harrison called the Battle of Tippecanoe a decisive victory. It may be true that the Indian confederation had been weakened somewhat by the battle. Many years later, when he was in his late sixties, Harrison ran for President, and his having supposedly won a victory over the Indians helped him win the election of 1840. He died of pneumonia in the spring of 1841 only a month after taking office."

Ida told Robert and Charles, "We're going to see the reenactment of the battle."

"What's a reenactment?" Robert asked.

"People in costume," Joe explained, "will fight the battle again—but without bullets—so that visitors can watch what took place back in 1811. This year is the sesquicentennial."

Robert found the word "sesquicentennial" surprising.

"It means that a hundred and fifty years have passed," his father said.

On the afternoon of the 19th of August—when the reenactment was to occur—the boys and their parents drove to Lafayette. Joe and Ida had not been prepared for the massive turnout. Over ten thousand people attended. Traffic was snarled on the highways leading to Battle Ground. As the family's Chevrolet inched its way forward in the bumper-to-bumper procession, the reenactment began. The sound of guns popping in the distance told them that they were missing the battle. When they finally were within sight of the battlefield, which was surrounded by a tall iron fence, they saw Indians walking along the road who had obviously already done their part toward replicating the fight and were conversing casually with one another.

It was one of the rare times that Ida had not been first in line, and she was not happy that the reenactment had come and gone long before Joe could park the car. The delay could not have been avoided, though. Who would have thought that so many people would assemble for such an event?

Rather than stay for the barbeque dinner on Main Street in Battle Ground, Joe and Ida decided to return home.

Even though the family had missed the reenactment, Robert felt he had experienced a significant event. He had seen Indians wielding guns, and, even though they were "out of character," so to speak, they were symbolic of conflict. Robert had watched many a Western, but he had not given much thought to the nature of warfare, for which he felt a deeply instinctual revulsion.

"Why would Indians and soldier have to fight each other?" Robert asked his father later that evening. Joe was sipping coffee, and Robert was sitting cross-legged on the davenport. Joe's eyebrows drew downward, and he pursed his lips as he tried to think how best to answer Robert's question.

Joe began, "History is full of wars. They seem inevitable." Joe thought longer about what to say. "Your ancestors were Quakers. Many of them are buried in Quaker Cemetery near the Independence Road. We've taken you there on Memorial Day. The Quakers believed in peace. They would not fight. For that reason, they were generally trusted by Indians. Even though our family has attended the Methodist Church for the past four generations, some of the Quaker beliefs may have been passed down to us. I've given considerable thought to whether or not Quaker teachings may have persisted into the Methodist years, and I've concluded that there could well be Quaker attitudes among us. If you're thinking that people lost their lives unnecessarily at the Battle of Tippecanoe, you might be getting that feeling from bits and pieces of Quaker philosophy. It's also true that, customarily, nations respect the nobility and honor of those who fight for them."

While Robert felt satisfied with the answer, he continued to ponder why two groups of people would try to kill one another.

Chapter 24: The Spelling Bee and Halloween

Robert was wary about starting the second grade. He was accustomed to Mrs. Hail. When he entered the school on the first day that fall semester and saw Mrs. Hail welcoming a new class into her room, he felt somewhat abandoned, although he knew that passing from one grade to the next was the way the system worked. Now he would have Mrs. Arvin, who was older than Mrs. Hail and who sometimes wore a face of what he took for severity.

After a time, Robert adjusted to Mrs. Arvin's classroom manner and began to appreciate her methods. For Mrs. Arvin, the answers had to be strictly correct. Give her the correct answers, and she was your greatest supporter!

The year unfolded gradually, as did all the years back then. Time seemed to be in no hurry. Each minute was round and full of promise. One of Mrs. Arvin's pedagogical strategies was to conduct spelling bees during the second half of the lunch period when the weather was so inclement that the students could not go outside for recess. Robert came to look forward to the spelling bees so much that he hoped for rain. On the drizzly days of autumn, he raced back to school after eating lunch at his home across the street so that he could take part in the contests.

The students chose up sides, and Robert felt proud to be one of the first chosen because he was considered a good speller. He tried as hard as he could not to let down his team. He correctly spelled such words as "separate": S E P A R A T E. One day, Mrs. Arvin gave him "receive," and he correctly spelled R E C E I V E. Another day, Mrs. Arvin said, "Robert, spell 'definite.'" He said, "D E F I N I T E."

On one rainy noon, Robert wolfed down the lunch of chili and grilled cheese sandwich that his mother had prepared and ran back across State Route 26 to the school building. His class had already chosen sides and had already begun the spelling bee. The moment Robert walked through the door, Mrs. Arvin said, "Robert, while you were gone, Susan chose you to be on her team, and it is your turn. Spell 'twenty-three.'" Robert felt relieved to be given such an easy example. He took his place with Susan's group, which was standing in front of the chalkboard, and he said, "T W E N T Y - T R E E." Mrs. Arvin said, "That is incorrect. Robert, you may sit down." With the blood rushing to his face, Robert stumbled toward his desk and took his seat. Susan was staring at him accusingly. Mrs. Arvin gave the opposing team "twenty-three," and Alan spelled it correctly. Robert was too embarrassed to ask why his spelling was wrong, but the questioning look on his face must have revealed his bewilderment. Robert felt certain he had given the correct spelling. Mrs. Arvin said, "Robert, you omitted the *h* in

'three.'" Although he knew how to spell "three"—and although he thought he had spelled it correctly—he could remember the sound of his own voice skipping from the *t* to the *r* without saying the *h*.

Robert had failed his team, and his chagrin was palpable. He felt his face grow redder and redder. Perspiration dripped down his neck. He had felt so confident, only to have erred and to have disappointed his team. He realized that, in the future, he could not allow himself to experience the luxury of confidence unless he had first taken every precaution to ensure correctness. One of those precautions was to take his time. He had rushed into the classroom, had immediately been given a word to spell, and had hurried to spell it. In the future, he would take a deep breath, concentrate with a steely steadiness, and not speak until he was sure that he could speak correctly. The lesson was one of the most important lessons he would ever learn.

As Halloween approached, Mrs. Arvin hung a cardboard skeleton on her classroom door. The bones of the arms and legs could swivel and hold various positions. The skeleton was taller than the children in Mrs. Arvin's class. Halloween fell on a Tuesday, and, for an undisclosed reason, Mrs. Arvin had to be gone during the final period that day. Glen Bisel's daughter, who was a high school student, took over the class. Mrs. Arvin had provided her with a stack of paper from the purple ditto machine in the main office. The pages retained the pungent but not unpleasant smell of the ink. They bore the outlines of a jack-o-lantern. The children were asked to color the pumpkin.

Robert and his classmates took out their crayons and set to work. While Robert preferred to create his own pictures, he enjoyed art of any kind, including coloring within the lines already laid down for him. He carefully shaded his pumpkin to make it as three-dimensional as possible. Beyond the windows, the skies were heavy with gray clouds scudding eastward and threatening rain. The students worked diligently at their drawings and gave their substitute teacher no trouble.

At the end of the period, Robert hurried home. He presented his mother with his jack-o-lantern drawing, which she appeared to appreciate. The evening became blustery. Now and then, the wind moaned. The weather was delivering the perfect atmospheric conditions for Halloween.

On the previous Saturday, after Robert and Charles' piano lessons in Lafayette, Ida had shopped at the L. S. Ayres store, a branch of the big department store in Indianapolis. On display near the front doors were plastic Halloween masks.

"You boys, pick out your masks for trick-or-treating," Ida had said.

The masks featured a fuzzy surface that felt almost like velvet when touched with the fingertips. Charles had selected a gray donkey mask, and Robert had chosen a brown dog mask.

When it was time to go trick-or-treating, Ida gave each of her sons an old sheet to wrap around the shoulders, concealing their identities. They had brown-paper grocery bags, which they had decorated with crayon pictures of bats, witches, and black cats. Joe drove them downtown and parked the car up the street from Grandma Rhode's house.

Robert and Charles happily donned their new masks and wrapped the sheets tightly around themselves as the wind tried to whip the cloth away. They scurried to Grandma Rhode's front door and knocked boisterously. When she saw them, she stood back in mock alarm and exclaimed, "Well, sir! Who might these animals be? I can hardly guess!"

"Did we fool you?" Charles asked laughingly, as both boys removed their masks.

"You most certainly did!" Grandma Rhode said.

"Trick or treat!" Robert joyfully shouted, holding forth his paper bag and waiting for the popcorn ball that he knew would be forthcoming.

Grandma Rhode and Great Aunt Margaret, who lived on opposite corners of an intersection, always got together to prepare popcorn balls for Halloween. They made the best! The balls were huge, the popcorn was tender, and the caramel was rich.

While Grandma Rhode placed a giant popcorn ball in each bag, Joe and she chatted about the weather and how they hoped the rain would hold off.

With Joe not far behind in the shadows, the boys next hammered their fists on Aunt Margaret's door. A big smile spread across her face.

"What do we have here?" she asked. "I see a dog. He seems friendly enough. And here's a donkey. He won't kick, will he, Joe?"

"Trick or treat!" yelled Charles.

"I think you're Charles, and you're Robert. I see that you already have your popcorn balls from your grandmother, and I will give each of you another one."

While the boys waited for Aunt Margaret to bring the sweets, the wind whistled around her house and dashed her bushes from side to side.

Robert made his popcorn balls last. He ate only one of them later that night and saved the other for another day. They were the greatest treats of his childhood days.

Joe took his sons to a few other houses in town—enough for each boy to gather four candy bars. Milky Way and Three Musketeers were Robert's favorites.

The next day, as Robert went to school, he felt sorry that Halloween was over, but he looked forward to the lunch period. The clouds were spitting rain, and he thought it likely that Mrs. Arvin would hold a spelling bee.

Chapter 25: The Rev. Lowell E. Morris

"Your Grandpa and Grandma Morris are coming to dinner today," Ida reminded the boys. "Robert, I need you to dust, and, Charles, I want you to straighten up your room and put all your toys away."

Whenever the demands of a farm permitted, the family traveled southeast to Kirklin, Indiana, to visit Grandpa and Grandma Morris. He was the minister of the Methodist Church there. Before Robert could remember, the Morrises had lived in Westville, Indiana, where Ida taught school for the first time after earning her teaching degree at Indiana State Teachers College. Throughout his long working life, Grandpa Morris had taught school in Kentucky and Montana, and had served as minister in such Hoosier towns as Circleville, Frankfort, Hillsboro, Indianapolis, Newtown, Pence, Pittsboro, Waveland, and Wheatfield.

The Morrises came to see Ida, Joe, Charles, and Robert whenever a busy minister could find an opportunity.

Robert's mother had told the boys, "They're not related to you the way grandparents usually are, but they're your grandparents, all the same." Robert had failed to understand what such a cryptic statement meant, but, just by listening to the adults' conversation, he had discerned that the Reverend Lowell Everett Morris was Ida's surrogate father who had taken her under his wing when she was a thirteen-year-old girl in the Methodist Children's Home in Lebanon, Indiana.

Using the dust cloth that his mother handed him, Robert carefully cleaned the surfaces of the furniture in the living room while Charles repeatedly filled a cardboard box with toys that he then deposited in a small room at the foot of the stairway.

Robert enjoyed visits from Grandpa Morris, who was an educated gentleman with thick glasses, thin nose, thin face, thin hands, a ready smile, and … a toupee. Robert's father had said that Grandpa Morris gave the best sermons of any preacher Joe had heard because Grandpa Morris researched his topics thoroughly, wrote compellingly, and spoke eloquently. Robert had never heard him in the pulpit, but, when Joe married Ida, the Rev. Morris was the minister at the Methodist Church in Pine Village, and he officiated at their wedding, which took place at the parsonage. Robert had no reason to doubt his father's assessment of Grandpa Morris' abilities as a scholar, a writer, and an orator. At all times, Grandpa Morris' intelligence and his intellectual attainments were obvious to Robert. (Many years later, Robert had the opportunity to hear Grandpa Morris give a guest sermon at the Methodist

Church in Pine Village, and Robert was appropriately appreciative. Grandpa Morris quoted great literature while constructing an argument of biblical interpretation worthy of an English department degree in a leading university. His delivery was impeccable!)

Before long, Ida greeted Grandpa and Grandma Morris at the front door and welcomed them into the living room. Grandma Morris' name was Fern. She was Grandpa Morris's second wife. His first wife, Ella, had died many years earlier.

While Joe put the guests' coats on the bed in the main bedroom, Ida asked about their drive.

"We made good time," Grandpa Morris said. "We talked about little else other than how much we were going to enjoy another one of your home-cooked meals."

Ida excused herself to return to the kitchen while Joe, who taught the adult class at the church, talked to the Rev. Morris about recent class activities. Soon, Ida called everyone to the dinner table.

Grandpa Morris said the grace: "Father, we ask that you bless this food to our good and us to thy service, and we ask a special blessing for the hands that prepared this dinner."

Then a heaping platter of fried chicken was passed to Fern. Next came bowls of mashed potatoes, lima beans, and corn. A gravy boat made the rounds. Side dishes included strawberry Jell-O with banana slices. Ida had made her yeast rolls for the occasion. They were fat and fluffy! The conversation flowed effortlessly, with Grandpa Morris talking about various churches he had served, including Flackville near Indianapolis. Ida had lived with the Rev. Morris and Ella in Flackville while Ida taught elementary school in Indianapolis. Grandpa Morris also spoke about his service to the settlement schools in eastern Kentucky when he was a young man starting out. Robert listened intently to the Rev. Morris' stories about the mountain boys and girls that, so long ago, had attended the Red Bird Mission School to learn skills that could readily be put to use.

While the dessert of angel food cake was being served, Grandpa Morris said, "I have good news. Fern and I will be moving back to Pine Village."

Ida beamed and glanced happily toward Joe, as he said with a big smile, "You don't say!"

"Yes, I do say!" Grandpa Morris confirmed with a smile bigger than Joe's. "I have decided to retire from the active ministry, and Fern and I want to live here. A house is available less than a block south of the Methodist Church, and we intend to sign for it."

"It'll be so nice to have you living nearby!" Ida exclaimed.

"We wanted to surprise you," said Grandpa Morris.

"You've done that alright," said Ida.

"I've always felt a special connection to the church here in Pine Village," Grandpa Morris continued. "This is Fern's hometown, and we want to be near you and your family."

A few months later, the Morrises moved into a tidy white house on the east side of Jefferson Street. A few steps led up to the front porch. The front door opened into a cozy living room. Quite often, Robert's family looked in on Grandpa and Grandma Morris, who were frequent guests at Sunday dinner. Grandpa Morris usually could be found sitting in an easy chair with his feet up while he was reading a book or a church magazine. Robert liked visiting the Morrises because Grandpa Morris had a special place in his heart for Robert and Charles.

Once, on a hot summer day, Grandpa Morris walked up to see Ida and Joe. He found Robert trying to saw a board that Robert wanted for a birdhouse that needed a new bottom. The handsaw's teeth had become flattened through hard use, and Robert was making only slow progress.

"Let me show you how to saw," Grandpa Morris said. Robert gladly let the Rev. Morris take over.

"You want to move your arm straight back and forth from the elbow," Grandpa Morris instructed. Then he began to demonstrate.

The saw caught and bowed, so Grandpa Morris pulled back on it to straighten it out. He slowly drew the saw in the groove to give it a good start. He again tried to demonstrate how to work the saw forward and back, but it snagged as before.

The saw kept jamming up. Beads of perspiration were forming on Grandpa Morris' forehead and trickling down his neck. He unbuttoned his outer shirt, removed it, and draped it across the clothesline. In the process, he bumped his toupee, which slipped to one side. He straightened it, and then, with his

undershirt clinging to the perspiration, he threw himself into the project with all his strength. By the sheer power of his will, Grandpa Morris finally managed to saw through the board.

He grinned, handed the saw back to Robert, reclaimed his shirt, put it on (this time carefully, so as not to dislodge his toupee), and buttoned it up. "As Ecclesiastes says," Grandpa Morris began, "'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might!' I think I will ask Ida for some of her sweet iced tea now."

Robert thanked Grandpa Morris for the lesson.

Chapter 26: The Foragers

That fall, Ida drove Charles and Robert to "the secret farm." She headed toward Rainsville. North of where the road made a bend, a farm had once stood. Nature had reclaimed the site. The buildings had long ago rotted into oblivion, leaving no trace above ground. Even the wagon tracks that had led from the location of the barn out to the road had vanished, except for two ruts that could barely be seen amid the tangled growth on the north face of a low hill. Somehow, Ida knew how to weave through islands of blackberry vines and not get scratched. The boys followed her exactly, so that they would not get scratched either. All three carried buckets.

In the vicinity of where the buildings had stood far back from the highway, Ida strode up to "her" crab apple tree. The bright red fruit was two inches in diameter. The tree had set on heavily that year. She helped the boys fill their buckets with crab apples, which she would later slice and boil to make a clear orange jelly that was Robert's favorite of all the jellies his mother ever made.

"Look," she said, holding a crab apple in one hand and cutting it open with a paring knife that she had brought in the pocket of her dark blue jacket, "what color are the seeds?"

"They're brown," Charles said.

"That's how you know the crab apples are ready to be gathered," Ida explained. "If the seeds were not yet dark brown, we'd leave them on the tree a little longer. See how white the apple is on the inside? That's another indication that they're ready."

With buckets full of crab apples, the three made their way back to the car. They emptied the buckets into two bushel baskets in the trunk. Then they returned to the tree to get more of the red fruit. Robert noticed that the skins of the apples were a darker red where the sunlight bathed them.

They made two more trips to the car. By then, the baskets were almost full.

Next, Ida guided her sons to a slope to the north of the crab apple tree. There, she located "her" pawpaw tree.

"What's a pawpaw?" Robert asked.

"I'm going to show you," Ida replied. She reached up to loosen a brownish green fruit from the branch. She held it in front of Robert and teased it open with her paring knife.

"The inside is like a mushy banana," she said.

"Can I eat it?" Robert asked.

"I don't think you'd like it raw," Ida cautioned. "The pawpaws might need to be a little sweeter for you. I'm going to put them in Jell-O."

The small tree had only a few pawpaws, but they had reached the ideal ripeness. Ida carefully laid them in the bottoms of the buckets so that they would not bruise.

"How did you know the pawpaws were ready?" Charles asked.

"It's just the time of year for them," Ida said. "Now, you can look at them to see if they are just beginning to turn a little brown. That's when they're at their best. If they're too brown, they're past their peak and could be rotten."

Soon, the family was headed home. Ida said, "I sure hope nobody else ever finds my farm."

Ida was a skilled forager. When March winds gradually straightened the curls of her permanent, she could be found bent over in the yard while harvesting spring greens. She collected the mustard called "bittercress." She made sure she had plenty of dandelions. Into her bowl went chickweed, the tiniest leaves of the early dock, and a few leaves of the broadleaf plantain. Many of these plants entered into her fresh salads while others were cooked and served steaming hot and generously peppered.

In the spring of the year when the crab apples had been so numerous, Ida would take Robert, Charles, and a friend back to the abandoned farm to collect a few sassafras roots to make tea.

The boys would use shovels to dig just below the surface of the rich soil to expose the thin roots of the shrub with its three distinctively different shapes of leaf, one of them like a mitten. Their mother and her friend then would kneel on an old blanket and gently cut sections from a few of the roots. These she would bundle together to bring home.

"There was an article in the paper not long ago that said sassafras has been banned because the chemicals in it can be harmful, but one not-very-strong

cup should be good for us anyway. It's a tonic that purifies the blood, which has been too lethargic during this long winter," Ida would say.

At home that evening, Ida would steep the sassafras roots for a minute or two—until each of the four teacups contained a bright amber liquid. She would add honey, and the tea would be ready to drink. Robert would enjoy the flavor so much that he would wish he could have more of the tea.

"The roots are good for tea for only a few weeks, aren't they?" Joe would ask. Ida would nod. "I wonder," Joe would continue, "if the government studies were conducted with roots that were past the time when they could be boiled for tea. Maybe the properties change in the other months of the year."

On another occasion that spring, Ida would take the boys and her friend mushroom hunting at the old farm. She would collect only the morels, which she would dredge in flour and fry in butter.

Back in that same autumn when the crab apples were so numerous, Mrs. Bowen, one of Ida's best friends, was visiting with Ida over a late afternoon cup of coffee in Ida's kitchen, and the topic turned to mushroom hunting. Mrs. Bowen's name was Irene, but Ida always called her "Mrs. Bowen."

Mrs. Bowen said, "I've been giving some thought to that old neglected farm out there by Rainsville. I'd bet you there might be mushrooms back in there."

Ida gulped. She opened her mouth to say, "No, there aren't any. I've been back there, and you'd be wasting your time." She hesitated, instead.

Mrs. Bowen's sharp features sharpened further. She peered into Ida's soul. "I do believe you were about to say something," Mrs. Bowen said, meaningfully.

"Oh," Ida sighed. "I want to let you in on a little secret. Yes, that old place is where I find my morels. It's also where I get my blackberries, my crab apples, and my pawpaws."

"Your secret's safe with me," Mrs. Bowen said, setting down her coffee cup with a loud bump on the table, as if she were a queen affixing her seal to a court document. "Just make sure you come get me every time you go out there!"

“I will,” Ida said. … and, as already implied, Ida would be true to her word, taking her friend with her to “their farm.”

Chapter 27: The Red Coat

For that winter, Ida bought Robert and Charles new parkas. Robert asked if, rather than the usual dark blue or gray coats, he could have the red one on the rack at Sears, and—surprise!—Ida consented.

Robert loved his red coat! It was bright red throughout. Even the fuzzy stuff that took the place of fur around the hood was the same red! He could hardly wait to wear it on the playground at school.

He had fewer chances to wear it than he might have. The onslaught of childhood diseases had begun, and he had to remain at home with them, as well as being "quarantined" with what he eventually came to expect: his Christmas flu.

Over the next few years, Robert had the chicken pox, measles, mumps (on both sides), and a different kind of measles that was much more virulent than the first kind had been. He heard his parents referring to "the German measles," so that must have been what the bad ones were.

Robert hated missing school and falling behind in his assignments—even while he tried to keep up from home.

… and he hated Vicks VapoRub. Whenever he had a cold or flu, his mother smeared the intensely aromatic VapoRub on his chest, covered the gooey mess with a square torn from a worn-out pair of flannel pajamas, and buttoned up his new flannel pajama top over the square. Even when she had pulled the sheet, the bedspread, the gray woolen blanket, and the crazy quilt with its thick batting up to Robert's eyes, Robert could still smell the VapoRub. While he slowly baked beneath the heavy bedding, he felt sick because he smelled VapoRub, which he associated with feeling sick. It was a vicious cycle.

Robert was not terribly fond of the vitamins, either. They were in a brown bottle. Ida would pour the thick liquid into a teaspoon and hold out the spoon for Robert to take the vitamins, which had a strong aroma from the sulfur in the composition.

In the medicine cabinet above the bathroom sink were other medicines. There was tincture Merthiolate for cuts. It was applied from a thin glass rod attached to the inside of the cap, and it colored the cut a glaring reddish orange. For inflamed membranes or rashes, the light pink salve from the tube of Taloin ointment did the trick. Rubbing alcohol cleaned scratches.

Whenever Robert experienced a particularly stubborn bout of flu, Ida took him to see Dr. Scheurich. The good doctor might or might not set his cigar aside long enough to insert a tongue depressor in Robert's mouth and to peer down Robert's throat. Then, invariably, he would hand Ida a bottle of little red pills. Did the pills help? Not that Robert could determine.

Behind one of the upper hinged doors of the Hoosier was Joe's arsenal of aspirin. There was also an extra tin of the udder balm, with which Joe soothed his cows' sensitive skin after milking them. Joe and Ida applied udder balm to any dry patches that appeared on their hands, arms, or legs during the winter months.

Illnesses could not hold out forever, and—finally!—Robert got to wear his red coat on the playground! Alan and Terry led Robert's class in building a beauty of a snow fort. Simultaneously, the two Steves of the class above Robert's class guided their classmates in fashioning a most menacing fort within a snowball's distance of the other fort.

One of the Steves yelled across the no-man's-land, "I dare you to be the first to throw a snowball." At the same time, to taunt Alan and Terry's side, the other Steve stood on his head and waggled his legs.

"I say we attack 'em now," Terry advised.

"Have we made enough snowballs?" Alan asked.

"Sure! There are plenty."

"They're asking for it," Robert said.

"Fire at will!" Alan commanded.

Suddenly, the air between the two forts was full of snowballs. With several allies from older and younger classes, each fort numbered as many as twenty troops. Steve the Taunter nimbly dodged multiple snowballs hurled in his direction. His arm was a blur as he gave back as good as he got, firing snowball after snowball at his opponents.

A snowball found its mark on the right side of Robert's face, shattering lightly all about. Robert laughed as a chunk of the cold stuff went down his neck. Almost immediately, another snowball burst off the left side of his face, and more snow rolled inside his collar and down his neck. Robert was laughing so hard that he was almost incapacitated.

Gasping for air and laughing uncontrollably, he yelled, "Stop! Stop!"

Wham! Another snowball hit him on a shoulder.

"It's your coat," Terry shouted over the din of the battle. "The red is a target!"

Robert ducked behind the highest wall of the fort and regained his breath.

Nearby, Dennis jumped up to throw a massive snowball toward the enemy fort. At the same instant, he was hit full in the face.

"Oh, they got me," he said, falling to the ground and pretending to be a casualty—but only for a second. Then he was back on his feet and sending snowballs through the frosty air.

Susan, Linda, Randy, and Jean had reinforced the fort. They scurried out the back, formed snowballs in their gloved hands, ran inside the enclosure, and threw them as hard as they could, many of them finding their mark.

Before long, the sides had increased to over thirty troops apiece.

Just when the fight was becoming the best in history, someone heard Mrs. Arvin calling. The recess was over. Laughing and chuckling, the students filed from both forts across the playground to the school building. There were no hard feelings. Students that had been enemies only seconds earlier were swapping tales of valor with one another on the way back to the classrooms.

As Robert thought about it later, it may well have been the best snowball fight in history. By the next day, an abrupt warming trend had melted much of the snow, and the forts were destined to disappear from the playground landscape. The bonds of friendship that the battle had only strengthened were strong enough to endure the vicissitudes of lifetimes.

Chapter 28: The Glasses and the General

"I don't think Charles is seeing as well as he should," Ida said to Joe over the supper table one evening in the spring of Robert's second-grade year. "He's having trouble reading what Mrs. Winegardner writes on the chalkboard. I think we should take him to see the ophthalmologist."

An appointment was made not only for Charles but also for Robert (just for good measure), and, on the given day, Ida took the boys to Lafayette.

Robert enjoyed his time in the ophthalmologist's office. He thought the experience of having his eyes dilated was sufficiently novel to keep his attention. When he sat in the chair in the darkened room that was painted a deep green, he could have fallen asleep because everything was so restful. … but he remained awake to answer the doctor's questions, spoken in a low voice.

"Now look at the row of letters beginning with L and P. Do the letters look better like this or like this?"

The doctor had arranged the big machine that stretched across Robert's face so that only one of Robert's eyes was peering at the wall chart, which seemed to float in the air and to glow with an inner light. A whispering sound near Robert's ear of a lens sliding into place accompanied the doctor's words "like this," and another whispering sound of another lens sliding into place occurred when the doctor repeated "like this." Initially, Robert could see a difference and could reply with "the first one" or "the second one," but, eventually, he could detect no difference. "I don't know," he would say. "They look the same." … and the doctor would take a note somewhere in the darkness.

"This or this?" "This or this?" The pattern continued until both eyes had been tested.

Then there were more eye drops to stop the dilation and to return Robert's eyes to normal.

Charles had already been tested.

In the outer office, while the boys waited for their eyes to begin to adjust, the doctor said to Ida, "Both boys are nearsighted and will need glasses." He recommended a shop where they could be fitted with frames and lenses made to his prescription.

"I didn't know Robert was having any trouble," Ida said to the doctor.

"His eyes are similar to his brother's, but, naturally, his nearsightedness has not advanced quite as much yet."

The doctor handed the boys dark plastic glasses with white cardboard temple pieces that hooked over their ears. Ida walked them to the car.

Robert felt amazed that the whole world looked so fuzzy!

In a little over a week, the boys had their new glasses.

One of the first sights that Robert saw through his glasses was a century-old steam locomotive.

The United States was commemorating the Civil War, which had taken place between 1861 and 1865.

Joe, who had been a valedictorian and who read avidly about history, said to Charles and Robert, "A century may sound like a long time, but bear in mind that I talked with veterans of the Civil War who were farmers around Pine Village. I wasn't very old, but I remember those men very well. You had several ancestors that served in the war; some were on one side, and some were on the other. Your great great grandfather was a musician in the 100th Indiana Volunteers. He played a fife. The musicians also were soldiers who fired their guns during the battles."

The 32-year-old Daniel M. Fenton, who stood five feet six inches tall and had a fair complexion with light hair and blue eyes, was mustered into Company G of the 100th Indiana Volunteers on September 27, 1862, at Indianapolis, whereupon he was paid a $25 bounty. Indeed, musicians in the Civil War often joined in the fighting, and, apparently, Daniel was no exception. The 100th Indiana Volunteers supported at Vicksburg and Knoxville. The regiment fought in the most exposed location on Missionary Ridge and in a similarly deadly position at Kennesaw Mountain. The 100th supported again at Atlanta and experienced yet another sharp battle at the beginning of General William T. Sherman's march toward Savannah. It was at Grand Junction, Tennessee, in February of 1863 that Daniel faced the privations of a cold winter in the field.

Fifers such as Daniel played music to march the armies toward battle and helped to clear the field of the wounded and dead after battle. Daniel saw more than he wanted to see of the terror of warfare, and, physically, he broke down. For the rest of his life, he complained of chronic diarrhea and

rheumatism from the exposure he suffered in Tennessee. He had jaundice and disease of the liver.

All of these facts Joe narrated and explained to his sons.

Joe also said that Isaac Belew had been a member of the 100th Indiana and was the great grandfather of Glen J. Brutus, with whom Joe shared an enthusiasm for agricultural steam engines. Further, Joseph D. Farden had served in the 100th; Joseph's son, Millard, was a leader in local businesses, and Joseph's daughters, Flora and Fairy—both 1899 graduates of the Pine Village School—became teachers.

As part of the nation's observances of the conflict that temporarily tore the nation apart, the locomotive named *The General* was coming to Lafayette on its way to Chicago from Nashville, Tennessee.

On April 12th in 1862, civilian James J. Andrews and twenty Union volunteers, acting on orders from General Ormsby M. Mitchel, sneaked through Southern lines and succeeded in seizing *The General* and three boxcars at Big Shanty, Georgia. The raiders drove the train northward toward Chattanooga, cutting telegraph lines, prying up rails, and attempting to burn bridges to sever Confederate communications. Unfortunately for the raiders, the conductor of *The General* and Confederate troops closely pursued them, and rain defeated their efforts to set fire to bridges. With journals close to the melting point, *The General* eventually ran out of fuel and water. The raiders abandoned the train but were rounded up and imprisoned. In June of 1862, James J. Andrews and seven of the raiders were executed by hanging. Engineer William Knight and eight others escaped and found their way back to Union lines. In 1863, the rest were released in a prisoner exchange. Six of the raiders received the nation's first Medals of Honor. Fess Parker starred as Andrews in Walt Disney's movie *The Great Locomotive Chase* only five years before Robert and Charles stood beside *The General* in Lafayette.

Robert thought that the storied locomotive, which had been the subject of so many books, was enormous! Steam sighed from the cylinder cocks, and moisture sizzled around the hot boiler of the elegant machine.

The engineer finished oiling the boxes. He turned to my father and said, "Would your boys like to climb up on the platform to see the firebox?"

"I'm sure they would," Joe replied.

Robert was too shy to take a step forward, but Charles jumped at the opportunity. Joe helped Robert up the tall steps. The engineer swung open the firebox door, exposing the orange flames within. After staring at the fire through his new glasses, Robert's wide eyes took in the shining brass details of the cabin. Years later, he could instantaneously recall the scents of oil and smoke, the sounds of crackling and hissing. The visit to see *The General* made a profound impression on him: an impression made all the more indelible because he could see every detail so clearly.

Chapter 29: The Sow and the Drive-In

Early that spring, sows were farrowing, and Joe had one sow left over after filling all his individual hog houses. He arranged panels wired to metal fence posts to form a narrow chute to help guide the sow from the hog lot to the stall in the southwest corner of the barn. Unbeknownst to Joe, Robert was hiding near the chicken house. Robert held a corn cob that he planned to throw at his father in an ambush whenever Joe might walk within range. Joe often entered into the fun of such mock attacks, and Robert looked forward to the surprise.

Meanwhile, Joe was ready to steer the sow toward the barn. He stood behind her, and he took hold of the top edges of the panels to steady himself, should the sow try to back up. He began nudging her forward.

"Go on! Get on up there!" he spoke sharply to the rather reluctant sow. Just as the hog had reached the high threshold of the open Dutch door, she balked.

"Come on! Get up in there!" Joe shouted.

Suddenly, the sow flexed her fat body, bringing her front legs around to her left and placing them on the edge of the panel, as if she would attempt to jump over the panel.

"Pshaw!" Joe exclaimed, as he struggled to shove her legs off the board.

No sooner had he dislodged the sow than she whirled to her right and tried to leap over the tall panel.

"Dog my cats!" Joe yelled while making a superhuman effort to shove her front legs back down to the ground. In the process, he scratched his forearm on the end of a baling wire, and blood trickled down to his elbow.

Robert watched, wondering if he could do anything to assist his father.

Joe managed to get the sow oriented in the right direction, and, with a mighty push, he made her jump up over the tall threshold and into the stall. Working at breakneck speed, Joe swung shut the bottom half of the Dutch door and locked it in place. He breathed a sigh of relief and climbed over a panel to tend to matters outside the chute.

All at once, with a splintering crash, the sow flew through the air and fell to the ground. She found her legs and bolted for the hog lot. The remains of the broken Dutch door hung from the hinges.

Joe uttered a word that Joe never said.

Robert remained hidden. Robert's eyes were wide. He knew the word because some of his classmates at school had kindly taught him what it meant, but he never expected to hear his father use it. His father never used a naughty word!

Robert slunk away, so that Joe would never know that his son had overheard his father's transgression. Robert would keep the secret for years to come, and he never divulged it to anyone. Robert felt certain that his father, who taught the adult class at the church on Sundays, had instantly repented!

The sow that had escaped the barn held off having her litter. Joe felt that the litter by the first sow to have had pigs in the present round was old enough to be released into the hog lot, and he readily confined the stubborn sow in the hog house vacated by the oldest piglets and their mother.

To trim down the number of pigs on the farm, Joe later loaded three pigs in his GMC pickup. He could haul them to a variety of nearby markets: Boswell, Attica, and Lafayette were the principal outlets. On that Saturday, he chose Lafayette. Charles and Robert accompanied him. After unloading the pigs at the stockyard, the morning had been spent. Joe and the boys were hungry, so Joe pulled into the Park 'n' Eat, a drive-in restaurant on State Street with the Tastee-Freeze and the Cities Service station on the east side and the Standard gasoline station on the west side.

When the waitress stepped up to the truck, she made a face. "Pew!" she said in disgust, as she smelled the hog manure in straw lying in the bed of the pickup. Without saying another word, she turned and went back to the dining area.

"I wonder what the hold-up is," Joe said.

Before long, the owner of the restaurant walked out to the truck. With an apologetic smile, he said to Joe, "I'm sorry. I'm afraid we can't serve you. The smell of the pigs is too strong and will scare away our other customers."

Robert felt embarrassed. He understood the owner's point, but Robert knew better than to say anything.

With a sharp look in his eye, Joe returned the owner's smile and said, "That's the fragrance of money. I just sold three pigs, and I have good American money to spend on three of your hamburgers."

The owner shrugged his shoulders and enhanced the apologetic look on his smiling face. "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid I have to ask you to drive on. If you will come back in your family car, I will personally ensure that your meal meets your expectations."

"You needn't go to such trouble," Joe replied over his shoulder, as he backed out from under the roof of the drive-in and headed home.

"I'm sorry you boys have to wait a while longer before we eat," he said. Robert and Charles didn't mind, but they could see that Joe was seething.

It came as no surprise that the family never returned to the Park 'n' Eat.

The occasion when the sow broke the barn door and the occasion when the restaurant refused service were the only two occasions when Joe was angry—at least, they were the only two times when Robert could detect Joe's anger. Joe was otherwise consistently peaceful, even amicable at all times! Robert concluded that pigs were the ingredients to upset his father's proverbial apple cart. After all, hogs were the common denominator in both incidents. Robert developed the misgiving that, in working with swine, situations could arise that would inspire ire; for that reason, he always tried to keep his equanimity and his sense of humor when feeding pigs or helping care for new litters. Robert had reached the conclusion that pigs were catalysts for disaster.

Chapter 30: The Summer Plays

For several years, Charles and Robert had been enrolled in Mrs. Elizabeth Clements Sharpless' Children's Summer Theater at Columbian Park in Lafayette. Robert would never forget the first day that he attended. Back then, he was not yet in first grade.

With hopes that Mrs. Sharpless might help Robert to finish overcoming his inability to "say his *r*'s," Ida had deposited Charles and Robert at Rush Pavilion overhanging the lagoon.

Columbian Park was a magnificent facility sprawling over a triangular area in between Scott Street, Park Avenue, and Main Street. A zoo with a large animal house occupied one end. The animated conversations of monkeys often rose above the tranquil lapping of the water in the lagoon. Buddy the Chimpanzee frequently accompanied the engineer of the miniature locomotive that pulled a train on the well-built tracks weaving around the park. Zebras roamed a fenced enclosure.

In the main room of the pavilion, Mrs. Sharpless reigned. Her dynamic personality was constantly in evidence. On that first day, she assigned one of the Best sisters to teach Charles and Robert the words to "Frère Jacques," which they and other children would sing while dancing in a circle as part of one of the stage productions. Breezes from the lagoon wafted through the large open windows of the room, otherwise faintly redolent of the leotards and ballet slippers that the children were required to wear during rehearsals.

A painter widely recognized for her watercolors and her oils, Mrs. Sharpless was also a gifted musician and director. Over the years, Robert's appreciation of her enormous talent only grew. In Robert's second-grade year, Jenks Memorial Rest Center, otherwise known as "Jenks Rest," was built. It was a new facility with ample room for rehearsals of the large-scale productions for which Mrs. Sharpless was revered. A winding walkway dividing the lagoon connected the pavilion and Jenks Rest. Robert and another budding actor also named Robert—Robert Eugene Pechin III, to be exact—collected the green, heavy seed pods from the lilies that filled the edges of the lagoon with spectacular colors. With the other Robert's penknife, they and their friend Tim Funcheon carved out part of the pods to form canoes, which they set afloat. They watched their miniature boats drift lazily away until the Roberts were called back to rehearsals.

Mrs. Sharpless had assembled a vast staff. There were set designers, lighting and sound experts, costume designers, seamstresses, and musicians. One pianist among them could play as well as Jo Ann Castle on

The Lawrence Welk Show. The beloved Mrs. William F. McDill, whose children Sandy and Sherry were cast members, worked wonders with costumes, which she oversaw while assisting Mrs. Sharpless in the countless other ways that a schedule of five plays per summer demanded.

Young people who were really young adults customarily performed the major roles, so the theatrical productions often attained the stature of full-blown plays and musicals.

Each summer featured three or four large productions, and Robert found himself memorizing lines for the next show while still polishing lines for the current show.

Over the years, he absorbed and learned volumes of information from crew members. For a production set in Arabia, the artists on the staff painted many plywood cutouts in such a way that they appeared to be three-dimensional vases, some of them taller than a human being. Robert paid attention to the shading and the highlights that made the vases seem to be glazed pottery.

He was taught how to project his voice toward the microphones, some of which hung above and others of which were amid the footlights.

During one afternoon rehearsal when the lead actor was called away, Mrs. Sharpless asked Robert to read the actor's part from the script, thereby helping the rest of the cast to practice the scene. Robert thought that this was his chance to show Mrs. Sharpless how well he could do in a lead role. He reached a moment when the character was taken by surprise. Robert gave a shout into the microphone. He heard his exclamation reverberating from the speakers around the park. "No, no!" Mrs. Sharpless snapped. "He would *not* scream like that! Quite the contrary! He would remain silent! Always remember that less is more!"

On the evenings when the shows were presented on the great outdoor stage that was on Memorial Island at some distance from Rush Pavilion, electricity was in the air as performers changed into their costumes and the aroma of greasepaint filled the porches of the pavilion, which served as headquarters. As the lights on the great outdoor stage came up, the large audience grew silent, and the music (either live or recorded) began, Robert's heart beat fast.

Dennis, one of Robert's friends in his class at school, often visited an aunt who lived near Columbian Park, and he could be found in the audience.

Robert always tried to do his best to entertain everyone, including Robert's parents and his classmate.

Tom Sawyer featured scary scenes. The graveyard was so realistic as to be downright spooky, and the cave with Injun Joe was truly frightening. The actor who performed Muff Potter looked nothing like himself in real life. For his role as the drunken misfit, he had wild red hair and a scraggly beard, thanks to the excellent make-up artistry that Mrs. Sharpless could command.

When talented singer and actress Roberta Preston donned her elaborate mock turtle costume for *Alice in Wonderland*, Robert knew that the production would be a huge hit.

Babes in Toyland offered enchanting sets with fascinating effects of lighting. Robert's big line was "Oh no! It's the water from the Laughing Water Well!" Then (as scripted) Barnaby made the mistake of drinking the water!

Poor Ida drove the twenty miles to and from Lafayette at least once a day and often twice a day *almost every single day* during those summers when Charles and Robert were in Mrs. Sharpless' plays.

There were many amusing moments backstage. During the *Mikado*, the minstrel was in the midst of a story he was telling to crew members when he heard out front the music to the song he was supposed to be singing to the audience. Robert never saw someone run so fast! In that same production, Robert carried a bamboo umbrella above the emperor, ably—and nimbly—performed by Kevin McGuire. Robert's job was to keep the umbrella high above the actor's head, no matter where he walked. At one point, the emperor began to dance. He flung his hand holding a fan straight up, and the fan struck against—and broke—several of the thin wooden arms supporting the umbrella, which suddenly folded down around the emperor. He ducked from beneath the ruined umbrella and adlibbed a look of displeasure before resuming his dance. The audience roared with laughter. Robert felt the deepest chagrin, but, as soon as the number was completed and he carried the collapsed umbrella backstage, Mrs. Sharpless ran over to Robert and said, "Did you do that on purpose, or was it an accident? Never mind! It was brilliant! We'll rig the umbrella to collapse that same way every time!" Robert abruptly felt huge relief.

One night, Mrs. Sharpless walked onto the stage shortly after the show had begun. No one—not even the performers—knew what she was doing. She gestured for a staff member on the ground level to hand up a microphone over the footlights. Then, in a measured voice of reassurance, she said, "We

have received a report that a tornado is approaching Lafayette from the southwest. We ask that you calmly walk to Jenks Rest, where you can take shelter. Everyone needs to vacate this facility at this time."

Robert and Charles met up with their parents. As they strode briskly toward the building at the end of the winding walkway, Joe said to Ida, "We're parked near Jenks Rest. Why don't we go to the car and drive home?" Ida agreed, so the family hurried to the Chevrolet. As Joe was driving through Lafayette, the evening sky turned a greenish black. Ida kept looking up through the passenger window. Joe decided to head south, rather than west. He made the right choice, as the car passed quickly from beneath the threatening wall cloud. Fortunately, the funnel did not descend on Lafayette.

For the bright lights of the stage, relatively heavy makeup was deployed. Once, Mrs. Sharpless was running past where Robert was having greasepaint applied. She whirled around and said, "Make him darker." She rummaged among the tubes and found a particularly dark one. "Use this one," she told the makeup artist. "He's so bloomin' fair, he's a ghost on stage!"

Robert long remembered those summers at the park with billowy cumulus clouds almost motionless in a sky of vibrant blue, the actors in small groups rehearsing lines outdoors, the vivid orange and yellow and purple flowers everywhere, the exotic ducks preening beside the rippling waters of the lagoon, the indolent warmth, and the faraway chatter of monkeys.

Chapter 31: The Handwriting and the Soap

"Make your loop come back to the line before you swing out," Ida said to Robert. She was making Charles and Robert practice their cursive handwriting.

The boys were sitting at the kitchen table. Ida had given them ball point pens and yellow paper with thin blue lines, and she was having them practice the letter *l* over and over again.

"Your father has beautiful handwriting, and I want you to have beautiful handwriting, too," Ida reminded them. "Robert, you're not bringing your loop all the way back to the line first."

Robert found these exercises intensely boring. His mother would go for weeks without making him sit down for a session of cursive practice, then, for some reason, she would get the idea of forcing him and his brother to fill line after line with the same letter of the alphabet. Robert could only imagine how bored his older brother must be. Charles had already been using cursive for two years. How could he stand to sit there for an hour or more while forming the letter *e* endlessly?

The numbers were even worse—or so it seemed to Robert.

"Robert, you're not closing your zeros at the top. Let me show you," Ida would say, as she took the pen from his hand and, reaching over his shoulder, demonstrated a proper zero. "See? Make sure your loop comes all the way back again so that the top of the zero looks exactly the same as the bottom."

Robert would take up the pen and write 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0—filling the line.

Not quite all the letters and numbers in the book were designed in quite the same way as the foot-tall white letters and numbers printed on heavy cards with dark green backgrounds that lined the tops of Mrs. Arvin's chalkboards, but they were similar enough to meet the teacher's demanding standards.

One sunny Saturday afternoon, when the family had returned from the boys' piano lessons in Lafayette—and Ida's shopping spree—Ida said to Charles and Robert, "We're going to make soap today."

The family did not have to make soap. Ida bought bars when she shopped. Once, she had permitted the boys to use paring knives to carve Ivory bars

into the shapes of recumbent lions such as the concrete ones that lined the driveway of the occasional house. Ida had clipped the lion pattern from a magazine. When the lions were finished, she had made the boys wait to float them in the bathtub. Ida wanted to be sure that Grandma Rhode and Aunt Margaret saw the lions first, before they were rubbed into sudsy lumps.

Always the teacher, Ida had a reason for making her own soap: she wanted to show the boys how it had been done when she was a girl. She skipped the step that Grandma Rhode and Aunt Margaret would have followed of boiling hardwood ashes for half an hour in rain water, then skimming the lye off the top. Ida reached for her can of Gillett's Lye, which she had purchased at a grocery store.

While Ida tied on her apron, she put Charles and Robert to work in the kitchen.

"Charles, how many pints are in a quart?" Ida asked.

"Two," Charles answered.

"How many cups are in a pint?"

"Two."

"Then how many cups are in a quart?"

"Four."

"That's right. Measure out four cups from this gallon of lard," Ida said, handing Charles the tin measuring cup and a butter knife to scrape the lard level at the upper edge of the cup.

Meanwhile, Ida measured slightly less than 4 1/2 ounces of lye, which she accurately weighed on the kitchen scale. She handed Robert a Pyrex 4-cup measure and a pitcher of water from the hydrant beside the well in the front yard.

"Robert, pour the water up to the 10-ounce line here," said Ida, pointing to the line.

Next, she carefully carried the water, the lye, and a heavy Dutch oven outside.

"Never pour the water into the lye," Ida warned. "When I pour the lye into the water, the bowl is going to become very hot. Don't touch anything!"

Robert and Charles kept a safe distance while Ida slowly poured the water into the Dutch oven and the lye into the water.

"We're going to let that cool," Ida said. "Let's go back to the kitchen."

Ida melted the lard over low heat on the range. Then she told the boys to remain in the kitchen while she brought in the lye and water mixture.

She set the Dutch oven on the table and handed Robert a big wooden spoon.

"You're going to wash that spoon in this clean bowl," Ida said, as she poured clear vinegar in the bowl. "Scrub the spoon with this Ivory soap and keep rinsing it in the vinegar until I tell you to stop."

"You can quit rinsing now," Ida said after a few minutes. She took the spoon from Robert and ran water over it from the faucet at the kitchen sink.

"Stand back, while I pour the lye and water into the lard," she instructed. She slowly poured the contents of the Dutch oven into the lard that had been melted on the stove and kept hot. Lifting the wooden spoon from the towel where the spoon had been drying, she quickly began stirring the lye and water into the lard. "Watch what happens!" she said.

Robert and Charles looked on while the mixture turned into something resembling cake batter. Ida kept lifting the spoon and dribbling some of the batter across the surface. After about five minutes, the dribbled line kept its shape for a time before becoming submerged. Ida put a lid on the pot and kept it hot for an hour. Then she called the boys back into the kitchen.

They watched while she poured the mixture into a sheet cake pan.

"Now we're ready to wait until tomorrow," Ida said.

The next day, Ida used a sharp knife to cut the soap into large rectangular bars, which were a deep tan color from the Gillett's Lye. One bar lasted for months and had a pure scent unlike store-bought soaps.

Joe stepped into the kitchen and admired the bars of soap.

"I think you boys deserve a treat after helping Mom make soap," he said. "I have to go to the elevator, so you come along, and you can have a Coke."

Charles and Robert happily climbed into the pickup, and Joe drove east on State Route 26 to the elevator.

Usually, the boys had to split one small bottle of Coke, but their father generously let each have his own bottle. Further, each could choose what kind of pop he wanted: Coke, root beer, orange, cream soda, or grape.

Joe dropped the coin into the slot at the left and opened the lid on top of the cooler. Charles went first. He wanted root beer. He took hold of the fluted cap and the bulged neck of the bottle and slid it along the slot in the metal channel that held the bottle upright. He continued to guide the bottle into the opening where he could lift it up and it was his. He inserted it into the enclosure where he could pry the cap off. Then (as he had been taught) he checked the top of the bottle to make sure the glass was not chipped. Had it been, he would have told his father, who would have told Mr. Hail, who would have given Joe a refund.

Robert wanted a grape soda, but it was blocked by bottles containing other flavors.

"Let me help," Joe said. He slid bottles along channels and moved them out of the way like railroad cars at a switchyard until he could guide the grape bottle into the opening. He pried the cap off and handed the bottle to Robert. Finally, Joe helped himself to a Coke.

Nothing could have been better, unless Robert could have had a "black cow." The float was made at home by combining vanilla ice cream and Coke in a tall glass. All the same, the grape soda was a delicious reward for helping his mother in the kitchen.

Chapter 32: The Paddle and the 4-H Club

Robert so admired Mrs. Arvin that he was sad to leave her second-grade classroom. He moved on to Mrs. Moyers' third-grade room. Mrs. Moyers was a dignified teacher with a heart of gold. Attired in slender skirts of pleated brown plaid with matching fox-brown blouses and jackets, Mrs. Moyers appeared to be as sophisticated as she indeed was. She collected birds' nests, several of which adorned her shelves. She was happy to be asked about them, and she delighted in describing how she baked them to eliminate insects, mold, or mildew.

Every elementary teacher could wield a paddle, but Robert could tell that several of them greatly preferred not to resort to paddling a student. Mrs. Moyers was one who truly disliked her paddle, but, with Robert's class, she encountered a difficulty.

Who knows why? For some reason, Robert's class had a tough time memorizing multiplication tables. Mrs. Moyers tried every strategy she could apply toward helping the students remember such products as 9 times 7, 9 times 8, and 9 times 9. Finally, in desperation, she said, "I will paddle anyone who answers incorrectly when I ask for a product resulting from the multiplication of two factors." She arranged each day so that, in the final period, she could go up and down the row, asking students, "What is the product of seven and eight?" or "What is the product of six and nine?" When a student gave the wrong answer, she walked toward her desk, slowly removed the paddle from its drawer, and turned toward the student. Then she would say, "The period is nearly over, and I've yet to give the homework assignment; for that reason, I'll postpone paddling you for giving the wrong answer." … and, the next day, she seemed to have forgotten that she was to have paddled someone!

One afternoon, she came to Robert's desk. "What is the product of nine and six?" she asked. Suddenly, Robert felt confused. He remembered the product of nine and five: forty-five. He recalled the product of nine and seven: sixty-three. He could not—for the life of him—remember the product of nine and six. He blushed. Ultimately, he said, "I forget."

He felt his classmates' eyes staring at him—burning into him—from all sides. He pictured how it would feel to be marched to the front of the room, to be commanded to bend over, and to receive the humiliating blows of the paddle across his backside.

Mrs. Moyers glanced up at the large clock on the wall of her room. "Well, Robert, the period is almost over. I still need to give the homework

assignment for tomorrow. You'll have to wait to be paddled another day, but I want you to be sure to tell your mother that you do not know your nines."

All the elementary teachers respected Robert's mother because she, too, had taught elementary school for some fourteen years before Charles was born, when she quit teaching. When Robert returned home from school, he walked up to his mother and said, "Mrs. Moyers told me to tell you that I do not know my nines."

Ida was rolling pie dough. Flour was clinging in dusty patches on her forearms and her apron. She stopped in mid-roll and stared at Robert.

"What do you mean? You don't know your nines?"

"I forgot the product of nine and six today."

"Mrs. Moyers called on you, then? Is that it? And you couldn't answer her question?"

"Yes," Robert said meekly.

"Sit down here at the table while I finish the dough."

Robert took a seat on one of the bentwood chairs.

"Let's go through the nines," she began. "What is" she pushed the roller forward "nine times two?" she drew the roller back.

"Eighteen," Robert answered.

"What is" she pushed the roller forward "nine times three?" she drew the roller back.

"Twenty-seven," Robert answered.

Ida went all the way through the nines and made three circles of dough for pies while Robert responded to the drill.

While she prepared the pie fillings, she took him through the sevens and the eights. Then she went back to the nines to see if he would forget any of them. Luckily for him, he remembered all.

Then Ida sat down across from him. She looked him straight in the eye and said, "Are you embarrassed that you didn't know the answer when Mrs. Moyers asked you?"

"Yes, very much so," Robert replied.

"See that it never happens again," she said, and, after a stern moment, she smiled her trademark smile. "You know the answers now, and you need to know them for the rest of your life."

After that day, Robert never again came close to a paddling in school.

One of the greatest experiences of that school year was joining the 4-H Club, of which Charles was already a member. The sponsor was Mr. Coffman, a jolly elf of a man with a huge smile for everyone and every occasion. He was not terribly tall and a tad roly-poly. He wore black rimmed glasses through which his honest eyes sparkled, and his black hair was always cut somewhat short. He taught agriculture and shop classes, and he was the Future Farmers of America advisor, to boot. The 4-H meetings were held in Mr. Coffman's classroom in the basement of the gymnasium that opened out to the track and field to the north. A carved wooden owl for FFA meetings stood at the front of his desk. Thanks to the owl, he had gained the nickname "Bird." Everyone liked Mr. Coffman, and, before 4-H meetings were called to order, someone would say, "What's the word?" To this question, the universal reply was "Bird!"

Robert quickly memorized the 4-H motto: to make the best better. He soon mastered the promise: I pledge my head to clearer thinking, my heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger service, and my health to better living for my club, my community, and my country.

Robert and Charles' father, who had been in 4-H when he was a boy, decided to enter Charles in several projects that year, one of them the raising of a dairy cow. Robert, meanwhile, was enrolled in swine and gardening (plenty for a boy his age). Joe had a promising Holstein calf that he thought might do well in the judging. Charles was given the responsibility of training her to be exhibited in the coliseum that coming summer. Robert helped Charles because both boys thought the world of the calf.

Her name was Buttercup. She was as gentle as a lamb, but her personality was as powerful as a lion. She loved to be around people, and, at times, she seemed human, herself! Her coat of velvety black and purest white was always shiny (from the frequent brushings she received), and she fluttered her long lashes in a way that was most becoming.

Joe hoped Buttercup's conformity to the expectations for her breed would earn her a strong showing at the 4-H fair. She was duly registered as a purebred Holstein.

With thanks (in part) to Robert's 4-H project, Ida would have an extra helper in the garden that spring. His parents would teach him to keep exact records as he went along. Robert could hardly wait to see the vegetables grow!

Chapter 33: The Obstacle Course

Robert glanced toward the front gate and saw Alan, the boys' cousin, about to come in. Alan lived in Ladoga and was visiting his grandmother, Lena Rhode, who lived in Pine Village. Lena resembled the sweet old woman in the illustrations in one of the children's books that Ida had read to Robert when he was small: white hair in a braid encircling her head, wire-rim glasses, and an embroidered apron. In the book, the woman popped corn, and Robert wondered how often Lena did the same.

Robert ran to meet Alan, whom he looked up to. A visit from Alan meant fun on the farm. Charles sauntered through the screen door and waved at Alan.

Alan was closer to Charles' age, and the two of them devised what Robert considered fascinating games that he could not have imagined on his own.

Ida came to the door to greet Alan.

"Can you stay with us for dinner?" she asked Alan.

"Yes," Alan said simply.

"Then you boys play for an hour, and I'll have dinner ready by then."

"What would you like to do?" Charles asked Alan, who glanced at a red Schwinn bicycle lying on its side.

"Let's ride the bike," he suggested.

After taking turns riding back and forth on the sidewalk a few times within the yard, Alan and Charles decided to take the bicycle through the south gate into the chicken yard.

The boys cleared an oval track around the westernmost chicken house. They had to move a five-gallon metal bucket out of the way, and they had to pull up gypsum weeds by their roots along the south side of the chicken house. Soon, Charles and Alan were alternating fast rides around the building while Robert watched.

"Would you like to ride next?" Alan asked Robert.

"Yes, I would!" Robert exclaimed.

Alan turned toward Charles. "I think your brother would like to take a turn."

Charles yielded the bike to Robert, who pedaled slowly at first but eventually gained enough speed to keep the bike from wobbling. The boys had gone around the track often enough that the path had grown dusty. It felt soft beneath the tires.

After Robert had made two circuits, Alan said, "You know what we need. We need an obstacle course."

Charles agreed. He and Alan placed the metal bucket directly in the path. Then they took turns steering around it while riding at top speed.

While Charles rode, Alan looked over a small metal drum and the unhinged door from a hog house. When Charles came to a stop, Alan said, "Why don't we lay this barrel on its side and lean this door on it to make a ramp? Then we could ride the bike up the ramp, fly through the air, and come down on the other side."

Charles smiled broadly the moment he heard the plan. He and Alan tugged the drum into place and propped the door to make the ramp, which was steeper than either he or Alan had realized it would be.

"What do you think?" Alan asked. "Can we keep the bike upright after flying through the air?"

"I think so," Charles said.

"I dare you to go first," Alan said.

"I double dare you to go first," Charles replied.

"Well, alright!" Alan said. "If you're going to double dare me, I suppose I'll have to show you how it's done."

He set the bucket out of the way, so that the oval was clear, except for the ramp, which seemed pointed at the sky. Alan rode once around the chicken house to gain speed. On the second pass, he bounced the front wheel over the edge of the wooden door. The bike dashed up the incline and dropped heavily just beyond the upper edge. Alan stayed standing on the pedals as a cloud of dust arose, and, wobbling to the right and back to the left, he kept the bike upright. The stunt was magnificent! Robert applauded in glee!

"Now it's your turn," Alan said to Charles.

Having had the advantage of watching Alan, Charles imitated his predecessor's strategy as exactly as he could. He built up his speed around the track, and, the second time around, he flew up the ramp. With his legs almost straight up from the pedals, he rode the bike in its short arc back to Mother Earth and managed to pedal the bicycle forward beyond the dust cloud marking the point of impact.

"That was impressive," Alan said, in his customary droll manner.

"Robert, would you like to try?"

Robert quickly declined the opportunity. Shaking his head, he said, "I'm not old enough."

"Shall we go again?" Alan asked. He accepted the handlebars from Charles and made his second attempt, which was less wobbly than his first. Then it was Charles' turn again.

This time, Charles had a little less speed than he had on his first effort. When he reached the top of the ramp, the bike leaned to one side, and he and the bike fell.

"Oh, no!" Alan said. "Are you alright?"

Charles dusted himself off. He had torn the knee of his jeans, and he had a small cut on one elbow; otherwise, he had come away unscathed.

"Boys!" Ida called from the back door. "Dinner's ready! Charles, go get your father!"

Charles walked to the barn to tell Joe it was time to eat the noon meal.

When everyone entered the kitchen, Ida looked at Charles and asked, "How did you rip your jeans?"

"I fell off the bike," Charles said.

"You should have seen it!" Robert said, but a look from Charles made Robert understand he was not to reveal the dangerous ramp, which the boys had dismantled. "He just … fell … off!" Robert extemporized.

"Put some tincture Merthiolate on his elbow while I give the boys their Fizzies," Ida said to Joe.

Alan, Charles, and Robert eagerly dropped the Fizzies tablets in their glasses and watched as the flavored bubbles rose through the water.

After the meal, Ida told Charles to change his pants and to bring her the torn jeans. When she straightened out the rolled up cuffs, a handful of dust fell from each one.

“What were you boys doing?” she asked, with an inkling of the truth.

No one replied.

“Whatever it was, nobody was seriously hurt, at least,” she said, as she prepared a patch for the jeans.

As Joe had to go to Keith’s shop for a tractor part anyway, he drove Alan back to Lena’s house. Having had great fun, Robert looked forward to more adventures the next time Alan would visit.

Chapter 34: The Figurine and the Feed

That spring, Joe and Ida brought home the last boxes of items from the house of Grandma Rhode, who had passed away in her sleep on the final day of March. The only remaining thing that had to be moved before the property could be sold was the cultivator that Joe stored in the garage when it was not in use. Ida drove the Chevrolet into town while Joe ran the Minneapolis–Moline tractor into position to receive the cultivator. Charles and Robert were with their mother. They tumbled out of the car and stood waiting to help their father.

In years past, the boys nearly always had been on hand when Joe had attached the implement to his tractor. Grandma Kosie Rhode would serve everyone orange juice in tiny glasses with oranges painted on the sides. It seemed odd for Grandma Rhode to be missing the fun. Joe carried the heavy front sections of iron with their V-shaped hoes to either side of the tractor. He balanced each on a concrete block while he slid heavy bolts through the holes he had patiently aligned. When it came time to lift the doubly heavy back section, he enlisted the help of Ida and both boys: Ida to assist in lifting and the boys to steady and guide the ironwork into place. While Joe was fastening the nuts, Ida and the boys took one more look around the empty house.

Their footsteps echoed in the small rooms. Robert peeped into the tiny bathroom.

"Mom, you missed something," he said.

Ida came to look. On the shelf above the sink was an inexpensive porcelain container in the shape of a lady at a costume ball in the 1700s. The upper portion—including her head with a funny hat—was a lid that covered the bottom portion—her light blue gown. The container had nothing in it and had been kept spotlessly clean. (Grandma Rhode had been meticulous in dusting and sweeping.)

"I guess we missed that," Ida said.

Robert looked up with eyes that asked, "Could I have it?"

Reading his expression, Ida questioned, "Do you really want it?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Then you may have it."

On the way home, Robert held the upper half of the container in one hand and the lower half in the other hand, to keep them from harm. He put the fragile piece out of the way on the bookshelf above his bed so that he would not accidentally break the figurine.

Joe, meanwhile, took Robert and Charles to the feed store in town to order ground feed for the shoats.

He switched off the GMC in the alley beside the store, and he and his sons walked into the office, where "Fireball" greeted them.

Lester Crane had two nicknames: "Let" (the more obvious of the two) and "Fireball." Let's father had known not only Joe but also Joe's mother, her brother, and her parents. The roots of camaraderie between the Cranes and the Cobb family (Kosie's maiden name) ran deep.

"Hi, Let," Joe said.

"What can I do for you today?" Fireball asked.

"I need to load the bed of my pickup with ground feed for my feeder pigs."

"Let me fix you up," Fireball said good-naturedly, as he pulled an order form backed by carbon paper into place on top of the metal box that held the blank forms. He felt around the pocket on the bib of his overalls until he found the pen that he knew he had stuck there.

While Let was preparing the form, Joe peered through the window at the street to watch the traffic. His back was turned when Russell Mitchell entered the office.

"What d'ya say, Fireball?" Russell began, then, noticing Joe, he said, "Hi, Joe!"

Surprised to hear his name, Joe spun around. "Hi, Russell," Joe said.

"Are you keeping those boys of yours in line?" Russell inquired, nodding in the direction of Charles and Robert.

Joe smiled. "I reckon so," he replied. "How are your boys?"

"Oh, I have them working in the barn today. I thought I'd sneak off to order some feed. They probably haven't missed me yet."

Robert listened to the conversation, while he looked forward to seeing the ground feed falling from the chute into his father's truck. He always enjoyed the sight of the rushing feed making a mountain in the bed of the GMC and the dusty fragrance of the crushed grain.

"When I drove past your place the other day," Russell said, his eyes becoming narrow, "I saw your boy there—"

"Charles." Joe provided the name.

"Charles—leading a heifer around the yard."

"That's right," Joe said. "He's training her for the 4-H fair."

Russell smiled. "So he'll have her entered in the heifer class, then."

"Yes. It's his first year for the dairy project."

"I was gonna say you've had pigs at the fair before this."

"Yes, and we'll have our Chester Whites there again this year."

Fireball interrupted, "Joe, I need your signature right there."

After Joe had signed his name with his customary elegant cursive, he handed the pen back to Let and said, "I reckon your boys will have cows at the fair."

"Roger and Richard," Russell said with a twinkle in his eye. "Yeah, we always have our Holsteins in the various classes."

Joe hesitated, then he asked, "The heifer class, too?"

Russell peered intently at Joe. "We have a nice looking heifer that we think is gonna bring home a champion ribbon for us."

"Is that right?" Joe commented, smiling.

"'bout so," Russell said.

"You've generally had the champion in that class, haven't you?"

"Fairly consistently," Russell agreed, nodding.

Accidentally dropping the carbon copy of the form that Fireball handed him, Joe fumbled to pick it up from the dusty floor but managed to grab it on the third try. He carefully folded it and slid it in the pocket of his overalls.

"Pull around there, and I'll get you loaded right now," Fireball said to Joe.

"We'll be seeing you, then," Joe said to Russell.

"Take 'er easy," Russell responded.

Robert was not disappointed. The ground feed cascaded into the truck with a satisfying rumble.

His father's conversation had given Robert an idea for the use of his figurine: he would keep his 4-H pins in it.

Chapter 35: The Television

The television brought people face to face with a world far larger than Pine Village: a world that had hidden in the shadows of the imagination as farmers of the late 1940s and 1950s had listened to their radios and a world that, despite being described in detail in the dailies and the fat newspapers on Sundays, remained aloof. In the beginning, television's limited news coverage imitated the highly crafted newsreels viewed in movie theaters, but, gradually, that coverage became better adjusted to breaking news with its raw qualities and lack of polished shapes. With televisions in more and more of the homes in town and on farms, the world no longer lay in newsprint on the kitchen table. There was the world! There, on the television!

Granted, the news occupied only fifteen minutes on weekday evenings. Joe and Ida's Zenith TV brought in two of the three networks clearly enough. Although the networks already had a commercial stake in ensuring high numbers of viewers, the journalists who read the news, often taken from wire stories, strictly avoided opinion and, in perfect spoken English, offered only the facts as those facts could best be understood at the time.

Broadcasts and telecasts told of the agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union to establish a hot line for the leaders to forestall nuclear war, and Charles, Robert, and their classmates were led in drills to kneel beneath their desks in the event of an exploding nuclear bomb, perhaps in Chicago, which was too close to Pine Village for comfort. In Joe Dan's Restaurant, veterans of both World Wars openly speculated about World War III. They had seen the world and were wary of it.

The daily news increments may have been tiny, but television sets *showed* that troubles were not illusions. Radio news had enabled listeners to picture troubles in their minds, and, not infrequently, the troubles as pictured in listeners' imaginations became either magnified or tinged with a fancy bordering on unreality. Televisions and the evening news came to be trusted as living room repositories of the stark truth: a truth not contaminated by the imagination and not shaped into newsreels. Turn on the set for the evening news, and there they were: *true* troubles in spoken words illustrated by pictures only a few feet away—just past the footstool! At first—with journalists that had undergone rigorous training and with exacting adherence to high ethical standards—TV news programs could legitimately claim to encapsulate the truth or whatever was carefully considered to be the most likely truth at the time. Little by little over several decades, entertainment with its penchant for shock value would nudge truth aside. Unfortunately, the trust would remain, even when the truth had vanished.

No one was so deluded as to dream that the rural community had been the Garden of Eden before TV sets arrived. The Great Depression had dealt poverty to many families that had no means of recovery. Lives lost in Europe, in the Pacific, and in Korea had left behind broken hearts that could not be comforted. In spite of their vigilance, some farmers had fallen victim to accidents that left grievous injuries. All the same, Pine Village had succeeded in giving its residents a foundational stability: the bedrock of continuity. The television was sending tremors through that substratum.

The television seemed to pose difficult questions. What was Pine Village to do with the threat of nuclear annihilation? What was Pine Village to think about the varieties of unrest that began surfacing in cities across the nation? What was Pine Village to be in a troubled world?

Meanwhile, Ida's friend Mary Akers dropped her boys, Matt and Lon, in the yard, where they and Robert and Charles played cowboys and Indians with their Western toy guns while she entered the kitchen. Ida switched off the TV set.

"I brought my books," Mary said, waving her right hand filled with several booklets, then waving her left hand filled with sheets of S&H Green Stamps, "and my stamps."

Mary was younger than Ida, but they were fast friends. That spring, both had sunburned necks from driving tractors to help their husbands in the fields. They sat at the oilcloth-draped kitchen table and attached stamps to the pages of their booklets. Clerks handed the stamps to customers in grocery lines and at the checkout counters of other stores; the stamps could be redeemed for discounts on goods at a wide variety of establishments. While they affixed stamps to fill their booklets, they swigged instant coffee and chatted about events on the farms and in the town.

"Did I tell you what I did?" Mary asked.

"What did you do?" Ida returned.

"Last weekend, I came around the school driveway past where they're building the new tennis court on the corner right across the road from you. The workers had left for the day, and I saw three Coke bottles lying in the grass. So I parked and picked up the bottles. I needed just that many to fill my last carton. That way, I had four cartons full."

"You don't say."

"I felt inspired, so I drove straight to the IGA in Oxford and redeemed all four cartons. While I was there, I picked up a box of Crispy Critters for the kids and a bottle of Mrs. Butterworth's syrup for me."

"What did Don get?" Ida wanted to know.

"He doesn't need anything!" Mary joked.

Ida laughed.

That evening, Joe and Ida took Charles and Robert to Columbian Park to the ball diamond, where they sat on bleachers to watch a demonstration of traditional dances performed by members of the Miami tribe. Men and women, boys and girls, were attired in the clothing of Indians—not the often ridiculously flamboyant costumes of Hollywood Indians but the authentic dress of the various peoples of the Miami, such as the Wea and the Piankeshaw.

As musicians struck the deep-toned drums, a circle of dancers formed. Slowly the circle revolved as the men and women shuffled sideways. The dance was intended to ensure a good harvest. As Robert was enrolled in the 4-H gardening project, he hoped the dance would be effective.

Robert watched in fascination as the circle inched around and around. He wondered if Charles might be enjoying the performance as much as he was, but, when he glanced at his brother, Robert could tell that Charles was bored. Robert stayed focused on the dance after that.

In between dances, an announcer explained to the audience that, long ago, the Piankeshaw and Wea had lived on the land where Lafayette and West Lafayette stood. Robert suddenly felt transported back in time. He felt he was witnessing a culture that had arisen from the rivers, creeks, marshes, prairies, and woods that he knew. The circles formed by the dancers were cementing bonds among the performers and members of the audience while honoring not only the land but also what could not be seen but what could be profoundly felt: the spirit flowing around and through the water, the soil, and the air.

At the end of the exhibition, the audience gradually began applauding. It was not that people were reluctant to clap their hands to show their appreciation—it was that nobody quite knew whether applause was appropriate after such dances that the announcer had carefully placed in the context of Indian spiritual concepts. It felt as if a congregation were

applauding after a church service. All the same, the children in the tribes smiled, as did several of the adults.

While Joe drove home, Robert pondered the dances and their meaning. For many days thereafter, Robert slipped away from the evening news telecasts. When he was by himself outdoors, he tried to perceive the natural world in front of him with enough precision to sense its vast spiritual backdrop. A rhythm—a music—lay within the wind. It was faint and came from far away. What was the meaning of that music? Robert tried shuffling sideways in imitation of what he had seen the Miami do, until he had traced a circle in the grass.

Chapter 36: The Checkup and the Catalog

"Mr. Coffman's here!" Charles announced, loudly enough for Joe, Ida, and Robert to understand every word, no matter where they were in the house.

By the time Charles reached the front gate of the white-board fence surrounding the yard, Mr. Coffman was already standing there with his friendly smile and a clipboard under his arm. His neatly ironed shirt was worn outside—not tucked in—as if he were at a picnic.

"Are you ready for me?" he asked, while Charles unlatched the gate.

"I think so," Charles replied. "What do you want to see first?"

Mr. Coffman checked his 4-H clipboard. "I have Robert down for a gardening project. Let's see the garden!" Mr. Coffman's smile widened.

By this time, Joe and Ida had joined their sons. Everyone walked along the edge of the garden, Ida's pride and joy.

The garden lay between the Rhode family house to the east and Cecil Gray's house to the west. At one time, Cecil's house had belonged to Joe's mother's family, and Joe had been born there. The rows of Ida's overly large garden were arranged from south to north. As people drove past on State Route 26 or walked beside the school playground, they could look up and the down the rows of lettuce, beets, carrots, turnips, onions, potatoes, tomatoes, cabbages, beans of all sorts, pumpkins, and sweet corn. Throughout the spring and early summer, Ida worked tirelessly to plow and hoe the weeds, leaving clean, straight rows of vegetables. Now that Robert was in the 4-H Club and enrolled in gardening, she had a constant helper.

"Are you keeping good records?" Mr. Coffman asked Robert.

"Yes, I am," Robert said proudly.

"That's good!" Mr. Coffman smiled. "We like good records!" He turned to Ida. "Everything is coming along nicely."

"The rows are starting to fill in," Ida agreed.

"Will you can again this year?" Mr. Coffman asked.

"Yes," Ida said with a smile as big as Mr. Coffman's. "I always have more jars in the cellar than we can get to. I'm planning to make sauerkraut again

this year. I didn't make any last year because the cabbage looked wilted. I guess it wasn't, but I didn't trust it."

"Do you make it in crocks?" Mr. Coffman wanted to know.

"Blue crown crocks," Ida answered, "without lids. I keep them in the cellar under the smokehouse. I put plates on top and weight them down with bricks. Then I drape cotton towels over them."

"The kraut you make yourself is so much better than the kind sold in the grocery stores," Mr. Coffman said.

"The taste is different," Ida agreed. "It's not so biting. The flavor of homemade kraut is richer."

"It's more complex," Mr. Coffman offered, "but subtle, too."

"If my sauerkraut turns out well, I'll make sure you get some," Ida volunteered.

"That would be very nice of you," Mr. Coffman returned.

Throughout this conversation, the group had been ambling up and down the garden and admiring the plants bathed in sunshine.

"You have a beautiful garden," Mr. Coffman concluded.

"Thank you," Ida said. "Robert has been a big help."

Mr. Coffman turned to Robert and said, "You can take pride in a job well done." Glancing at his clipboard, Mr. Coffman asked, "Dairy?"

"I have Charles' heifer in the barn," Joe said.

While Ida returned to the house, the rest walked the dusty path between the chicken houses, through the gate beside the raised gasoline tank from which Joe fueled his tractors, and into the center aisle of the barn. The air was redolent with the fragrance of new hay.

As soon as Buttercup saw Mr. Coffman, she walked right up to the front of the stall and held her nose over for Mr. Coffman to pet.

"She's a friendly heifer!" Mr. Coffman said, as he patted her velvety nose.

"I think she looks good, too," Joe hinted.

"Have you been taking good care of her?" Mr. Coffman asked Charles.

"I've been teaching her to lead," Charles said.

"I wouldn't think you'd have any trouble with her," Mr. Coffman smiled. "She's too friendly to be a nuisance." He turned to Joe. "If there were a sweepstakes ribbon for congeniality, I'd give it to her."

Mr. Coffman looked toward Buttercup. "The Mitchell boys have some good-looking heifers," Mr. Coffman commented.

Joe's smile flickered for a moment, as if a small cloud had passed before the sun.

"The Mitchells always have good stock," Joe said.

"I think Buttercup will do very well at the fair," Mr. Coffman said, rocking back on his heels and putting a big check mark on the page in his clipboard.

After Mr. Coffman had driven away, Joe entered the kitchen to have a cup of coffee. Ida looked up from where she sat at the table with the Spiegel catalog open to a page depicting a dress and hat combination similar to the style that First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy wore.

"I'm thinking about ordering a dress like that," Ida said. "I would have to get some new gloves to go with it on Sundays."

With coffee cup in hand, Joe stood peering over Ida's shoulder.

"Does the hat come with it?" Joe asked.

"Of course not!" Ida exclaimed, laughing. "If I order the dress in blue, I can wear my blue hat, which will be close enough, once I take off the beaded thingamajig and the veil. I *am* going to have to order gloves, though. Mine aren't like these new white ones. It won't be long before Della will be visiting the Cheesmans, and, when she comes here and all of us go to church, I'll have a new dress that's more in style."

Della was Ida's sister that had lived in Fort Lauderdale and had moved to Atlanta a year earlier. Della, Harold, and their daughters, Sally and Becky, were coming to see the Cheesman family in West Point, Indiana. Della had developed close ties to the Cheesmans long ago. Della's family would be

coming along to Pine Village afterward. In her letter, Della had said she was looking forward to seeing the Rev. Lowell Morris and Mrs. Morris.

Ida and her family always looked forward to visits with Della, Harold, Sally, and Becky. … and, on this occasion, Ida also looked forward to a new "Sunday best" blue dress and white gloves!

Chapter 37: The Movie and the Cousins

As Joe took the family to the Wabash Drive-In near Attica to see Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*, he slowed down and ran the right-hand wheels of the Chevrolet onto the berm when he passed Russell Mitchell's farm. Joe's eyes roamed across the Holsteins in the pasture. He worried that Russell's sons might have a heifer so promising that she could challenge Buttercup for the championship at the county fair.

After eating his popcorn, Robert fell asleep for most of the movie. Ida considered waking him, but she found the motion picture so preposterously long that she thought a sound sleep might outweigh the historical value. To her, the extravagant scenes felt pompous and out of place with the mood of the country that the television was establishing. About a year earlier, the family had attended *The Music Man* at the Mars Theater in Lafayette, and Robert had eagerly watched every moment of that rousing musical. Now Ida glanced into the back seat to see Robert peacefully dreaming. She began to wonder if she would miss anything if she, too, were to take a nap during *Cleopatra*. The squawking speaker hanging on the edge of Joe's window kept droning on and on.

The weekend arrived when Uncle Harold's car crunched the pebbles of the half-circle driveway in front of the house.

"They're here!" Robert called from his perch at the front window, where he had been vigilantly watching.

It was early Sunday morning, and everyone was dressed for church. The summer day had turned off blessedly cooler after a hot week—almost like the springtime!

Dapper Uncle Harold wore a neatly trimmed mustache and was one of the few mustachioed men in Robert's experience. Uncle Harold escorted daughters Sally and Becky and Aunt Della through the front gate. Robert loved hearing Uncle Harold's Georgia accent!

Wearing her new dress, which had just arrived from the mail-order house, Ida greeted her sister, who took Ida's hand and held it closely in her own. Robert looked back and forth from his mother to his aunt and noted the resemblance.

"You look so pretty, Ida," Della said.

"The dress is new," Ida beamed. "Look how much your daughters have grown!" Ida turned to Sally and Becky. "You're young ladies now," she said.

Robert considered his cousins more beautiful than the girls in *The Music Man*.

Charles said, "After church, we can ride bikes!"

Sally laughed. "Charles," she said "I wonder what I would look like wearing this dress and trying to pedal a boy's bike?"

Joe said, "You know how much you enjoyed steering the tractor the last time you visited. I can put a blanket on the seat and we can go for a ride on the Minneapolis–Moline Z, if you want to later on."

Ida said, "I think the girls may want to walk with Della and me around the garden and see the flowers this time."

Meanwhile, Uncle Harold handed Ida a box full of oranges.

"You didn't grow these in Georgia!" Ida exclaimed.

Harold smiled. "No, these are from Florida."

"Well, they look wonderful," Ida said, as she turned to carry the box into the kitchen. "We'll be having a big dinner after church," she called back over her shoulder. "Maybe we can add some oranges to the fruit cups."

Harold and Joe drove their families to the Methodist Church, where Grandpa and Grandma Morris were waiting on the steps.

"It is so good to see you," Grandpa Morris said, shaking hands with Harold while Fern quickly hugged Della.

"Aren't your girls dressed so nice!" Grandma Morris said.

"They're young ladies," Grandpa Morris observed.

"That's exactly what I said," Ida commented.

In the car, Ida had put on her new white gloves and had adjusted her blue hat, which she had simplified to match the new styles. As Ida and Della walked down the aisle, Robert thought his mother and his aunt looked

radiant and charming. He felt proud that his aunt was so becoming in her dove-gray dress and matching hat of the latest fashion.

Pastor David Richards invited the congregation to sing the first hymn. Although he felt that he did not sing well, Robert could easily read the music. He enjoyed listening to his mother's clear soprano voice and his father's resonant baritone voice. As a young man, his father had performed with a quartet, and his experience showed in his confident singing.

The sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows cast pastel patterns on the pews. While the Rev. Richards gave the sermon, Robert watched the pink, gold, and turquoise lights play across his mother's gloved hands, which she held clasped together until it was time to lift the hymnal again from the varnished rack attached to the back of the pew in front. The spring-like weather made the day seem like Easter in the middle of summer.

Ida and Della had much to talk about over the lavish dinner that Ida had prepared. Sally, Becky, Charles, and Robert sat at a folding table beside the main table. (Joe had removed the davenport to make room in the crowded kitchen.) Grandpa and Grandma Morris, Harold, Della, Joe, and Ida sat around the big table, which had been greatly expanded with extra leaves. Both tables were covered with antique linen tablecloths that Ida had ironed until there were no traces of wrinkles to be seen.

After the meal, everyone sauntered into the yard.

Charles glanced longingly at the red bike lying on its side near the well, but he realized that Sally and Becky's dresses prohibited riding. Ida's summer flowers were in full bloom. Becky clapped her hands when she saw a hybrid tea rose covered with big yellow blossoms.

"I love this," she said, gesturing toward a rectangular flower garden running almost all the way across the yard from the house on the west to the garage on the east. In the center was an arched trellis with a climbing rose that was enjoying a second blush of red blooms.

"I was standing by that trellis," Ida said, "on the morning when Robert was born. I can hardly believe he'll turn nine in a few days."

"He's already steering the tractor when I haul cornstalks to the cows," Joe said, with a smile toward Sally.

"I'll steer for you the next time we visit," Sally said, smiling back. "Aunt Ida, what is this called?" Sally asked, pointing toward a large, tangled bush.

“Do you mean the Japonica?” Ida returned. “It blooms in the spring.”

“I think what I’m seeing is blooming now,” Sally said.

“Show me,” Ida suggested.

Sally found a way into the flower bed without stepping on a plant, and she pointed directly at what looked like a miniature ear of green Indian corn on a stem.

“Oh, those are the seeds of Jack-in-the-pulpit!” Ida exclaimed. “They turn red in the fall.”

“Has it already bloomed then?” Sally asked.

“Yes, it bloomed in the spring. The pulpit looks like the old-fashioned ones that had an ornate canopy overhead. Under the canopy is this same stem, only much smaller when the plant is blooming. His name is Jack.”

“Can you eat the seeds?” Sally wondered.

“No,” Ida said. “The plant is poisonous, but the Indians had a way of preparing it as medicine.”

“It’s beautiful!” Sally exclaimed.

“It’s so peaceful here,” Della said, peering intently at her sister. “Everything else seems to be in such turmoil these days.”

Ida nodded, not able to put her thoughts into words but fearing that the world that Sally, Becky, Charles, and Robert would one day inhabit as adults might not be so peaceful.

The time had passed too quickly. Uncle Harold, Aunt Della, Sally, and Becky had to leave. They were going to stay overnight in West Point before returning to Georgia the next day. Aunt Della hugged Ida. The sisters’ eyes glistened.

Uncle Harold waved from the driver’s window as he made a U-turn and headed east on State Route 26. Charles and Robert waved back. Robert felt sad to see them go, but he knew they would come again before long.

In the mean time, Joe changed into his work clothes and went to the barn to start the evening chores. He looked carefully at Buttercup strolling with the other Holsteins along the path in the meadow. She glowed in the honey and amber light of late afternoon. Had she grown into the young lady that would take the championship ribbon at the fair? Joe would soon find out.

Chapter 38: The Champion

The first day of the 4-H fair week dawned, and Joe had already been busy, loading the new wooden box that held the brushes, halter, and products necessary to keep Buttercup looking beautiful. As soon as the sun peeked over the horizon, Ida and Robert were walking the rows and scrutinizing the vegetables to decide which ones to pick for the gardening display. With sunbeams lighting its yellow feathers, a meadowlark perched on a fence post and sang, "How are you today? How are you today?" in answer to the crowing of a rooster in the chicken yard. Then the meadowlark flapped its wings and flapped them again as it dipped and rose, dipped and rose, above the pasture.

Yawning, Charles came to help Joe as he led Buttercup up the chute into the pickup for the ride to Williamsport. She seemed eager to go. Having seen *Francis the Talking Mule* at the movie theater in Oxford and *Mr. Ed* on television, Joe and Charles had little difficulty imagining that Buttercup was saying, "Let's get this show on the road! My fans await me!"

With Robert as her passenger, Ida drove the Chevrolet behind Joe's GMC, where Charles was seated next to his father. When Joe passed the Mitchell farm, he kicked up dust on the berm as the pickup's right tires ran just beyond the edge of the pavement. Joe was too busy looking for the Mitchells' cow to watch the road. Russell, Roger, and Richard were loading a stylish Holstein heifer in their truck. Joe waved. Russell winked and waved back. Joe ran the tires back onto the asphalt.

When the truck and car passed Mrs. Arvin's house on the left, Robert spotted his former teacher in her garden, and he yelled, "Hi ya, hi ya, hi ya, Mrs. Arvin!" He waved through the open window. Robert was so loud that Ida flinched, grabbed the steering wheel tightly, and pushed the throttle to the floor. The car lurched forward before Ida lifted her foot and brought the vehicle back to a normal speed. Mrs. Arvin straightened up and watched the Chevrolet as it went on down the road.

"Do you think she saw me?" Robert asked.

"Oh, she saw you alright, and she *heard* you, too," Ida confirmed. When she told Joe about Robert's outburst later, he laughed. The saying "Hi ya, hi ya, hi ya, Mrs. Arvin!" became a family quotation, repeated on seemingly endless occasions for years thereafter.

Driving the pickup with Buttercup happily watching the world go by, Joe, meanwhile, was whistling the tune to

Late one night, when we were all in bed,
Old Mrs. Leary left the lantern in the shed,
And when the cow kicked it over,
She winked her eye and said,
"It'll be a hot time in the old town tonight!"

Red-winged blackbirds sitting on the passing fences chortled in harmony.

Soon enough, the pickup pulled into the fairgrounds of the county seat. Joe maneuvered his GMC into the line of trucks unloading animals to be housed in the south wing of the coliseum and livestock barn. The men in charge of the dairy exhibits assigned Buttercup the southeast corner: an ideal location! No sooner had she taken up residence in the large space than teenage girls walking past saw Buttercup and came up to pet her nose. Ida had parked in one of the regular spots along the shady road, and Robert ran to help his father and brother scatter golden straw in thick crests around and under Buttercup. Joe wrestled the show box in place just behind Buttercup. For weeks before the fair, Charles had decorated it with vibrantly colored Amish star symbols around the sides, and he had perfectly painted large green letters spelling RHODE in the center of the lid. Then he had given the box several coats of glossy varnish. It was a work of art!

Robert ran back to help his mother carry the vegetables to the aisle beneath the bleachers where the gardening exhibits were arranged. In preparation for the event, he had used marker pens, crayons, and poster board to duplicate the Great Seal of the State of Indiana. A magenta and fuschia sunrise colored hills pink and violet while a cinnamon and ginger bison leapt over a log and a woodsman swung an ax to chop an emerald and turquoise tree above aquamarine grass dotted with pale yellow flowers. The kaleidoscopic depiction hung from tiny gold chains behind Ida's oversized cornucopia basket with a huge cabbage in its maw as beans, corn, carrots, onions, kohlrabi, and turnips poured forth in spectacular array.

Having fed and watered Buttercup, Joe sauntered down the aisle and took a close look at the competition. He felt satisfied that the Mitchell heifer might take the honors away from Buttercup.

"That heifer of yours," Russell said, as he chewed on a straw and squinted in Joe's direction, "will put a smile on the judge's face."

Joe grinned. "So will yours," he admitted.

Russell glanced appreciatively at the better heifer of the two that his boys were going to show. "She'll be a contender," Russell remarked.

"With the Holstein judging as the first event tomorrow morning, we won't have too much longer to learn what happens," Joe said.

Russell turned to Joe. "May the best heifer win!" he said, chuckling.

In the afternoon, the whole family helped give Buttercup a bath in one of the special pens set up for such purposes. She obviously loved being shampooed and rinsed, toweled and brushed, until her coat shone.

The day passed rapidly away. At dusk, the GMC and the Chevrolet caravanned back to Pine Village. That night, Joe hardly slept a wink. At four in the morning, he sat sipping instant coffee as his mind mulled over the finer points of Buttercup and her adversary.

Charles dressed in his show clothes. He wore jeans of the purest white and a new plaid shirt with white, avocado, and light blue squares. Buttercup wore a brand new halter of shiny black leather that Joe had purchased at considerable expense.

The crowd began gathering in the coliseum. Mr. Charles Coffman slid onto the bench before the electric organ on the platform stage, smiled at the audience, and launched into a rousing rendition of "Fine and Dandy." He completed the song with a flourish and nodded to the families seated on both sides.

Mr. John F. McKee, county extension agent, clapped his hands and strode to the microphone. "Very fine! Very fine!" he exclaimed. He adjusted his silver hair and his equally silver glasses. "Now will the 4-H members bring in their Holstein heifers."

Roger and Richard Mitchell led their cows into the ring. Then Charles brought Buttercup, who put on her best show for the crowd—and for the judge, a professorial gentleman wearing glasses, a dazzling white shirt, and what appeared to be snakeskin boots. In all, five cows were competing in the class, two led by girls.

Wearing a printed shirt and slacks for show day, Joe stood near one of the wooden panels leading to the judging area, his arms folded and his brows drawn in what Robert called his "eagle-eyed look." Joe's friend, Don Akers, strode up from the hog barn. Don's cap was pulled forward, shading his eyes. His smile, as white as his T-shirt, lit up his tanned face as he rested

one foot on the bottom board of the panel and put his hands on the top board. “Well, Joe, how does she look?”

As soon as Joe had seen Don, Joe had dropped his arms, tucked his thumbs just inside the upper edges of his back pockets, and leaned forward in a characteristic posture that meant he would now give the fullest consideration to whatever Don had to say. “I think she looks good,” Joe said, grinning and blushing from having complimented his own heifer.

Don offered, “It’s a small class—”

“—but there’s strong competition,” Joe added, shaking his head with worry.

At the same instant, Joe and Don looked across at Russell Mitchell, who waved at them. With one accord, Don and Joe raised and lowered the first fingers of their right hands in the universally accepted gesture of acknowledgment.

“Russell often wins this class, doesn’t he?” Don asked.

“Yes,” Joe answered, repeating, “yes, he does.”

“Don’t you wish you could tell what the judge is thinking!” Don exclaimed. “But maybe it’s just as well that we don’t know. He might be wishing he had a coin he could flip.”

Joe laughed, removed his seed corn cap, ran his hand over his head, put his cap back on, and said, “We could give him a quarter, but people might think we were trying to bribe him.”

“What counts is what those boys and girls are learning out there,” Don said.

The judge had the 4-H members walk their heifers around the ring and then stand them. Buttercup needed no encouragement or instruction. When she walked, she strutted, and, when she stood, she posed. Passing his hands along their backs and flanks, the judge studied every detail of each cow.

He approached the platform. A hush fell throughout the coliseum. The judge pointed toward Buttercup and immediately pointed toward Richard’s heifer. “Number one and number two,” the judge barked.

Robert, who was seated beside his mother in the stands, could not be sure what the judge meant. He glanced worriedly from Ida’s face nearby to Joe’s face across the ring.

"I think Buttercup just won," Ida said, but she was uncertain, too. From their angle, it was difficult to know which way the judge had pointed. Ida looked at Joe. He was frowning, staring straight ahead, and not moving a muscle, but Don was smiling.

The man with the ribbons in his hand stepped down from the platform and into the ring while the judge ascended the platform and strode toward the microphone.

Smiles crept across Ida's face and Joe's face and Robert's face as the man with the ribbons came closer and closer to Charles. The man briefly held the champion ribbon over Buttercup's neck before handing the coveted purple treasure to Charles, who grinned from ear to ear.

While the reserve champion ribbon went to Richard's entry, the judge said, "These winning heifers are so nearly alike that they could be twins. It's really splitting hairs to say there's a difference between them. For me, it came down to personality. I like the attitude of the champion." The judge paused; then he shrugged. "She just *acts* like a champion!" he declared, to the amusement of the crowd. Farm wives and farmer husbands turned toward one another and laughed heartily, nodding in agreement with the judge. "These 4-H'ers," the judge continued, "deserve a great deal of credit for raising such fine animals, training them, and bringing them to our attention." With that, he signaled the helpers to assist the boys and girls in leading their cows from the ring.

Robert and Ida were standing with Charles at Buttercup's stall before Joe and Don got there. Don's wife, Mary, came up, almost on the run.

"I was helping in the Craft Building," Mary said, nearly out of breath, "but I caught the tail end of the judging—" Mary hesitated a second, catching her pun and adding, "so to speak. Congratulations!"

"I have the camera," Ida said, lifting the Kodak Brownie Hawkeye to show Joe.

"Let's take Buttercup around the corner outside where there'll be more light," Joe suggested.

Charles held the lead strap while Buttercup took her position with the glistening championship ribbon draped across her back. Sun dappled the white-painted building, and Buttercup's black-and-white coat wore a velvety

sheen. The heifer fluttered her long lashes; she *knew* she was the champion. The snapshot would be preserved for years thereafter.

"That makes it feel like all the work was worth it, doesn't it, Charles?" Don asked.

"Yes, it does," Charles assented, while he led Buttercup back to her stall.

"Let's all get together for dinner in the Cafeteria Building to celebrate," Mary said to Ida and Joe.

"Want to meet there around 11:30?" Ida asked.

"We'll see you there!" Mary smiled. "I need to get back to the Craft Building," she said while excusing herself and dashing away.

Don said, "Now that we know the best heifer won, I can get back to cleaning up my hog pens!" With that, Don headed down the aisle.

"The gardening exhibits should be judged by now," Joe said.

"We'll go see," Ida said. She and Robert marched off to the room, which had been locked during the judging. The wire door stood open. When they walked to where the Great Seal of Indiana stood in all its glory above the cornucopia, they could not believe their eyes. A big pink rosette with the words "Reserve Sweepstakes" on it was pinned to the basketry. An older 4-H member's exhibit had taken the sweepstakes, but, with so many entrants, being second best was the same as winning.

Even as exciting as the reserve sweepstakes in gardening was, the family felt that the most thrilling experience had been watching Buttercup win her championship.

On the way home that night, Joe silently concluded there had been other champions that day: Don and Mary.

Chapter 39: The News

After the week of the fair, Buttercup returned to her meadow, where she reigned as queen for the rest of her long life.

Ida wanted to tell everyone the good news, but she quickly realized that practically everyone she wanted to tell had been in the coliseum and had watched Buttercup win the championship. Ida had to be content to bask in the warm glow of victory.

Just before school was to begin, Ida took Robert and Charles to the school cafeteria to buy their books. Robert always looked forward to the occasion, for he loved to walk up and down the tables to see the covers of the books for all the grades. The fragrance of the volumes resembled that of a cup of fine tea. Ida scrutinized the used copies to make sure they were the same editions as the new books, and she bought used whenever the books contained no marks, underlining, or notes. Quite often, she purchased new printings. On the way back across the road, Robert and Charles carried armloads of books.

Just at the end of August, the television carried news of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The cameras panned across a multitude of people—more people than Robert could imagine in one place at one time! Robert tried to understand what the newscasters—with their perfectly trained voices and equally perfect grammar—were saying, but, at key moments in their sentences, their vocabulary exceeded Robert's and he lost their meaning. He had a penchant for words, so he kept trying, and, during commercials, he asked his mother what various terms meant.

Her early teenage years in the Methodist Children's Home in Lebanon, Indiana, had given Ida a steadfast faith. She hoped that past maladies leading down to the present hour could be made well, but she feared that the illnesses afflicting the nation might not find cures.

In defining words, Ida attempted to conceal her vague sense of foreboding, but Robert discerned her worry about the future.

Robert entered Mrs. Winegardner's fourth-grade class. Mrs. Winegardner was as steady as the Rock of Gibraltar. Her eyes fixed each student in place, and she held all students to the highest standard. She had one of those faces of artistic concentration like a Willa Cather or a Gene Stratton–Porter. Like Joe, Robert's father and her classmate from long before, Mrs. Winegardner loved history. When she taught about Clay and Webster and Calhoun, she brought to life their powerful points of view. Little by little, she

nudged the class toward an understanding of the long history of conflict that was the foreground for current events. Robert found the concept of inequality incomprehensible, yet his American history book reported a story the theme of which was inequality from the American Revolution forward.

The school year promised to be rewarding. Mr. Charles "Charlie" Coffman had been named the interim principal; the beloved teacher, 4-H leader, FFA sponsor, and organist at the county fair was admired by all the students.

In November, Ida wrote on the back of the wall calendar provided by Messner and Sons (Clothing and Shoes for the Entire Family, Phone Dudley 5-2041) of Oxford:

ironing
get gander
sell chickens
see egg man
finish cleaning
straighten drawers
Christmas presents
freeze turkeys
shell popcorn
rake leaves
cook pumpkins

At school that November afternoon, Mr. Coffman came to Mrs. Winegardner's door. Robert looked up in astonishment. Mr. Coffman was crying!

He said, "I'm sorry to interrupt. I don't know a good way to say this. President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas, Texas, and he has passed away. School will end early today. I've already called in the bus drivers." With that, he put his handkerchief to his eyes, turned, and was gone.

Mrs. Winegardner, who was sitting at her desk, slowly closed her book. She was staring through the open doorway. She took a deep breath and faced her class.

"Well," she said. "This is a difficult time. Please put away your books and wait quietly."

Mrs. Winegardner stood and walked just outside her door, where she spoke softly with the other elementary teachers. Mrs. Leighty, the fifth-grade

teacher, was crying. Buses began appearing in the parking lot outside the fourth-grade windows. Soon, everyone was sent home.

Now Ida knew what her ominous feelings had meant. She was witnessing the shattering of the age.

The television remained on throughout the waking hours that weekend. Ida did not feel like cooking Sunday dinner, so she suggested the family go to a restaurant in Boswell. Joe drove into town to invite Aunt Margaret, who put on her winter coat, gloves, and hat and accompanied Joe back home. When he parked by the front gate, Aunt Margaret walked into the house. The TV camera was showing the basement of the Dallas Police Headquarters where Lee Harvey Oswald was to be transferred to the county jail. Just then, a man in the crowd approached Oswald. A commotion ensued, deepening into pandemonium.

"I think somebody just shot Lee Harvey Oswald," Aunt Margaret said. No one else said anything. It was stunning to be watching an event of such magnitude as it happened. The family stood in front of the television for several minutes, until Ida thought everyone had seen enough for the time being. She switched off the set. In the cold outdoors, Joe, Ida, Aunt Margaret, Charles, and Robert filed to the car for the short trip to the restaurant.

School was cancelled for Monday so that everyone could watch the funeral on television. Images on the TV burned into Robert's memory, the eternal flame one of the last.

It was exactly as has often been said: those that were alive then would remember for the rest of their lives what they had been doing when the news of President Kennedy's assassination arrived.

The often expressed presumption that the nation had entered an exciting period of youthful vigor characterized by a relatively young President had vanished.

Nothing felt the same after that.

Chapter 40: The Surprise

Robert was fortunate to have been in Mrs. Winegardner's class at that precise moment in history. Her measured viewpoint was exactly what was needed. Her class participated in her deliberate weighing of ideas in the scales of historical truth. Mrs. Winegardner was a gyroscope, keeping everything in balance.

Even with Mrs. Winegardner's steadying influence, Robert well understood that the country had entered an epoch of upheaval. As Bob Dylan would sing that January, " … the times they are a-changin'."

It would remain to be seen whether the children of Robert's generation could weather the storms that were yet to come. For a little while longer, the kids had to be kids.

When Robert had been in the third grade, the snows had been frequent and deep, but the winter of his fourth-grade year was unusually snowy.

… and cold! Whenever he took the first breath outdoors, Robert felt the linings of his nostrils crinkle as if they might freeze.

Robert had only recently recovered from his annual pre-Christmas flu. The roads were barely passable with drifting snow. The cold air rapidly drew the heat out of the multiple layers of winter clothing that Ida made the boys wear. Even so, she insisted that the family go for a ride.

Robert considered her perseverance remarkable in view of the weather. Robert's father was all too ready to agree. What could have gotten into his parents?

All bundled up, Robert and Charles squeezed into the Chevrolet, which never felt warm for the entire trip to Attica. Robert wondered why Joe chose Attica, which was ten miles away, when he could have selected Oxford, which was only five miles away. A ride was a ride. On such a bitterly cold day, why go farther away when you could stay closer to home?

In Attica, Joe took roads that he did not typically follow. After a time, he pulled into an icy drive beside a farmhouse close to the town.

"Why are we stopping?" Charles asked, taking the words right out of Robert's mouth.

"I reckon you'll find out soon enough," Joe said with that Bing Crosby twinkle in his eye.

Ida and Joe apparently knew where they were going. They circled the house and knocked on a side door, which a gray-haired man answered.

"I'll be right out, folks," he said. "Just need to put on my coat!" In a jiffy, he bounded down the steps of the side door and led the group to a white-painted outbuilding. The glow of red heat lamps lit the frost on the windows.

No sooner had Charles and Robert stepped inside the building than their eyes focused on a litter of black-and-white puppies! The boys ran up to the fenced enclosure that protected the puppies within the structure.

"We've already picked out one," Ida told the boys.

"You mean we get to have one?" Charles asked.

"We're a few days early, but he's going to be one of your Christmas presents," Joe said.

"Which one is ours?" Charles wanted to know.

The owner of the kennel pointed to one of the friendliest puppies. It was standing with its front paws against the wire and was yapping joyously.

"He's yours," the gentleman said. He turned to Joe, "And he's had his shots and is ready to go."

Without the boys' knowledge, Ida had concealed in the trunk of the car a stout cardboard box with a blanket in the bottom. Joe brought it, and the wiggling puppy was placed inside. Ida closed the flaps. She carried the precious cargo as carefully as she could over the ice and snow and set the box in the center of the back seat. For once, Robert didn't mind riding in back because he got to sit next to the box!

On the drive homeward, Charles occasionally lifted the flap a little, so that the boys could see their dog.

"Keep that flap closed," Ida warned. "It's too cold for a puppy to be exposed to the air, even in the car." She glanced worriedly at Joe. "Do you think he'll survive this cold trip?"

"Oh, sure!" Joe exclaimed. "Animals are tough—even puppies!"

“What kind of puppy is it?” Charles asked.

“It’s a male purebred shorthaired fox terrier,” Joe answered.

“A fox terrier,” Charles repeated.

As soon as the car pulled in beside the front gate, Ida lifted the box and practically ran with it into the house. She sat on the davenport before the Norge stove in the kitchen and pulled the puppy from the box. She held it in her arms to keep it warm.

“What should we name him?” Ida asked.

Robert looked at the big black spot on the puppy’s back and immediately said, “Spot!”—as if the name were obvious!

“That’s such a common name,” Charles said.

… but Ida intervened, saying, “Robert named him, and so that’s his name!”

After dinner that night, Ida was holding the puppy when it was time for the boys to go to bed.

When they awoke the next morning, they ran to see Spot. Ida was still holding the puppy. Joe had brought her a pillow and a blanket, and she had catnapped on the davenport with Spot in her arms. She had been reluctant to leave the puppy by himself, she had wanted to keep him warm, and she had decided to begin his doggy form of potty training right away.

Spot was a member of the family from that first night onward. On Christmas morning, he shredded wrapping paper, shaking it from side to side and growling. When the weather would permit, he romped with the boys in the yard. Charles and Robert helped him become accustomed to a harness and a leash—just in case he would succeed in penetrating the fence and would have to be chased down.

As Spot grew older and could spend more time outdoors, he proved that he was equal to the task of escaping and running downtown as fast as his legs could carry him. The boys would race after him on foot while Joe would jump in the car and drive after the puppy. Spot would look back and would seem to smile while he led everyone on such merry chases. Eventually, he would permit the boys to catch him, harness him, and lead him to the car—or Joe would simply hold open the car door and Spot would jump in!

When Spot first met Fuzz, now eight years old, the cat bristled to twice his normal volume while Spot, barking loudly, rocked back with his front legs almost flat on the ground. Fuzz slunk to one side before running off and flying through a gap between the boards of the fence. Spot could have caught him, but the dog didn't even try. He was content to watch the cat make his escape.

He wanted to catch chickens, but the fence was too strong for him to burst through into the chicken yard.

Spot became a frequently photographed dog. Many a snapshot was wasted as he was faster than the shutter and was only a blur in the print that came back from Hinea's Camera Shop in Lafayette. Other photographs captured him napping while draped over the arm of the davenport or posing with his paintbrush tail wagging beside the hollyhocks.

Spot was often the subject of Robert's art, as well. Robert depicted Spot in a series of pastels, one of which Ida framed.

Spot was the greatest Christmas gift of Charles and Robert's childhood.

One day, Joe was scraping the icing from the mixer bowl with a butter knife. In between mouthfuls of chocolate, Joe said, "I thought Spot would be my dog, but you've stolen his affections away from me. I now think that's why you held him all night long the first night we had him."

"Don't keep scraping! You'll scrape clear through the side of the bowl some day! Go ahead and give me the bowl," Ida said, "so that I can wash it while I still have suds in the sink."

Ida smiled as she submerged the bowl. "You may think he's my dog, but *I* think he belongs to Charles and Robert."

"Well, that's a good thing," Joe said, "because he's theirs." Joe pointed toward the davenport. Ida looked, and their sat Charles and Robert with Spot in between. All three were sound asleep.

THE END

Chapter 1: The Discovery

This novel is dedicated to my dear friend Eleanor Yeager Stewart, who helped me realize that the worlds of our childhood were never somewhere else but always right within us. Here is part of my childhood world—almost exactly the way it was!

The tall foxtail of July waved like ornamental grasses above him. Across the road to the northeast stood the school with the grades and the high school all in one building made mostly of metal. Two long, angling sidewalks approached the two sets of doors spaced along the south front of the red-roofed one-story school. The white paint on the exterior walls made dusty spots on the fingertips when it was touched, and the scrubby evergreens along the foundation gave off a pleasant mid-summer scent. Straight to the north, dappled shadows played across the porch of Beulah Jones' house surrounded by old maples. The drive to the parking lot between the school and the gymnasium curved past sawed-off poles spaced to deter traffic from entering the playground. Behind the gym was a fringe of trees bordering Pine Creek. Had he been taller, he might have seen Beulah in the vegetable garden tucked behind her home. She wore a straw hat and pretty gloves made for gardening. Her white hair curled stylishly beneath the hat's broad brim. She seemed perfectly at ease bending over her tomatoes and hunkering down to pull the weeds among her onions.

The sky was the pale blue shade of a hazy summer. Rows of cumulus clouds floated slowly toward the east—so slowly that their motion was almost undetectable. Now and then, the rasping crescendo of a cicada in the nearby catalpa tree caught his attention before the sound trailed away. His mother, Ida, was hoeing industriously in her large garden. Plenty of hoeing was needed in July, for the ground had hardened under the baking sunshine and firmly gripped the roots of the weeds that were shooting upward and outward at an alarming rate each day. Unlike Beulah, his mother wore no hat. The tight curls of her "perm" glistened black while she threw her sun-reddened shoulders into the work of hacking away at the pigweed and the lamb's quarters.

He couldn't see his mother, either, even though she was only thirty feet away. He couldn't see the houses of Pine Village in an arc from the north to the west. His mother's garden on the south side of State Route 26 and the playground on the north side defined the east edge of the town. The cozy homes nestled securely among the shade trees. Robins sailed down from the low branches to pull worms from the lawns, and katydids droned pleasantly in the foliage. Occasionally, pickups with curving fenders and livestock

panels around the beds ambled along the highway. Horses in the narrow meadow behind Jim Eberle's house whinnied happily.

He saw only the nodding brushes of the foxtail all around him and a spot of blue sky and white cloud above. Ida had stamped her sandaled feet in the thick growth of foxtail until she had hollowed out a "playpen" for little Robert, who had just turned two. The weeds were impenetrable there in shade of the lone catalpa on the south edge of the garden, and she knew that Robert could go nowhere. He sat with his feet almost together and his dimpled knees to either side. He indolently played with the long stems that his mother had trod.

Suddenly, the weeds parted and eyes stared at Robert. His blue eyes must have registered just as much surprise as he saw in the blue eyes that looked back at him. To get his mother's attention, Robert shouted. She dropped her hoe and came running as fast as she could between the rows of potatoes. Soon, her face with the glasses almost slipping off her nose peered down from the circle of sky above Robert.

"It's a kitty!" she exclaimed, reaching downward and scooping up the ivory-colored kitten, which mewed, much to Robert's delight. The fur was scarcely any lighter than Robert's hair, for he was a towhead. Ida set down the kitten only long enough to lift Robert in one arm while she reached for the kitten again with her free hand. Taking long strides so that Robert wouldn't get too heavy, Ida rushed toward the house. When she reached the gate that leaned from the corner of the old smokehouse, her steps were easier in the mowed grass on the other side. She swung open the screened door of the breezeway between the smokehouse, now a storage room, and the kitchen. She was glad to set Robert down while she kept a firm hold on the kitten.

"We'll feed him some cream," she said, disappearing into the kitchen and soon reappearing with a saucer in hand. There in the breezeway, she placed the saucer before the wobbly kitten and poured a little cream that she had drawn from the separator just that morning. It was a Marvel Gravity Dilution Cream Separator made by Superior Sheet Metal Works Company of Indianapolis, as a silvery plate on the dark blue three-legged can proclaimed. Even though Robert's feet hurt, as they did whenever he stood, he hardly noticed the ache because he was so entranced with the kitten, which overcame its fear and flicked its little pink tongue into the fresh cream. "After he has drunk all he wants, you can pet him a little," said Ida.

Silently, she and little Robert watched the kitten contentedly lapping the surface of the liquid. It drank almost every drop. Then Ida showed Robert how to pet the creature lightly so as not to hurt it.

“What shall we call him?” Ida asked Robert. Because the kitten was so soft, Robert said, “Fuzz.” Ida laughed. “That’s a good name for him!” she agreed.

At that moment, Robert’s father came to the porch on the opposite side of the kitchen from the breezeway. “Joe, come here,” Ida called to her husband. “Look what Robert found!”

In his dark blue overalls and short-sleeved shirt, bleached almost white, Joe hurried through the kitchen and out to the breezeway. He took off his seed corn cap and ran his hand over his balding head. His eyes twinkled and his face broke into a smile. “Well, where did you find a kitten?” he asked his wife.

“Robert found him,” Ida explained. “I heard Robert yell, and here was the kitten standing by Robert in the weeds. His name is Fuzz. Robert named him.”

“We’re going to keep him, are we?” Joe wanted to know.

“He’s Robert’s kitten,” Ida answered.

Robert looked up at his father’s merry eyes and his mother’s big smile. He could hardly believe his luck in getting to have such a miraculous thing as a soft, warm kitten, which had begun to purr under his careful touch. Robert would remember that day for the rest of his life.

Chapter 2: The Incubator

For hours each day, Robert played with the kitten he had named Fuzz. Robert tantalizingly pulled a long piece of yarn, and Fuzz pounced on it, over and over. Robert sat with his pudgy knees out. His feet hurt too much to stand. Once, he overheard his mother speaking in worried tones to his father about how Robert was becoming too big to carry and that, at two years of age, he should be walking. After all, he was tall enough to see over the edge of the kitchen table! Ida thought Robert would not understand what she was saying. In her diary, she had expressed her fear that Robert was not as bright as his older brother, Charles. "Robert doesn't say much," she wrote. She acknowledged that, at the same age, Charles had been quite talkative.

But Robert *did* comprehend what she was saying, and he knew that, inevitably, he would be taken to Dr. Virgil Scheurich in Oxford, the town five miles to the north of Pine Village. During the consultation, Dr. Scheurich advised Ida and Joe to consult with a doctor in Lafayette who had enjoyed success with youngsters who could not walk.

Within a few days, Robert and his parents were seated in the office of the doctor, who said, "Why, his arches are as flat as pancakes! He needs corrective shoes with arch supports." Right then and there, Joe drove to the B & W Shoe Company on the east side of the square. Proprietor Mr. Marion R. Baker took measurements of Robert's feet and wrote an order for the shoes. Charles likewise was to receive a pair.

Several days later, when Mr. Baker ensured that the boys' shoes fit them, Robert took his first walk in the style of black shoes with arch supports that he would wear until he entered college. (He continued to wear a pair when he performed as a member of the Indiana University Marching Hundred.) As a toddler, Robert found that he could walk without the same degree of pain that he had been feeling. With wide eyes, he looked up at his father, as if to say, "It's a miracle!" Soon thereafter, Robert was walking routinely, and his parents did not have to carry him.

What of Robert's reluctance to speak? Again, there were conversations in undertones between his parents. They decided to take him to a Lafayette clinic specializing in speech defects. He was tested, but so was his brother. Charles' answers were to serve as a comparison. After the testing, the expert sat down with Ida and Joe. He began by saying, "There is nothing wrong with Robert's intelligence. He recognizes more words than his brother knows—probably because Robert has been listening carefully. Robert's reticence originates in his having a palate that is a bit higher than normal; for this reason, he says 'wabbit,' instead of 'rabbit.' You can help him to say

his *r*'s by asking him to say 'er' first, then the rest of the word. 'Er'-abbit, for 'rabbit,' or 'Er'-obert, for 'Robert.' Avoid correcting him for mispronunciation; that makes him afraid to speak."

Ida and Joe took the specialist's advice to heart, and, little by little, Robert began talking without hesitation. At first, his "er" was drawn out, but, gradually, it shortened. Eventually, he was uttering the proper sound of the *r* at the beginning of words such as "reading." He always felt a trifle self-conscious of the *r* sound whenever it fell at the beginning of a word, and that feeling never left him.

All too soon, Robert celebrated his third birthday. That Thursday, Ida invited his grandmother, named Kosie Rhode, and his great aunt, named Margaret Goddard, to the noon meal, called "dinner." Everyone gathered around the five-leg drop-leaf table covered with an oilcloth in the kitchen. There was barely room for the six people to pull up their chairs. The windows and doors were open to permit the faint breezes of late July to waft through the hot room. On the table were platters of steaming roasting ears, fresh yeast rolls. Big bowls were filled with fluffy mashed potatoes and glistening green beans fresh from the garden. In the center was a mound of fried chicken. Sweet iced tea was poured over crackling ice cubes in the glasses with weighted bottoms that were used only for special occasions. Using a wooden mold, Ida had made a big block of butter from the fresh milk of the Holstein cows, and the yellow brick was topped with the shape of a rose. Beside it stood dishes filled with Ida's crabapple jelly and wild grape jelly. The conversation flowed freely, with beloved Great Aunt Margaret telling stories from her childhood so humorous that laughter repeatedly burst forth. She had the gift of making any story amusing. Grandma Rhode listened intently and smiled prettily. Great Aunt Margaret's first husband had been Grandma Rhode's brother, who passed away many years earlier. Margaret's second husband had been the veterinarian in town, and he, too, had gone to his reward. Grandma Rhode and her husband, Seymour Alfred Rhode, had divorced, and he lived in Indianapolis.

Dessert was an angel food cake with pink peppermint icing, which became Robert's favorite cake, requested for his birthday year after year thereafter. Not long before the 25th of July, Robert had learned a stunt of which he was very proud. He would begin on all fours then lift one leg into the air. He would then waddle as quickly as he could on both hands and one foot while keeping the other foot as high as he could. He wanted to show Great Aunt Margaret and Grandma Rhode his newly acquired skill, so, after dinner, his mother moved her rocking chair to one side, thereby opening just enough floor space for Robert to demonstrate his acrobatic talent.

“Look at him go!” Great Aunt Margaret exclaimed. After taking a few rolling and rollicking steps on two hands and a foot, Robert stood up and accepted the gracious praise of his great aunt and grandmother. The company retired to the living room, but, finding it too hot for comfort, everyone gratefully sat down on the front porch, which faced the north and was less steamy than anywhere else. The adults took the metal chairs and the swing that hung from the ceiling, while Robert and Charles sat on the cool concrete floor. Family stories poured forth—tales of long ago that Robert and Charles absorbed and would remember years hence.

After Robert turned four, he began to feel as if everything were even more memorable than before. His life on the farm in Pine Village seemed permanent and secure. One morning, he awakened to the touch of something lightweight and soft brushing his face.

“Peep, peep, peep,” went the something.

Robert slowly opened his eyes. He saw his mother’s smiling face above an indistinct yellow blur. He focused on the blur. Just then, it moved.

“Peep, peep,” the blur said.

Robert focused more closely. The outlines of a duckling taking its first steps on the edge of the covers that Robert had pulled across his chin became clear.

“Careful!” Ida urged, as Robert abruptly slid upward to free his arms. “Don’t squeeze him! Hold him in the palm of your hand.”

Robert’s mother had a large Farm Master incubator, in which she hatched ducklings, goslings, and some of the chicks that Joe raised in his chicken business. Robert’s father purchased the majority of his chicks from Henderson Poultry in Oxford.

“He just hatched,” Ida said, while Robert held the downy yellow duckling in the palms of his hands. Its bright eyes sparkled. Its orange bill curved upward in what appeared to be a smile. “Come see the others,” said Ida, taking the duckling from Robert’s outstretched arms.

Robert followed his mother to the breezeway where the incubator stood. An early summer breeze carried the not unpleasant scent of eggs hatching in the warmth of the brown wooden box on green painted legs. Ida unlatched the door with its slender glass window on one side of the box and let it swing downward on its hinges. She slid the tray forward. Among the eggs on the

tray were several that were pipping: that is, the bills of the ducklings inside were breaking away the shell on one end, so that the ducklings could emerge from the eggs. Robert stared in wonder at the tiny bills pushing at the inner lining where bits of the outer shell had fallen away. One damp duckling was all the way free and was drying while resting from her effort to escape.

Ida soon slid the tray back into position and swung the latch around. She had removed the damp duckling, which she gently set in the same bushel basket where she had placed the happy creature that had awakened Robert. Even though the morning was warm, a red heat lamp hanging by its black cord from a hook in the ceiling was suspended not far above the basket, which was lined with newspapers.

"Peep, peep, peep," said Robert's duckling. "Peep, peep," replied its slightly damp, tired nest mate.

Chapter 3: The Stage

Just then, Robert heard his father whistling as he opened the screen door to the east porch. Robert ran to help Joe put the round white filter in the special galvanized funnel that perfectly fit the opening in the top of the tall milk can. "Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's home from work we go," Joe whistled, while he lifted the white enameled milk bucket with its red rim and poured the morning's fragrant milk into the funnel. Robert heard the merry pinging of the filtered liquid dripping and splashing within the can.

Rubbing his sleepy eyes, Charles stood in the kitchen doorway and yawned.

"Let's sit down to breakfast," Ida said.

Tumblers of fresh milk with a layer of yellow cream having risen to the top were arranged around the table. Halves of pink grapefruits rested in bowls at each place around the table. Mounds of sugar on top of the grapefruits were slowly turning a pale gray as the juice mingled with the granules. While Joe, Robert, and Charles spooned out the pink segments, Ida fried eggs until the edges of the whites were crispy brown. As the toaster popped with a pleasant "ker-ching" sound, she quickly slathered homemade butter on the slices and distributed the hot toast to each person.

"Joe, I'm worried about the cows," Ida said. "If they get out, they'll fall in that hole."

A deep hole ….

"There's nothing to worry about," said Joe. "They're not going to get out. If they *were* going to break through the pasture fence, it wouldn't be there. It'd be where that old panel is by the hog lot."

By this time, Robert was walking well wherever and whenever he wanted. He was talking much more often and fluently. He had practically forgotten the fact that, only two years earlier, his parents had to carry him everywhere while his feet ached. He had indeed forgotten his preliminary reluctance to speak.

As Charles had begun to attend first grade at the school across the road from home, Robert wanted to go to school, but his mother said he couldn't.

"You're only four. You have to wait another year," she said, repeatedly.

Every afternoon, Robert stood in the window in his parents' bedroom and watched for his brother to come home from school. The window in that room commanded the best view of the long sidewalk that ran to the southwest door of the school from a point across the highway from the driveway where Joe's 1950 Chevrolet was parked, and it permitted Robert to see Charles striding past the automobile in the driveway to the gate through their white-board fence into the yard, thence along a narrow sidewalk to the porch east of the kitchen. Robert could hear the new Zenith television airing a telecast from its position atop a green Formica table with silvery tubular legs in the kitchen corner.

The television had not yet entirely replaced the dark brown 1949 Philco Bakelite radio standing amid the strands of white pop beads on Ida's dresser, but the newfangled "TV" had certainly captured the family's attention.

While Robert pulled back the white gauzy curtains to wait for Charles to appear, he wondered what Charles was learning that day and why he, Robert, was not allowed to learn the lessons at the same time. He felt miffed that he had to stay home through the long mornings and the boring afternoons while Charles got to participate in what must surely be the pleasures of schooling.

Then Robert would see Charles walking down the driveway, and envious thoughts were shoved aside by eager anticipation of playing until suppertime. Robert would run around the foot of the bed, through the kitchen, to the porch to greet Charles as he came through the screen door.

On this day, Robert scurried to welcome Charles home from school.

"What do you want to do until it's time for chores?" Robert asked.

"What did you learn at school today?" Ida asked.

Charles smiled while he unzipped his gray jacket and hung it up. "We learned to subtract, but then, I already knew how to do that," he replied to his mother.

Ida, who had taught elementary school, cast a worried glance at Robert. "Maybe I'm teaching you too much at home," she said.

Robert tried to get his brother's attention. "But what do you want to do?" he prompted.

"We'll make a stage out of Tinkertoys," Charles finally answered.

While Charles changed from his school clothes to his everyday clothes, Robert poured the Tinkertoys from their cans onto the rug in the living room.

"We'll need a way to hang curtains on both sides of the stage," Charles said, as he began to place green sticks in plain wooden disks. Robert handed the stage-maker whatever parts he needed as he called for them.

In a short time, a representative proscenium arch and stage stood before them, although they did not yet know the term "proscenium arch." It was rather unstable but functional.

Robert and Charles were familiar with stages because their parents had taken them for lessons at Allen's Dance Studio across from the *Journal and Courier* newspaper office in Lafayette.

Charles brought two plastic toy cows from the shelves where the toys were piled, and he held one in each hand on the stage. To Robert's delight, he made them dance.

"Now we need curtains," Charles said. "Mom," he called, as he strode into the kitchen, "we need curtains for our stage."

Ida was up to her elbows in suds while doing dishes. She turned and smiled at her son while wiping her hands on a towel. She returned to the living room and admired the stage before going to her room to pull material from a basket. She cut the curtains from leftover lightweight cotton and showed Charles how to pleat it while Robert looked on. Next, she used a knitting needle to pull a string through the pleats of both curtains. When she held up the curtains by the string, both boys were enchanted.

Charles carefully tied the string to both sides of the proscenium arch. He and Robert gently pulled the curtains closed and applauded their work. Obeying Charles' instructions, Robert pulled the curtains open while Charles held the dancing cows on the stage. The effect was dramatic! They could hardly wait to show their father when he came in to get them for the evening chores.

Joe was generous in his praise of the stage. He kindly sat through a matinee performance of the dancing bovines. Then he announced that it was time to feed the real cows. Robert thought that maybe, when all human beings were out of sight, the real cows danced.

Chapter 4: The Cow

The blustery weather of November was at hand. The wind moaned beneath leaden skies, and the branches of the twin oaks near the barn tossed and creaked. Robert and Charles helped scatter ground chicken feed from a repurposed coffee can along the tin feeders inside the old chicken house. Next, it was off to the barn to milk the Holstein cows, which had already come in from the pasture on their own without having to be herded. Fuzz watched from the high threshold of the door of the corn crib within the barn while Charles and Robert used other discarded coffee cans to scoop ground feed from a sack and to pour it in the shallow boxes in the stalls. Their father said, "Watch out below," and, shortly thereafter, dropped a hay bale through the rectangular hole cut in the bottom of the mow. He followed down the ladder that was nailed to the wall there and began to scatter last summer's sweet-smelling clover and timothy in the deep hay boxes that ran the length of both sides of the alley down the middle of the barn and that held a shallow feed tray in each stall.

While Joe balanced on a one-legged milking stool and rhythmically squirted the milk into an enameled bucket, Robert and Charles sang songs in the alleyway.

I've been working on the railroad
All the live-long day.
I've been working on the railroad
Just to pass the time away.
Can't you hear the whistle blowing?
Rise up so early in the morn!
Can't you hear the whistle blowing?
Dinah, blow your horn!

Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow your horn?
Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow,
Dinah, won't you blow your horn?

Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah …

… and on went the rollicking song and others like it, until Joe had finished milking the few cows that needed to be milked. He had almost a full bucket, which he had to carry carefully so as not to spill a drop.

Back at the enclosed porch to the east of the house, the boys and their father unsnapped the line of buckles down their boots, kicked them off, and hung their wraps before sitting down to dinner.

Ida had prepared buttery grilled cheese sandwiches and a huge batch of chili. The conversation flowed without cessation while the four of them ate and ate.

After dinner, the television was turned on so that the family could watch *Gunsmoke*. All too soon, it seemed, everyone had to go to bed.

In the middle of the night, Robert slowly awakened to unaccustomed sounds. He rubbed his eyes and tried to comprehend why light was coming down the hallway from the kitchen to the boys' bedroom. He heard his parents' anxious voices.

Charles was already out of bed, so Robert tossed back the warm covers. Following his brother's lead, Robert pulled his jeans over his flannel pajamas and put a flannel shirt over the flannel pajama top. In the cool darkness, he accidentally put pajama buttons through the shirt button holes and had to start over. By the time he had found his shoes and socks, he was well behind Charles.

Robert was frightened. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

"I suppose I ought to wake up Glen Bisel," Joe was saying to Ida when the boys came running into the kitchen.

"What's wrong?" Charles asked.

The boys' mother replied, "The cows got out, and one of them fell in the hole."

Robert suddenly became aware of a distant bellowing. The mournful sound seemed blown by the gusts of wind. The hole was almost as deep as a cow was tall and had been dug to fix a tile problem. It could not be backfilled until Joe could be assured that the difficulties had been resolved.

Joe put on his denim coat and his cap with the ear flaps. Soon, he was driving his GMC pickup to the Sinclair gasoline station to awaken his friend Glen.

Before long, the GMC returned. Behind it came Glen's wrecker. Joe parked the pickup so that its headlights illuminated the scene. To Robert, the

occurrence felt like a weird dream: beams from headlamps casting fantastic shadows, groaning wind, black-and-white cow mooing in distress, Glen carefully lowering his truck's heavy chain with a canvas sling attached, struggling to position the sling under the belly of the terrified cow, and slowly lifting the cow from the hole that had swallowed it.

As the sling came away, the cow scrambled to trot away. Joe herded it and the other cows through the broken fence before setting a metal fence post and using pliers to splice new wire around the breaks.

"Would you come in for a cup of coffee?" Ida asked Glen.

"No, thank you," Glen smiled in the light from his wrecker. "I think I'll go back to bed." It was—after all—the middle of the night.

While Robert, Charles, and their mother trudged back to the house, Joe drove the pickup around to the driveway.

"I guess Dad should have listened to you," Robert said.

"Don't find fault with your father," Robert's mother warned. "Once there's a problem, it's time to fix the problem. It's never the time to say, 'I told you so.'"

Charles and Robert went back to bed while Ida and Joe had a cup of Nescafé instant coffee to settle their jangled nerves. It had been an eventful night. Robert lay awake for some time, listening to the roar of the wind. He thought about how his father was an excellent farmer, and Robert wondered how his father could sometimes make slapdash fence repairs that anyone could see would not hold back cows for long. Robert guessed that his father had much to do and could not give every task the same degree of attention. Thankfully, his father had fixed the fence properly on this night! Then Robert thought about how his father worked hard throughout each day, including hours before sunrise and after sunset, and Robert remembered what his mother had said about not finding fault. He felt embarrassed that he had been critical of his father's fence-mending. With a sense of guilt, he tossed and turned until he finally fell asleep. Inspired by his mother's frequent readings of Winnie the Pooh stories, Robert dreamed that a Horrible Heffalump had fallen in the hole.

Chapter 5: The Holidays

After Charles returned from school one day, he and Robert were playing Blob when their mother announced that they were going to the Masonic Lodge to see Santa Claus that evening. Blob was a game that the boys had invented. In previews at the movie theater in the nearby town of Oxford, enough of the plot of the movie by the same name had been revealed to suggest the game, without necessitating a viewing of the horror film—which their mother would never have permitted, anyway.

One of the brothers was designated "the Blob." He covered himself with an old blanket and huddled on the floor while the other brother hid. Then the Blob searched for the hidden brother. While he searched, he periodically knelt and rolled around on the floor while keeping the blanket over him. When he found the brother, his object was to cast the blanket over him while making horrifying snarling sounds. If he failed to get the blanket to fall over his brother, he had to crouch beneath the blanket and make muttering noises until his brother had a chance to hide again. The search repeated. If he was lucky enough to drop the blanket over his brother, the brother became the Blob, and the proverbial tables were turned.

With a visit to Santa Claus in the offing, the brothers soon found themselves having to dress in their Sunday best. Because temperatures were chilly, they had to don long underwear. Robert had trouble folding the bottom of the leg of the underwear and stuffing it inside his sock. After he had pulled on his woolen trousers, he had to put on his corrective shoes and tie their laces. His mother had repeatedly demonstrated how to form a loop and to hold it in one hand while doubling the other end through the loop so as to form a second loop. Robert could almost achieve that much, but, when he tried to pull the two loops tight, the end of the one he had doubled invariably slipped through the first loop. He was left with one loop, a loose knot, and a long strand of lace that he would trip over, if he were to leave things as they were.

On his own, Robert had learned to form one loop in one hand and a second loop in his other hand and to tie the two loops together. He assumed (incorrectly) that speed was important, so he practiced forming the loops as rapidly as possible. That way, he could tell his mother, "See? My way is just as fast." Ida wanted him to tie his shoes the way she had shown him, and she made him try and try again. Finally, Robert's father said, "Ida, he gets his shoes tied just as nicely his way as our way. Why not let him have his way?" Reluctantly, she consented. (Robert would tie his shoes his way for the rest of his life!)

On this occasion, Robert tied his shoes successfully. Next, his brother and he had to zip up their parkas, put on their stocking caps, slip the hoods of their parkas over the stocking caps, wrap their mufflers around their faces, and put on their gloves. Charles and their mother climbed into the back seat of the 1950 Chevrolet, and Robert and their father took the front seat. Robert always got "car sick" in the back, so he had to ride in the front. His mother thought it was a reasonable concession to put Robert in front.

The boys were perspiring under their parkas, even after the short drive to the Masonic Lodge. The two-story building was on the south side of an alley that led westward from State Route 55 not far from the intersection of State Route 26. Some thirty years earlier, the first floor had served as Ray Ogborn's garage and automotive repair shop. The boys' grandmother Kosie had a brother, Charles Albert Cobb, nicknamed Charley or Cobbie, who died in 1931. His widow, Margaret Wagner, was the beloved family member that the boys and their parents called "Great Aunt Margaret." She eventually had married the veterinarian, Doc Goddard, but he, too, died before the boys were born. Residents of the town continued to refer to her as Mrs. Margaret Goddard. Ray Ogborn had purchased the automotive business, but not the building, from Charley, so Great Aunt Margaret transferred ownership of the first floor to her sister Louise and Louise's husband, Pete Thurman.

To reach the Masonic rooms on the second floor, the boys and their parents trudged down the dark alley. Robert kept turning his head from side to side so that he could see beyond the fake fur that surrounded the hood. Half dead vines shuddered in the cold breeze along the brick wall. Traces of snow highlighted the weeds along the foundation of the building across from the Masonic Lodge. The family passed through a doorway at the very back of the old building and started up the dimly illuminated stairs. Robert tripped more than once. Several of the steps creaked.

They entered the main hall. A huge potbelly stove stood in the center of the room. So much wood had been fed to it that it was glowing red in places and was radiating a tropical heat that melted the frost on the tall windows. Chairs were pushed back around the walls. The boys were thankful to remove their coats, but, even then, they were too hot. They waited patiently for Santa Claus. Well, they knew that this was not the *real* Santa. He came without being seen on Christmas Eve and left presents for the boys in their very own home. This Santa was a well-meaning member of the lodge. Soon, they heard him ho-ho-hoing. To the adults' applause, he burst upon the gathering. He was wearing a flimsy Santa costume with a rather poor excuse for a cotton beard, but he was most certainly jolly! He handed small gifts and candy to all the children. The leader of the lodge said a few inspiring words about Christmas, and the event was over. The adults stood

conversing with one another far longer than Robert's patience could hold out, but he knew better than to tug on his mother's sleeve. Eventually, Ida smiled down at Charles and Robert and asked, "Are you boys ready to go home?" They nodded politely.

On went the parkas, the stocking caps, the mufflers, and the gloves. Once the family was back inside the Chevrolet, Ida suggested that they see the Christmas lights. Joe drove around Pine Village, which took relatively little time, as the town was quite small. Next, he headed north on State Route 55 all the way to Oxford. The stores that year were carrying GE "ice bulbs," which were pale blue Christmas lights that were shaped like globes and covered with "ice crystals," as they were called, and Elvis' recording of "Blue Christmas" had been playing on radio stations for two years. Even so, the family was surprised when Joe drove past Doc Scheurich's ranch house in the woods just to the south of Oxford. All blue lights outlined the home! The blue was such a departure from the multi-colored bulbs that the boys and their parents were impressed.

Once the family was home, Joe played 45 RPM records on the Victrola, which resembled a piece of furniture and which had an honored place in the living room. Twin doors with ornamental ovals in the gleaming finish swung open to reveal a radio and record player, as well as a fabric-covered speaker, on the right and shelves for storing 45 records on the left. Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" was a favorite!

Christmas Eve fell on Wednesday, and the family went to the Methodist Church for the evening service. Joe's father, Seymour, had come from Indianapolis to spend the holiday with Joe, Ida, and the boys. Grandpa Rhode gave everyone a ride in his black 1951 Hudson Commodore 8 Sedan. The family disembarked from the comfortable car and took the stairs to the sanctuary. For the remainder of his life, Robert would retain a detailed memory of how holy the church appeared that night. Candles stood in the windowsills, and their flames reflected from the undulations in the stained glass. Real evergreen boughs surrounded them, and the scent of pine filled the room. People spoke softly as they took their seats along the pews. Mrs. Brutus, the organist, launched into "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Everyone stood and began to sing. Robert long remembered the twinkle in his father's eyes and the sparkling light reflected in the glistening eyes of his mother, whom the song touched deeply.

Chapter 6: Christmas Morning

Robert was squirming to get out of bed long before anyone else was awake on Christmas Day that year. His wish to see what Santa had brought bordered on anxiety. When he heard his mother gathering dishes in the kitchen, he threw back the heavy covers and raced to the living room to be sure that Santa had left presents. Robert's eyes grew round as saucers when he confirmed that Santa had paid a visit during the mysterious night of nights. Next, he sprinted to the kitchen.

"Shhh!" his mother said with her forefinger to her lips. "You'll wake Grandpa!" The way the rooms of the house were arranged, Robert had run through his parents' bedroom to get to the kitchen. He had dashed past Grandpa Rhode, who looked so much like Joe that Robert had assumed it was his father asleep in the bed.

"Santa came!" Robert exclaimed in a spluttering whisper.

"He did?" Ida responded, while she prepared fresh side meat for frying. Even though Robert preferred side meat to bacon, he could not be bothered to notice that side meat was on the morning's menu. He was too excited to find out what Santa had brought him.

"Go back and put on your slippers!" his mother said quietly but emphatically. "You'll catch your death of cold."

Robert was prone to head colds with ear aches, so he took his mother's command with extra seriousness. He tiptoed back to the room that he shared with Charles and put on his slippers before tiptoeing to the kitchen and resuming his conversation.

"I wonder what Santa brought me!" Robert said to his mother.

"Shouldn't you be wondering what Santa brought *everyone*," Ida prompted.

Robert understood that he was being selfish. "I *do* wonder what Santa brought everyone," he acknowledged. "When can we open the presents?"

"You'll have to wait 'til after breakfast," his mother said.

Robert was uncertain he could delay so long as that. For a moment, his face registered his dismay. Then he took joy in watching his mother creating biscuits from a mound of flour. Soon, the fragrances of baking and frying filled the kitchen. When Robert heard his grandfather roll over, he

considered whether he might have awakened the family's guest, but, when Grandpa Rhode suddenly snored loudly, Robert felt less guilty.

Robert wondered how Charles could be so calm as to remain in bed when there were presents to unwrap and fun to experience. Almost as if he were talking to himself, Robert shook his head. All at once, he realized that his father was sleeping on the sofa that squeezed between the heating stove and the kitchen table. Say, rather, *trying* to sleep amid the commotion! Joe sat up, yawned, and gradually pulled on his trademark blue overalls—right over his pajamas. Carrying his socks and other garments, he stepped inside the bathroom and closed the door.

The house was one of the first in town to have a bathroom with indoor plumbing. By now, the fixtures were antiquated, and the room was impossibly small. A person almost had to suck in the breath to shut the door. Robert heard his father bumping the walls of the bathroom while he dressed. Eventually, Joe struggled to open the door and slipped past it. He was wearing his customary farming clothes and was carrying his pajamas neatly folded over one arm.

"Robert, go get dressed," his mother said. "Get Charles up and tell him to get dressed, too. We're about ready to eat."

"Had I better wake Grandpa?" Joe asked Ida.

"We're going to eat soon, so I suppose you might," Ida replied.

Robert walked quickly past his sleeping grandfather, returned to his room, and shook his brother. "Get up!" he ordered.

Robert wriggled out of his pajamas and into his flannel shirt and jeans. He was so excited that he had extra trouble tying his shoes.

By the time Robert came back to the kitchen, his parents had moved the sofa perilously close to the heating stove so that everyone could sit around the kitchen table. Wearing a white shirt, a green tie, and gray slacks, Grandpa Rhode took the chair Ida offered him. With a yawn and a big smile, Charles sat down next. Soon, everyone was ready for Joe to say grace.

"As we gather together this Christmas Day," Joe began, "we remember the Christ child, the greatest gift of all. Lord, we ask thy blessing on this food and the hands that prepared it. We promise to keep the spirit of Christmas alive in our hearts throughout the year."

Then there came platters of steaming biscuits, glistening side meat, and scrambled eggs. At each place setting was a half an orange—a real treat at Christmas! The biscuits were slathered in homemade butter and piled high with Ida's jellies and jams. It was a feast fit for a king—with the promise of more only a few hours later!

Robert waited politely until the adults were finished eating breakfast—so slowly, it seemed to him!

"Well, should we open our presents?" Joe asked, finally!

Robert jumped down from his chair and practically ran into the living room. His parents and Grandpa Rhode came, eventually!

Robert sat near the Christmas tree, which scented the room with the lovely fragrance of pine. He took mental snapshots of the bubble lights and the ice bulbs. The ornaments were often doubled: one that was designated his and one that was designated his brother's. The largest globes hung from the bottom branches. A large one with bands of magenta was Charles' ornament, and a similar one with stripes of blue was Robert's. At the top of the tree were tiny ornaments that had been on Joe's first trees in the late teens and early 1920s. There were tiny bells and clusters of grapes made of glass. The oldest, Joe always said, was a delicate ornament with slender white and blue and cranberry-colored beads strung in a diamond shape.

Joe began to hand out presents. Suddenly, the room filled the sounds of rustling paper and exclamations of surprise. Robert and Charles' grandfather and father received new ties and monogrammed handkerchiefs. The boys' mother modeled her new robe and pocketbook. Robert and Charles had a variety of toys, but the two that really caught their eye were relatively large, heavy police cars to which flexible tubes could be attached. Their hands held battery packs that were at the ends of the tubes. By pushing buttons on the battery packs, they could make the cars roll along the carpet. A light in the center of the roof of each car flashed red, and a siren whirred. The police cars were Grandpa Rhode's gift to the boys. He always gave the best presents!

No one could have been happier that Christmas!

Later that morning, Grandma Rhode and Great Aunt Margaret brought gifts and received theirs in turn before joining the family for "dinner," as the noon meal was called. And what a magnificent dinner it was! The table was laden with soft yeast rolls made of flour that had been rising all night, ham, peas, carrots, corn, and every good thing that Ida had canned from her garden!

Despite having eaten a huge breakfast, the family dug into the dinner with a will. Grandma Rhode and Grandpa Rhode spoke politely to one another but said relatively little directly to each other. They had been divorced for many years. Robert had not been told that fact, but he might not have understood it anyway. All he knew was that Grandma Rhode lived in a small house in town while Grandpa Rhode lived eighty miles away in Indianapolis. Later, Robert learned that his mother had told his father to make amends with his father so that the boys' grandfather could take an active role in their lives. From Robert's point of view, everything was exactly as it should be!

With his capacity for memorization, Robert took a long look around the table. It was as if he were a camera recording every detail in photographs that he would cherish many years from now. He wanted to be able to recall the happy faces, the laughter, the sunlight glinting from the glassware, the pattern of the china, the way the freshly ironed tablecloth fell in pleats across his knees.

In the window near Ida's rocking chair hung a crinkly red cellophane wreath with a silver socket resembling a candle and a single orange bulb glowing. In his thoughts and feelings, Robert compared the wreath with the circle of his family around the dinner table and the orange light with the joy they shared. He wished he could express his analogy to everyone, but he lacked the words. He remained content to notice the correspondence on such an important day.

Chapter 7: The Winter

When snow deep enough to build snowmen finally arrived, Ida chose a Saturday afternoon to take the boys outside to help her roll the snow and sculpt a snow*woman* with arms akimbo and head tilted. She added an apron. She tied a scarf over the head and under the chin. She stuck walnuts for blouse buttons from the waist to the neck. More walnuts made eyes and a mouth. From across the street, Beulah Jones called, "Is that you, Ida?"

"No," the boys' mother said. "I'd have a dust rag in one hand and a mop in the other." Beulah laughed.

"A woman's work is never done," Beulah commented.

Having returned to the kitchen to get warm, Ida and her sons laid their brown gloves in a row along the top of the heating stove to dry. While dollops of snow slid sizzling from the gloves, their fingers tingled.

Later that same day, Robert and Charles went back outside and shuffled along, making trails in the snow so that they could play Fox and Goose. One trail ended in a circular area that they tramped down and that they called the goose's nest. Robert was the goose. He waited in the nest until Charles was at the point farthest away. Robert then came out of the nest and ran along one of the trails. As the fox, Charles chose interconnecting trails to try to catch Robert, who tried to outsmart him and get back to the nest before he could be tagged. Eventually, though, Robert *was* tagged, and became the fox for the next round.

On January days with the thermometer dipping below zero, Joe used a butter knife to work raggedy strips of torn flannel cloth into the cracks around the doors so as to try to conserve heat from the stoves.

There were two Norge dark-brown stoves that burned heating oil. One was in the living room, and the other was in the kitchen. Both stood on squares of metal with rolled edges that were made for the purpose. The stove in the living room had a mica window on the side. Whenever Robert had a nightmare and wanted to be with his parents, he had to go from the boys' bedroom through the corner of the living room to get to his parents' bedroom, but Robert was afraid to pass by the stove window. In the dark, the wicked flames scared him. Sometimes, he knelt shivering for what seemed an hour before he could summon the courage to run past the window. He would shake his father's elbow until Joe would awaken enough to reach over, pick Robert up, and put him between him and Robert's mother. Sandwiched between his parents, Robert felt safe.

On wintry weekends, if the sun were shining on powdery snow, Jim Eberle would harness his horses to a sleigh and go riding around the school playground. Robert watched in fascination from across State Route 26. With bells jingling, the pair of light brown horses appeared to enjoy the exercise, and the riders in the sleigh obviously had a great time. Their laughter drifted across the road on the breezes that made the dust of snow twinkle in the sunshine. It was quite a picture: the red sleigh sliding along, the tan horses with a lively step, the feathery patches of snow sailing down from the pine boughs, and the bluest of blue shadows here and there.

Among Joe's winter chores was keeping what he called the "horse tank" free of ice long enough for the cows to drink water. From the middle of the large galvanized metal tank protruded a rusty iron stove. With a poker, Joe would slide the lid open, toss lumps of coal inside, and stir up the fire before shoving the lid back in place. During the coldest stretches, even the water nearest the stove would glaze over. Joe used a hatchet to chop through the thinnest ice. The cows would nudge him out of their way so they could slurp the water with frozen chunks bobbing on the surface. The Holsteins had to stretch their necks to reach the watery circle surrounding the stove; the thick ice of the tank's perimeter jutted up in places like a miniature version of Pine Creek.

Sometimes, to Robert's delight, Charles would consent to pull the sled that their father had been given as a Christmas gift in 1926. Robert would ride while Charles tugged on the clothes line tied to the handle bar. Going on thirty-three years of age, the sled still pulled fairly easily when the snow was sufficiently slick. The other sled, which had been given to the boys' grandmother in 1890 and had been built by her uncle, the blacksmith Tommy Eleazer Fenton, resisted being pulled. While there were hills for sledding near Pine Creek, Ida prohibited the boys from participating in such activity that she felt was too dangerous. When he was a boy, Joe hit his chin on the sled while dashing down a slope named "Loop the Loop." Snow kept the cut from bleeding, but, when Joe returned home, his mother had to put gauze and a bandage on it. The boys' father had a scar from that cut, and that was enough for the boys' mother to warn them away from leaving the fenced yard to visit the hills along the creek.

Once, on a drive toward Rainsville, Ida pointed and yelled, "Stop the car!" Joe brought the Chevrolet to a halt. "It's a deer!" she whispered in tones of awe. Robert and Charles looked in the direction of their mother's hand. Standing on a bank of snow at the edge of a wood was a doe. If her ears had not twitched, she could have been described as a statue. There were no laws protecting deer. For many years, they had been hunted. Seeing one

was a rare event! The family waited as long as the deer waited. The scene resembled a magnificent stage. The backdrop was the purple and tan and blue forest with snow lining the branches. In front, there arose the drift sparkling with millions of multicolored spangles. With grace and dignity, the deer watched with her soft, alert eyes. Eventually, she turned and slipped silently among the trees. "Wow!" Charles muttered.

On another occasion that winter, the boys were riding with their father in his GMC pickup. It was rated a half-ton model, but it had a ¾-ton bed. It was painted a pale silvery blue. It boasted a 1940s underdash heater that was an aftermarket installation by Glen Bisel, who had found it in a wrecked Oldsmobile car. The heater was shaped like a shield and had two doors with round metal doorknobs. When a door was opened—or even when the doors were closed—the heat poured out. Robert always sat between Joe and Charles on the bench seat. The heater was close to Robert's knees. He compulsively drew his legs back into the seat as far from the heater as he could get.

Joe had driven north onto the true prairie that was even flatter than the land in the vicinity of Pine Village. He crossed a rail line that stretched perfectly straight in both directions and pulled onto the gravel in front of the tall elevator at Templeton.

"I thought you should see the steam engine while you still can," Joe said to his sons, as they tumbled from the pickup.

In a building attached to one side of the towering elevator was a whispering steam engine with quietly revolving flywheel. Robert watched as the connecting rod transformed linear motion into circular motion. What seemed to Robert a massive mound of corncobs awaited use as fuel, along with coal as iridescent as ravens' wings. Now and then a drip sizzled somewhere.

"It won't be long before we switch over to a gasoline motor," the engineer said to Joe.

"It won't be half as much fun," Joe said, smiling.

The engineer grinned and shook his head.

Joe had ensured that Charles and Robert would remember steam power. When Robert was only two, Joe had booked his family on one of the last trips of the steam locomotive named *James Whitcomb Riley* (after the famous Hoosier poet) from Lafayette to Indianapolis, where everyone had lunch with Joe's father, Seymour, whom the boys always called "Grandpa

Rhode.” Further, Joe was always pleased when the family car had to stop at the railroad tracks on the west side of West Lafayette to let a steam locomotive pull its train through the intersection. The occurrence happened often enough for Robert to remember the shiny black boilers and the distinctive sounds as the last of the steam locomotives chuffed through the crossing. Soon, diesels replaced the steam engines. Now Joe had gone the proverbial extra mile to have Robert and Charles witness a steam-powered elevator.

As the days grew gradually longer, Old Man Winter loosened his grip on the countryside. Icicles crashed to the ground, spots of black earth showed through melting snow, and everywhere were sounds of trickling water. Joe began to talk of plowing and disking. Robert thought how he would soon turn the ripe old age of five!

Chapter 8: The Barn

On a summer day, Robert had gone with his father to crack corn for the cows. Joe stepped up into the crib that was just inside the main door to the barn. He knelt down and took an ear of corn from the mound that slanted downward from the back of the crib to the front. Holding it just right, he banged it down on the edge of an old wooden box, and the ear snapped in two. While his father was busy breaking the ears, Robert pet Fuzz. "Lieutenant Fuzz," Joe's nickname for the cat that was based on the Beetle Bailey cartoon strip, was not the only cat on the place. A sleek black female cat had taken up residence. Robert called her "Blackie." She was crouched on a hay bale at the far end of the alley between the stalls.

All of a sudden, Fuzz leapt up and grabbed both sides of Robert's leg with his claws. Robert winced from the pain. Then Fuzz rolled and pitched, scratching Robert's other leg. Robert wanted to run but, each time he took a step, Fuzz grabbed Robert's leading leg, leaving long red marks. Robert began to scream. Joe came to the door of the crib to see what could be the matter. Taking in the situation in a glance, Joe lightly kicked Fuzz to one side and picked Robert up. When they were outside the barn and away from the cat, Joe walked Robert to the house.

Ida took one look and exclaimed, "What happened to him?"

While Joe told about Fuzz, Ida guided Robert toward the bathroom. She helped him take off his shoes, shirt, and shorts while she ran water in the tub. Once Robert was seated in the warm water, she poured rubbing alcohol in the bath.

"Ow! Oh, ow!" Robert yelled, thrashing around. His legs were on fire.

"Sit still!" his mother commanded.

After a time, the agony of the cuts began to subside. Ida gently bathed Robert's legs, which were crisscrossed with bloody red lines.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Robert asked, "Why did Fuzz do that?"

Robert felt betrayed by the cat that he considered his best friend.

"Well," Ida began, "Fuzz is in love with Blackie, and he was afraid that you would steal her from him."

Somehow, that explanation made sense to Robert.

"You'll have to keep your distance for a while," Ida advised.

Whenever Robert saw Fuzz, he stayed far back. Lieutenant Fuzz never attacked again, but Robert remained wary of him. Robert never could trust Fuzz after the scratching incident.

One day, Robert was preparing to scatter ground feed in the cows' boxes along the north side of the alleyway. As he climbed onto a hay bale to reach the central box, he thought he heard tiny sounds coming from beneath the wooden box, which rested on the edges of the manger. Hay was packed fairly solidly beneath the box, but Robert detected a small tunnel. As the cows had not yet entered the barn on that side, he jumped down, ran to the latched doorway, unhooked the door, swung it open on its hinges, and stepped up into the stalls. He hurried around the back of the barrier wall to enter the central stall. Now he could easily reach beneath the box. Sticking his hand in the tunnel, he felt soft, warm bodies hiding. Gently, he pulled one out. It was a black kitten with its eyes shut. It mewed loudly. From somewhere in the barn, Blackie answered. Robert knew enough about cats to know that Blackie would come running, so he put the kitten back. Sure enough! Blackie jumped up on the edge of the manger and let herself down to the hay before squeezing under the box.

Robert ran to the house and told his mother about the kittens. She followed Robert back to the barn to see how many there were. Ida pulled out four. There were two black kittens and two cream-colored kittens.

"Blackie will find a new place to hide them now," Ida said to Robert.

"Why?"

"Because she doesn't want us to know where they are until she thinks they're able to fend for themselves."

His mother was right. The next day, when Robert stuck his hand under the box, he felt only an empty hollow where the kittens had been.

By the time he had celebrated his fifth birthday, Robert was scurrying up the ladder to the haymow right behind his brother. There, they piled the new fifty-pound hay bales to make forts: one on the north and one on the south of the mow. The old bales, which weighed a hundred pounds each, were too heavy to move, but a different baler had made all the difference. Each fort had secret passageways, or tunnels, through which the boys could crawl, getting plenty of chaff down their necks while they were at it. Both forts had

parapets high up near the ceiling. As the barn was small, the parapets were not widely separated. The ammunition that the boys "fired" at one another consisted of the occasional walnut along with corn cobs having the kernels shelled off, leaving only the pink, lightweight cob. When either brother showed his head above the parapet, the other rapidly threw cobs his way. It was great fun!

The mow had the fragrance of dried flowers and spices. In those days before homes had air conditioning, the mow was hot in the summer, but the boys took no notice of the heat. For hours each day, they designed and built their forts.

Down below, barn swallows sailed in and out of the open doors on the southeast and northeast corners of the barn to gain access to their nests in the stalls. The males had touches of bright orange above and below their bills. There markings made it appear as though they were wearing a pale orange cowboy handkerchief tied around their necks. Their undersides were almost white. The females were similar, but the orange was not as brilliant. Both had backs and tails that seemed black in the shadows of the barn but shimmered blue in the sunlight. The tails were gracefully long and opened like scissors. The birds' nests adhered to the sides of the ceiling beams. They appeared to be made with tiny mud bricks. Along a few of the beams were rows of nests. Every summer, Robert could hardly wait to see the open beaks of the baby birds awaiting food from their parents, aunts, and uncles. The adult swallows circled low above the meadows to the east and south as they caught insects on the wing. They glided effortlessly, now and then pumping their wings a few times so as to dart after bugs.

One of Robert's favorite activities was to help his father to bring in the cows whenever the Holsteins remained in the meadow at milking time. Often, they came to the barn of their own volition, but, when they did not, Joe and the boys took the path the cows had made: a dusty line curving through the timothy and clover. Cabbage, alfalfa, and sulphur butterflies flitted and bobbed—especially near any puddles left from a recent shower. Monarch butterflies and black swallowtails sailed on updrafts. The pasture smelled like rich chamomile tea. Often, the dozen or so Holsteins were to be found standing in the shade of an old elm tree. The cows would be chewing their cud as they turned their deep blue eyes toward Joe and the boys. Now and then, their tails swung to discourage flies.

At Joe's urging, the cows launched forward like swaying ships. Black-and-white spotted flanks and rumps tilted to one side then the other. The cows were so tame that they required almost no persuasion to come to the barn to be milked at feeding time.

While farm life could certainly be hectic—with work that never ceased—it also danced to slower rhythms such as the strolling of cows on summer paths.

Chapter 9: The Threshing Reunion

On Labor Day Weekend each year, Joe drove the family the hundred miles to Pontiac, Illinois, to attend the Central States Threshermen's Reunion. The event featured around fifty steam engines, half a dozen OilPulls, and several big prairie tractors. Every day, a steam engine was belted to a thresher for a demonstration of steam-powered threshing. As the threshing ring to which Joe had belonged had only recently disintegrated, Robert was familiar with threshing machines. His parents had photographed him standing beside the Nichols & Shepard Red River Special the last year that Joe had threshed with his friend Don Akers. Then Joe had bought his first combine, an Allis–Chalmers, which replaced the threshing machine. Had the family not attended the Pontiac show each year, Robert might not have been acquainted with the steam engines that originally supplied the power to the threshers that separated the wheat and other small grain from the stalks on which the grain had grown. Joe's mother's brother, Uncle Charley, who had died in 1931, had taught Joe how to run farm steam engines, which Charley had run professionally. Joe loved to see the steam engines at work again—if only for a weekend in Pontiac. Robert and Charles looked forward to the annual trip to the threshing reunion.

The family scurried around before dawn to get ready to go. Ida packed a picnic lunch of tomato soup, which was kept warm in thermos bottles. She wrapped a big block of cheddar cheese with a sharp knife to make cheese sandwiches. Other bottles held milk and coffee. A loaf of bread and a freshly baked apple pie were carefully deposited in the basket. Finally, a red blanket was folded and placed on top of the basket in the trunk of the car. Cookies, as well as other snacks, were arranged beside Ida where she could monitor them.

When Robert was five, the family was scurrying around before dawn on a Sunday. Usually, the family made the trek to Pontiac on a Saturday, but, in that year, Joe had chosen Sunday so that he would not miss an important Masonic meeting on Saturday. The week before, Joe had ensured a safe trip by having Glen Bisel put plenty of air in the spare tire. Glen also made sure that the coolant passages throughout the engine were not blocked. Even though Joe would not be sitting anywhere in stopped traffic—and even though his trip was not all that long—it paid to be sure that the radiator would not overheat. Many drivers carried a jug of water to refill a radiator whose heat (and, therefore, pressure) increased beyond the pounds of resistance from the cap. Cars with clouds of steam streaming out from a raised hood were common sights along roadways. The drivers of such vehicles were forced to wait until the car cooled down before refilling the radiator.

In those days, people dressed up to attend any fair. Accordingly, Joe wore a pair of pleated slacks, a starched and ironed short-sleeved shirt having a pattern of light green fish, and a wide-brimmed straw fedora hat. Ida wore a full skirt with a green and blue floral print and a light blue blouse. The boys put on their best tan shorts and new shirts with horizontal red-white-and-blue stripes. When everyone was ready to go, the sun had not yet awakened.

"Are all the animals fed?" Ida asked Joe.

"Yes," he replied. "I gave the cows enough feed to hold them until we get home."

Joe and Ida had not bothered to lock the doors to the house. In those times, no one in the town had a reason to lock a door.

"You did shut off the light in the kitchen, didn't you?" Ida asked Joe.

"Yes," he answered, "and I made sure the light was off in the boys' room."

The car pulled out of the driveway and headed west.

For the first many miles, Robert was too excited to nap, but, after a while, he felt drowsy. His head nodded, and he leaned into a corner of the front seat. He remembered hearing Ida asking Joe "Are you sure we will make it there?" and Joe replying "We have a good spare."

The next thing Robert knew, the car was parked along a road in the middle of Illinois and Joe was using a jack to lift the flat tire off the ground. The sun had arisen. Charles and Ida were standing behind Joe and watching. After Joe had changed the tire and everyone was back in the car, Ida said, "I hope the spare will get us there—and back. There won't be any place open to work on a tire on Sunday."

"Glen looked at the spare and said its patches were good," Joe reassured Ida.

On went the car. Just outside Chatsworth, an all-too-familiar bumping sound began. Joe looked grim.

"What will we do now?" Ida asked.

"Somebody in Chatsworth will be able to fix a tire," Joe said.

The car limped into town. Joe stopped at a closed service station. A couple walking to a nearby church noticed the flat.

"Bill can get you back on the road," the man said to Joe. "He'll be at church."

The couple went into the church, and, soon enough, another man came out and introduced himself as Bill.

He opened the door to the service station. Before long, he had patched both tires. When Joe took out his wallet to pay Bill, Bill waved his hand and said, "You folks just go and have a good time at the reunion."

Joe pulled into the parking area of the Pontiac 4-H fair at 11:00, giving an hour to look around before the noon whistle. Ida said she wanted to see the crafts on display at the ladies' building while Joe and the boys walked along the line of engines. Joe and Ida agreed to meet at the car for the picnic lunch at 12:00.

Robert, Charles, and Joe strode beneath the tall trees that shaded the park. As they neared the engines, smoke scented with cylinder oil drifted among the sun-dappled leaves. Robert was a little ahead of Joe and Charles. He wandered behind an engine and watched as a woman put a shovelful of coal in the firebox. She was wearing a plaid blouse and jeans. An engineer's cap was perched jauntily on the back of her head. She turned around, saw Robert dawdling there, and asked him, "Do you like steam engines?"

Robert was delighted that such a great person as a steam engineer would take notice of him. "Y-yes," he stammered.

Joe and Charles stepped up.

"Does he belong to you?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Joe replied. "His name is Robert, and this is Charles. I'm Joe Rhode."

"I'm Doris Lindenmier, and this"—she pointed a gloved hand toward the engineer on the platform of the engine next to hers—"is my husband, Lester." Pulling the glove from his right hand, Lester reached down from the platform of his engine to shake hands with Joe.

"I'm pleased to meet you both," Joe said. "We've been coming to Pontiac every year for several years, and I've always enjoyed seeing your engines. My uncle was the engineer for a Reeves outfit in the teens and twenties."

Doris nodded smartly. “They’re good engines!” she said.

Both Doris and Lester ran Reeves engines, which were parked beside one another under the trees. Lazy billows of smoke rose from their stylishly shaped smokestacks. An RN, Doris had the additional responsibility of serving as the reunion’s nurse.

Robert felt a growing fascination for farm steam engines—a fascination that would last throughout his life.

Doris, Lester, and Joe talked briefly about Joe’s uncle’s experiences on various threshing runs, and then Joe said, “I suppose we should be moseying on.”

Doris and Lester waved as Joe, Charles, and Robert walked farther down the line of steam engines. They crossed an open area, and Robert was amazed at how quietly a steam engine could come up behind them so that Joe had to take the boys’ hands and move to one side, allowing the engine to pass. “Chuff, chuff, chuff,” the engine sounded, as if it were breathing.

Just before the noon whistle, Joe brought the boys back to the car. Ida had already spread the red blanket on the soft grass in the shade of the tree beside the Chevrolet. Soon, everyone was eating lunch.

Robert did not care for tomato soup, but, on such a special occasion as getting to go to the steam engine show, he could tolerate it without complaint. He liked the cheese sandwich, and he especially liked the apple pie!

The boys laughed and covered their ears with their hands when the noon whistle took place. From the area where the steam engines were parked, the madcap whistles shrieked and tooted in deafening abandon.

Later that afternoon, Joe and the boys watched as steam threshing was demonstrated. “Rumble, rumble,” the thresher sounded, as its numerous pulleys and belts came to life. Men with pitchforks stood atop two wagons piled high with bundles of wheat. Alternating from one man to the other, their forks lifted sheaves and dropped them on the feeder with its conveyor belt that brought the bundles to the chomping knives and the spinning cylinder teeth, which knocked the grain loose. Eventually, the grain made its way through a loading tube into a wagon while the chaff and straw blew from a big tube in back onto a straw stack. The threshing machine received its power from a big belt that crossed over the flywheel of the steam engine

and over the thresher's main pulley. The two machines were separated some sixty feet. The crowd of onlookers was so large that Joe had to thread his way to the front so that Robert and Charles could get a clear view of the thresher in action. The nicely dressed members of the crowd smiled and politely made way for the boys to work their way forward.

When the threshing crew stopped so that the throng could go to the reviewing stands for the daily parade, Ida joined Joe and the boys, and they sat on the lowest bleacher. One of Robert's favorite engines was a Keck–Gonnerman owned by Joe Weishaupt; it had Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse painted on the bunkers! Ida had spent her earliest years within a short walk of the Keck–Gonnerman steam engine factory, so she loved the Kecks exhibited in Pontiac. While Joe often stayed for the whole parade, on this occasion he said that the family might want to get an early start on the return trip to Indiana. When almost the last of the steam engines had rumbled past, Joe, Ida, Charles, and Robert left the stands and started toward the parking area.

Joe must have had a premonition. On the way home, the thumping noise returned. Another flat! As before, Joe slowly changed the tire. Eventually, the Chevrolet pulled into the driveway and parked. There was still enough light to make it easy to milk the cows. The next day, Joe bought two new tires.

Chapter 10: The Carnival

"Don't forget that you're taking the boys to the Carnival this evening," Ida reminded Joe, as he prepared to spend the afternoon picking corn.

Robert had not forgotten! He could hardly wait to go!

Sponsored by the Lions Club, the Carnival was held each year in the gymnasium of the Pine Village School. It featured games and prizes, and everyone attended from miles around.

After supper that evening, the boys put on their jackets, and Joe guided them across the state highway that ran in front of their farm. The occasion was so important that school officials had placed the Coca-Cola life-size lithographed tin policeman signs at the entrances to the school. The smiling policeman in his blue uniform and white gloves held a yellow shield bearing the words **SLOW** SCHOOL ZONE. Joe, Charles, and Robert followed the driveway around the back, or north, side of the school and through the parking lot filled with the rounded forms of older cars and the streamlined forms of newer cars, some sporting fins over the taillights. Adults and kids of high school age milled about the doorways of the gym.

Construction of the gym had begun in 1940 and was completed in 1943 as a Works Progress Administration project. When the brick school building burned on Sunday the 21st of November in 1943, the gym had been spared.

While Robert had been inside bigger buildings, such as the Edward C. Elliott Hall of Music on the campus of nearby Purdue University—which was an enormous auditorium—he considered the gymnasium to be big enough. High above his head, dark brown rafters formed aesthetically pleasing diamond patterns across the square-based elongated-dome ceiling. The bleachers rose on three sides from concrete tiers that met in parapets sporting iron railings above ramps that sloped down to the double doorways on the southeast and southwest corners. In Robert's imagination, the parapets, with their additional seating, arched above drawbridges, as if the gym were a medieval castle.

Outside, the autumn air was crisp, but, inside, the crowd made the atmosphere warm. Joe bought tickets for the boys to redeem at the booths. The throng of families and children was elbow to elbow within the gym, and the noise made it almost impossible to hear what anyone was saying. Robert loved the commotion! Booths manned by volunteers stood everywhere on the giant rumpled canvas that covered and protected the varnished basketball floor.

Robert's favorite game was to go fishing. Two members of the Lions Club stood behind a metal tank made for livestock. Joe handed them a ticket, and one of the men offered Robert a dowel rod for a fishing pole. At one end of the rod was a shiny steel hook. The object was to reach into the water and hook a wooden fish that was about three quarters of an inch thick and six inches long. Each fish had a screw eye at its nose. Logic would dictate that it would be easy to snag the hook through one of the screw eyes, but, for a boy of only five years, hooking a fish was tricky. Robert held the pole almost straight up and down while he leaned against the edge of the tank. The fish, which were painted various colors, bobbed up and down. With all the patience that he could muster, Robert slowly twisted the rod until the hook seemed to line up under the screw eye just beneath the surface of the rippling water. Then he gently pulled the rod upward. Happy day! He had snagged a fish! The volunteers quickly grabbed it, so that no water would drip on the canvas.

His prize was a thin bamboo cane painted dark green. Everywhere, boys and girls who had won games were twirling similar canes. A few splintered remains of canes were underfoot.

Charles likewise won a cane.

Other booths invited contestants to toss balls at wooden targets about the same size as the fish but cut in the shape of milk bottles and painted white. At the milk bottle game, Robert and Charles won *crickets*, which were brightly colored tin noisemakers equipped with a rectangular piece of metal acting as a spring. By squeezing the spring to bring its end closer to the oval colored top, the owner could make a loud click–click sound. From everywhere could be heard the "click–click, click–click, click–click" of hundreds of crickets, adding to the overall din.

All evening, Joe smiled, as he met neighbor after neighbor for friendly conversation. How he could hear what the other person was saying was miraculous, given the cacophony in the gym. He was a little hard of hearing anyway. He always said that, as a child, he had developed an infection of the inner ear and that, when the doctor had lanced the eardrum to release the pressure of the infection, the result was a loss of some of Joe's hearing in that ear. Somehow or other, he managed to understand what his friends were talking about while the crickets sang all around him and the volunteers at the booths sang out to patrons.

With a ringing in their ears, Robert and Charles went with their father across the parking lot to the one-story school that had replaced the two-story brick

one that Joe had attended. Joe treated the boys to slices of pie in the cafeteria. The fluorescent lights seemed especially bright after threading their way between parked cars in the night.

Robert was sorry for the fun to have come to an end. Joe led Robert and Charles back across the street, and Ida told them it was time for them to change into their pajamas and go to bed.

"Did you win anything?" she asked the boys.

"Oh, yes!" they replied. They demonstrated how loud their crickets were. Ida knew that she would have to put up with the noisemakers for a few days, until their novelty wore off and the clicking mercifully stopped.

As Robert pulled the heavy blankets up to his chin, he turned toward the window near the foot of his bed. The panes looked out on the school driveway. The headlights of cars came to a stop before turning right or left onto State Route 26. For several minutes, Robert watched the light that swelled in the bedroom from each automobile that arrived at the intersection and that dimmed again as the car made its turn. He had had about as much fun as he could stand, so he eventually fell asleep.

Chapter 11: The Diastema

The 1950 Chevrolet was black. In front of the regular windows on the driver's side and passenger's side were triangular windows (wing vents) that could be turned in such a way as to force a blast of wind against the face. The breeze felt so good on a hot day! The windshield was in two halves joined by a thin metal connector moulding. When Robert was sitting in front (which was most of the time because he suffered from motion sickness when seated in the back), his eyes would focus first on the metal moulding then on the distant view then on the connector again, until he was well on his way toward nausea!

Joe and Ida drove differently. Joe was far-sighted and enjoyed perusing fellow farmers' fields to his left. While doing so, he slowly veered the car to the right until the right wheels were off the road and onto the berm. Miraculously, he never lost control of the vehicle but gradually brought it back onto the pavement, only to repeat the experiment immediately afterward. Ida, meanwhile, played with the throttle. Her small foot, usually wearing a sandal in summer, wore out the gas pedal by depressing it and lifting up right away, depressing it and lifting up right away. The car lurched forward and hesitated, lurched forward and hesitated in response. Robert was anxious when Joe drove, nauseous when Ida drove.

When most of the corn had been picked, Robert was riding with Ida at the wheel. She was driving out to visit with Robert's great uncle Marshall and his great aunt Anna. Down went the gas pedal, up went the gas pedal, down went the gas pedal, up went the gas pedal.

Robert had developed the bad habit of standing in the front seat. On this occasion, he swayed backwards and forwards in time with the motion of the throttle.

"Sit down," Ida told Robert.

He disobeyed.

"Come over here where I can put my arm around you," Ida said.

He disobeyed.

Frustrated, Ida said, "Alright! See if I care if you lose your balance."

Robert was near the passenger door and was having a hard time keeping his balance while the car briefly gained speed and momentarily slowed, gained

and slowed, gained and slowed. He felt slightly dizzy. He smelled his mother's new permanent. (Ida had to have curls in her straight hair!) The Chevrolet was lurching and hesitating while heading east along the gravel road that ran in front of the McFatridge farm. The car dipped down the slight hill leading to the intersection with the gravel road that ran south past the Anderson farm.

Tall corn in the fence corner blocked the view to the right. Ida obeyed the stop sign, but the corn was planted so close to the road that she could not see around it. The tan leaves rustled in the cool breezes of autumn. Ida slowly entered the intersection only to discover that a road grader was bearing down on the intersection from the right. The corn had hidden the big machine! Ida slammed on the brakes, and the road grader just missed the front bumper!

Robert flew headfirst into the hard metal dashboard. He ricocheted back toward the seat and slid onto the floor. He was watching stars sparkling and spangling before his eyes.

Ida put the car in parking gear and muttered, "Why don't you ever stand close enough so I can grab you?"

Ida did not yell at Robert. She felt terrible about what had happened.

She gently lifted Robert back into the seat. Using her hankie, she stanched the blood flowing from the gums where Robert had knocked out his two front upper teeth. Robert was beginning to see his surroundings again, and the pain was starting. He knew he had been wrong to stand on the seat. Now he sat where he was supposed to sit, and he whimpered.

Ida turned the car around and went home to ask Joe what should be done. Joe and Ida took Robert to Dr. Sullivan, their dentist in Attica, a town ten miles to the south. Dr. Sullivan explained that there was nothing to do but to wait for Robert's permanent teeth to come in.

At first, Robert's pronunciation changed to a lisp, but, instead of retreating into his early fear of talking, he pushed through the obstacle and learned to place his tongue a little farther back so that he could say the consonants that otherwise would become hisses. By degrees, he was learning to be more confident and assertive.

A little less than a year after the incident—and just in time for Robert to enter the first grade without embarrassment—Robert's permanent teeth came in. Owing to the injury, they were separated by a gap, or *diastema*.

Whether Robert liked it or not, his diastema became a trademark. Terry–Thomas was a popular British comic film actor in American movies. Robert always enjoyed his performances because, like Robert, he had a pronounced diastema.

Robert's teeth were somewhat yellow from the antibiotics he had been given for his frequent earaches. Worried about his diastema and his yellow teeth, his parents took him to see an orthodontist in Lafayette, Indiana. Taking children to an orthodontist was a very modern thing to do. The orthodontist had offices in a very modern building not far from Smitty's, a large independent grocery store near Purdue University. The very modern orthodontist said that he would apply hydrogen peroxide and heat to whiten Robert's teeth. When the very modern orthodontist told Joe and Ida that correcting Robert's diastema would cost $2,000, they asked Robert if he really wanted to have his incisors properly aligned through wearing very modern braces. Robert hated dentists, so the answer was easy. With vast relief, Robert said *no* to the very modern era. Also relieved, Joe and Ida did not have to pay $2,000 for a closed diastema and whitened teeth.

Ever after that, whenever Robert brushed his teeth, he recalled the hard old dashboard of that 1950 Chevrolet.

Chapter 12: The Cottage Cheese

Robert enjoyed watching his mother make cottage cheese. She began pouring boiling water over a large stainless steel bowl to discourage bacteria. Carefully holding the lip of the bowl with a towel, she shook the water droplets out so that no water remained in the bowl. Next, she let milk fresh from the cow sit for a day or two in the bowl covered with a muslin cloth. During the first few hours, Ida removed the cloth and used a spoon to skim off the thick yellow cream that rose to the top of the milk. She skimmed the cream at least twice and saved it in the refrigerator for other recipes. After the first day, she again lifted the muslin and gently shook the bowl. If the milk looked lumpy, it was ready. If not, it waited another day. The hotter the weather, the faster the milk turned lumpy.

Ida warmed the milk on the stove on low heat for ten minutes.

Ida next set a colander into a deep bowl. She lined the inside of the colander with a muslin cloth, and she poured the warm milk slowly into the colander. She covered the colander and bowl with yet another muslin cloth, and let the milk sit for two hours or so. She then used a spatula to encourage the curd to come loose from the cloth-lined colander. The whey in the bowl was saved and mixed in very small amounts with the dry ground feed that was given to the chickens. (Too much of a dairy product was deemed harmful to poultry, while a little was considered beneficial.) Meanwhile, Ida salted the curd and poured some cream on it. The cottage cheese was ready to eat!

… and that was the sad moment for Robert.

He hated the taste and the smell of the homemade cottage cheese.

"Eat it!" Ida told him. "It's good for you."

She said the same thing at every meal when she served cottage cheese—and that was at least once a day each time she made a batch. (She made batches all too often!)

"Eat it! It's good for you," Robert heard over and over.

He could hardly get the stuff past his nose! The curd was hard, resembling little gummy rice pellets. The dollop of it on his plate held its shape, but the creamy puddle that slowly spread out from the bottom of the mound invaded the other, good food nearby, tainting otherwise desirable items with the bitterness of the cheese. Robert would eagerly lift a delectable piece of

fried chicken only to discover that the bitter pool had seeped underneath and had soaked into what should have been the chicken's crispy surface.

In Ida's kitchen, children were to eat everything that she put on their plates. Robert was frankly astonished that Charles could eat the cottage cheese day after day, week after week. How was it possible?

"Eat it! It's good for you."

The creamed corn looked succulent, but oh no! The nasty cottage cheese puddle had sneaked into the creaminess of the corn, ruining the taste.

His mother did not allow Robert to get up from the table until he had eaten every morsel on the plate that she had served him. He would make his way through the chicken and the creamed corn—even though they had been contaminated by the seeping cheese. Ultimately, only the sinking mound of cottage cheese remained on Robert's plate. What could he do with it?

He tried to hand part of it to Lady, the family's dog whose name was inspired by Walt Disney.

"I saw that," Ida said. "Don't you give that cottage cheese to the dog! Eat it! It's good for you."

He put one granule of the cottage cheese on the tip of his spoon, held his breath, and deposited it in his mouth. He swallowed it without chewing it. Even so, the taste was disgusting. He sat for several minutes and stared at the dollop sitting on his plate. It seemed to grow larger.

"There are hungry people in the world that would love to have that cottage cheese," Ida said. "You can't get up from the table until you've eaten it."

Everyone else had left the table long before. Everyone else had cleaned his plate. Robert sat by himself, spoon in his motionless hand, while his mother did the dishes. Every now and then, she turned back from the sink with the suds clinging to her wrists and falling onto her apron. "Hurry up and eat that!" she said.

Robert would scoop another hard, bitter, nasty granule onto his spoon, push it past his nose, clamp down on it with his jaw, and swallow it as fast as he could. Ugh!

He could not repeat the process until several minutes had elapsed.

“Do I have to eat it?” Robert pleaded.

“Yes,” Ida said. “You have to eat everything on your plate. Now hurry up!”

Robert consumed one more icky granule—an especially tiny one. He often spent an hour in this way, incrementally working his way through the mound of cottage cheese. During the hour, Robert wondered what Charles was doing. Whatever it was, it probably was fascinating. How did he manage to eat his cottage cheese so fast? Robert had ample time to ponder such questions.

Ida never relented. She was determined to teach Robert not to waste food and to appreciate the healthy food that had been prepared for him.

Robert never developed a taste for homemade cottage cheese. He always took a long time to choke down the unpalatable substance. He hoped his mother would want his plate for washing and would excuse him from the table, but Ida had an iron will. If she ever were tempted to let him forgo the cottage cheese, she certainly did not show it. She could outwait him.

No, Robert never came to like homemade cottage cheese. His revulsion toward the sour concoction carried over to store-bought cottage cheese. Although he could choke it down, store-bought cottage cheese—the taste of which was very different (far blander)—was similar enough to the homemade astringent variety that he disliked commercial cottage cheese, too.

… and so, for years—for as long as Joe had dairy cows—Robert sat at the kitchen table and stared at a mound of homemade cottage cheese. Staring at the stinking, wretched curds became one of his principal memories of growing up.

Chapter 13: Christmas Returns

As another Christmas drew near, Ida and Joe took the boys to Purdue University's Christmas show matinee performance. After the long walk from the parking lot to the doors of the Edward C. Elliott Hall of Music, the family passed through a series of foyers. The boys and their parents waited in the innermost foyer until the doors would open. As Ida had seen to it that they were early, they were near the door on their right. More and more people entered the foyer and stood expectantly, speaking in low tones that steadily grew in volume as the crowd grew in numbers. The women's perfumes were strong all about. Here and there, the scent of a cigarette came wafting through the fragrances.

Suddenly, black-suited ushers opened the many doors across the foyer's inner wall, and Ida made a mad dash for the aisle beneath the balcony along the right of the ground floor. She had her boys' hands in hers, and they were practically tripping as she sprinted down the carpeted ramp. Ida wanted seats as close to the front as possible. Other mothers were springing forward ahead of Ida, so she accepted seats in the center of the second row. Joe was farther back, as he did not want to appear too eager. Eventually, he caught up with the rest of his family.

The auditorium was huge. Robert turned to look at the balconies. He stared at the big organ on the platform at the left. He watched the well-dressed crowd quickly filling all the seats.

At the appointed hour, a hush fell over the throng. Almost simultaneously, the lights dimmed. The velvet curtains rustled back from the immensely tall stage, and a winter scene unfolded. Fluffy snowflakes were falling. A full-sized house decorated for Christmas stood at the right, and an ever-so-tall Christmas tree covered in lights was catching snowflakes in the front yard. Snow-covered fields stretched back exactly as they would in the real outdoors, and horses pulled a sleigh into view at the left. Carolers singing "Jingle Bells" jumped down from the sleigh. Their trained Glee Club voices reached into all the corners of the gigantic hall.

Robert was in awe of the set, and it was only the first of many to move in and out, across, and up and down the massive stage. He watched in wonder at the baton of Al G. Wright, the orchestra conductor and widely recognized director of bands at Purdue University. It caught the yellow light from the brass lamps on the musicians' stands and flashed to the right and left of Al's tuxedo shoulders. Gladys Wright, the conductor's spouse, ably played bells and other percussion instruments.

When the renowned Al Stewart strode onto the stage, applause erupted immediately. He was the beloved choral conductor whose genius for entertainment lay at the heart of the annual Christmas extravaganza. He brought on soloists and various groupings of singers for number after number as the sets established mood after mood commensurate with Al's vision of the scope of Christmas and its meaning.

The whole event was grand on a grand scale. Just when people in the surrounding counties thought that Purdue could not possibly exceed the glories of a Christmas show twelve months later, the next year would unveil a magnificent entertainment even more spectacular than the one before.

At the end of the performance, a spotlight illuminated the organist, a scrim became nearly transparent. What appeared to be a cathedral with stained glass windows lit by candles could be seen through the misty scrim. The organist played a solemn introduction, and voices singing "O Come, All Ye Faithful" arose behind the audience.

Robert swung around to look back. Down all the aisles came robed singers carrying candles. At the same time, the words to the hymn appeared in ghostly translucence on the scrim. A voice from somewhere invited the audience to sing. More and more voices joined those of the robed choir members, who just kept coming. There were so many singers! As they arrived at the stage, they took steps to the tops of multi-tiered risers in front of the cathedral windows. In dignified procession, the singers slowly filled the risers. Verse after verse lit the scrim before them. By the end of the song, hundreds of robed singers filled the stage in towering rows from one side to the other. The effect was breathtaking.

The crowd sang several traditional Christmas melodies along with the choir and the thundering organ. At the end came "Silent Night." When the last chord trailed away, the robed singers blew out their candles, the stage was dark except for the central stained glass window with its depiction of the nativity, and the announcer's voice said, "All of us at Purdue University wish you and your loved ones a very merry Christmas."

The lights in the auditorium came up, and the crowd burst into a standing ovation.

Filled with Christmas joy, Joe, Ida, Charles, and Robert drove the twenty miles to their farm on the edge of Pine Village. All the way home, they talked about the sets, the singers, the clever dialog, Al G. Wright, Al Stewart, and the majestic ending.

Twilight was falling, and Joe plugged in the wreaths hanging in the windows and the lighted Santa Claus head that hung in the window at the foot of Robert's bed. Then Joe plugged in the Christmas tree. The decorations seemed all the brighter and more beautiful because the Purdue show had put everyone in the perfect holiday spirit.

Chapter 14: The Birthday

During the year before Robert began his formal schooling, his father bought a used car that was almost new. It was a 1957 two-door Chevrolet Bel Air Hardtop Coupe. Robert was glad to see the 1950 Chevrolet go. After all, it had knocked out his two front baby teeth! The new car sported fins and futuristic hood ornaments reminiscent of rockets. The roof was white and the body was pink. The abundance of chrome made Robert blink on a sunny day! What a splendid show the automobile made at the drive-in movies and drive-in restaurants!

Toward evening on Robert's sixth birthday, the family drove to Boswell, a nearby town, for so-called "ice cream cones" at the Tastee Treet. The late July temperature of 84 degrees Fahrenheit felt a little on the hot side, and frozen custard was the perfect remedy. Robert was permitted to have the largest size. The challenge was twofold: to consume the swirled goodness without getting a so-called "ice cream headache" and to do so before the bottom of the cone became so soggy as to leak and drip down Robert's shirt.

While Joe, Ida, Charles, and Robert were enjoying their cones, the topic of hair color came up in conversation. Everyone had dark hair, except Robert, who was blond. "I suppose Robert got his blond hair from you," Ida said to Joe.

"Dad has dark hair," Robert said, not really meaning to sound so contradictory.

"He does," Ida agreed, "but it was blond when he was your age. It turned dark later."

Actually, Joe was bald on top: a fact that embarrassed him. He liked wearing caps, which the seed corn companies provided, because they covered the bald area. The fringe of dark hair around the edges of the cap made him appear to have no baldness.

"I was somewhat younger than Robert when my hair grew darker," Joe said.

Meditatively, Robert licked the frozen custard. He hoped his hair would remain blond.

At that moment, a man of high school age strode into the filling station that stood next door to the Tastee Treet. The young fellow's hair was light blond.

"My hair is never going to turn black," Robert asserted. "It is going to be that color." He pointed at the blond high schooler through the open window of the car.

Even though she was laughing, Ida said, "It's not polite to point."

Robert's prediction was accurate. Years later, he often pondered if, on that day at the Tastee Treet, he had willed himself to retain his blond hair.

Back home that evening, Robert asked his mother if he could practice reading *The Little Engine That Could*. She readily consented. Until September, there would be no new programs on the TV, and, in those years, Ida would not let the Zenith dictate what the family spent its time doing. There were only three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), and by 1960, they had become chock full of Westerns, which were becoming just alike. The Zenith with its remote-controlled antenna on a scaffold up the side of the house pulled in two stations well and a third station reasonably well, but, as there was nothing that Ida wanted to see at that hour on the clear stations (that is, those free of static), she sat down beside Robert on the davenport in the kitchen. Together, they held the book that was so red that the blue locomotive on its cover almost blended into the red. It was the version retold by Watty Piper and published by Platt & Munk.

Robert sounded out the words again: "THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD … Chug, chug, chug. Puff, puff, puff. Ding-dong, ding-dong. The little train rumbled over the tracks. She was a happy little train for she had such a jolly load to carry. Her cars were filled full of good things for boys and girls." Robert felt that he might be a little too old for the story, but he was learning to read and had to begin somewhere. As he had witnessed steam engines in action, he was ready to read about the confident little engine in the story.

Ida was a little worried that Robert might be starting to read too soon, but she remembered what the speech impediment specialist had said about Robert's wide vocabulary. She did not want to hold Robert back. He would just be ahead in reading, and that was how it would be.

Robert read each word slowly for a page but was stuck on "giraffes" for a long time. "Yellow" threw him, as did "bobbed." When he bogged down on "aeroplanes," Ida said that he had read enough for one day, and Robert wanted to stop anyway. He glanced out the open window at the White Pekin ducks in the lot beyond the wire fence that ran along the south side of the yard. They were dabbling their bills in their water tub and preening themselves.

“It’s time to help your father feed those ducks and do the chores,” Ida said.

Having birthdays did not give one a pass to avoid chores on the farm! Besides, Joe was sure to be in a pleasant mood. He always was! He probably would join in a game of cowboys.

While the chores of feeding the chickens, feeding the ducks, feeding the geese, feeding the turkeys, making sure the pigs had enough feed in their feeders, feeding the Herefords (the beef cattle), and feeding and milking the Holsteins were underway, Robert and Charles could hide briefly and, when Joe passed nearby, leap out of hiding and “fire” an imaginary gun by tossing a corn cob shorn of its kernels. Joe would duck or sidestep the “bullet” that the cob represented. He carried a similar cob in a pocket of his overalls, and he would spin and “fire” his cob at whichever “cowboy” had “shot” at him. Whenever they were hit by one of Joe’s cobs, Charles or Robert would groan, “Oh, he got me,” hold hands over the spot where the cob had so lightly struck, and slowly fall to the ground. Then it was back to work.

The summer days seemed delightfully long. At the conclusion of his birthday, Robert felt he was living in an ideal world with the ideal car, the ideal ice cream cone, the ideal books, the ideal family, and the ideal hair color!

Chapter 15: The School

At long last the day arrived! Robert was to enter the first grade at Pine Village School. He had spent the past two years wanting to go to school, and now he was finally going.

Ida had rehearsed with him everything that he was to do. Charles accompanied Robert to the pair of doors where he was to wait with the other children until the doors were opened from the inside. With his heart beating fast, Robert stood expectantly. He said hello to a boy who was also coming to school for the first time. His name was Mitch. He had a happy personality. Then Robert saw Susan, whom he already knew from church. She, too, would be in his class.

Suddenly, the doors were flung open, and the children crowded into the hallway. A teacher guided Mitch, Susan, and Robert to Mrs. Yvonne Hail's room. It was at the far west end of the hallway. Mrs. Hail was friendly, but her demeanor made it clear that she expected compliance. Her eyes sparkled behind her pointy-framed glasses. Her red lipstick matched her red blouse worn beneath a stylish gray-checked short jacket and narrow skirt. When the room became too warm, she hung the jacket over her chair at the desk that stood in the front.

Mrs. Hail directed each student to an assigned seat. She wanted the class in alphabetical order by last name because she had so many students. Robert's class was one of the largest in the school's history! It was a huge elementary class by any standard and would have been split in a larger school. In the opening weeks, the students became acquainted with one another and bonded closely, forming many lifelong friendships. Robert liked everyone, and he liked learning. Mrs. Hail kept everything lively but orderly. Privately, she may have confessed that she had no idea how she would manage such a big class, but, in her room, day by day, she led her charges through the lessons with businesslike precision. In Mrs. Hail's world, everything was shipshape!

Attending school measured up to Robert's intense hopes.

Every noon, he walked briskly home to have dinner. Several of the children who did not ride a bus but who walked to school also walked home for dinner. Most farmers still preferred to call the noon meal "dinner," rather than "lunch." The former word implied a large meal, and farmers needed the energy from such large meals to continue their hard physical work throughout the afternoon. So Robert went home for dinner. Before long, though, he was calling the meal "lunch" because his classmates whose

parents bought them tickets to eat in the cafeteria were on what was called the "school lunch" program. In the change from the word "dinner" to the word "lunch" could be detected a shift in farm life.

Robert had to hurry back so as not to be late for the resumption of lessons in the afternoon. Typically, he had finished eating in time to join his classmates for the recess after lunch.

Mrs. Hail had been Yvonne Lafferty when she attended the same school. She had married John Hail, who ran the elevator. When Robert was in elementary school, married women customarily were called by their husbands' names. Accordingly, Mrs. Yvonne Hail should have been called "Mrs. John Hail," but her first name was unusual in the town—so much so that people could not resist using her name. When she was called something besides "Mrs. Hail," she was "Mrs. Yvonne Hail"!

Ida had given Robert strict orders that he was not to brag that he could read. She had told him that he was to take the reading lessons seriously, even if they repeated what he already knew. Had she only known it, Robert's mother had no reason for concern. Robert had no desire to boast, and he enjoyed starting at the beginning and learning exactly how to read. For him, learning was the greatest joy.

One day at recess, Robert's friend Dennis said there had been a fight on the playground between two older boys in his older brother's class. One of the boys had sustained a bloody nose, and he had wiped his hand on a telephone post beside the road. Dennis, Robert, and a few of their friends took time out from the games to see the post. Sure enough, a red handprint was visible on the dark brown wood of the post. The sight turned Robert's stomach. He wondered how anyone could willingly inflict such pain on a fellow human being. To him, a bloody handprint was a symbol of a terrible injury.

Robert's ancestors were Quakers. They left South Carolina to come to Ohio in 1806, when Ohio had been a state for only three years. They migrated to Indiana in 1826 and 1827. Later, many would migrate onward to Iowa, but Robert's ancestors stayed in Indiana. His great grandfather was raised in the Methodist Church, which had succeeded in attracting several of the Quakers. Even though there had been three generations of Methodists before Robert, several Quaker beliefs lay just beneath the surface of his upbringing. One was a determined belief in the efficacy of peace. The red handprint stood for whatever was the opposite of that peacefulness, and it was abhorrent to Robert.

Robert looked forward to the recess in the afternoon. Quite often, Mitch's mother, who ran the cafeteria, brought trays of lettuce sandwiches to the playground for the children. The crisp lettuce, the fresh butter, and the soft white bread were delightful.

The girls' restroom was adjacent to the classroom, but the boys' restroom was all the way to the east end of the school. Those were the high school rooms. Again and again, Mrs. Hail told the boys to walk quietly in a line to the restroom, but, every now and then, a few of the boys would be boisterous—especially when cranking brown paper towels from the dispensers. The boys' noise brought Mr. Taylor from his classroom. He always appeared in the doorway of the restroom as a towering giant with a yardstick in his hand. He slapped the wall of the restroom with the stick. The sound got the attention of all the boys. Mr. Taylor then patiently explained that they needed to remain quiet so that the high school students could learn their lessons. Robert was frightened of Mr. Taylor, but, years later, when Robert was in high school, he came to know and like him.

Mr. Horn was the principal. He demanded discipline, and his presence called for respect. One of his mannerisms was to slip his glasses from his nose, hold them in one hand, and wear a dignified expression on his face while gesturing with the hand that held the glasses. If he should step into the hallway from his office, an instantaneous hush would fall on any child otherwise inclined to cause a ruckus. He was known to paddle the worst offenders. Years later, Robert began to realize that Mr. Horn was a gracious gentleman who simply brooked no nonsense from students in his school.

Susan's mother, Mrs. Brutus, was the secretary, and she, too, commanded respect. Robert knew her from church, where Mrs. Brutus played the organ, and he recognized that she had a kind heart.

In only a short while, Robert had settled into a pattern of schooling that would last for twelve years. He never regretted a moment of that time.

Chapter 16: The Junior Fire Marshals

Robert and Charles thoroughly enjoyed the Hartford Junior Fire Marshal Program. Joe might have been less enthusiastic, but he didn't let it show. A member of the Pine Village Volunteer Fire Department visited Robert's first grade class and Charles' third grade class to explain that all the students must take a thick booklet to their parents, who would help them examine their homes for fire safety violations. When the booklets were returned, the students would be declared Junior Fire Marshals.

Robert and Charles skipped happily homeward that evening. Joe, who had already been through the process twice for Charles, was not necessarily looking forward to a third occasion. He hurriedly milked the cows and fed the chickens and other poultry while Ida set the supper table early. Fortunately, she did not serve homemade cottage cheese! Robert was ready to take part in the examination of the house as soon as the supper dishes were cleared.

"Alright, boys," Joe said, "we'll start with the bathroom." The bathroom had been added on to the old farmhouse, and it jutted out beyond the main wall as a tiny room all to itself. When the snowflakes were flying, the space was always cold. Joe had the boys look at the light fixtures and the one outlet, which passed their inspection.

"Isn't that a violation of fire safety?" Charles asked, pointing to a heat lamp that Joe kept hanging above the pipes of the water heater during the winter.

"Well," Joe said, "nothing can go wrong with it, and we use it only when it's cold enough to freeze the pipes. Let's assume the inspection is trying to find longstanding problems."

"So which box do I check?" Charles asked.

"Check that the bathroom passes our inspection," Joe said, removing a pen from the pocket of his overalls so that he could check the box in Robert's booklet while Charles checked the box in his booklet.

The three moved on to the corner of the kitchen where a toaster, an electric wall clock, and a coffee percolator were plugged in.

"Could the circuit be overloaded?" Charles asked.

"Well, we've never blown a fuse, and the circuit is designed to carry enough watts to permit what you see there."

“Do I check that the kitchen has a safety violation or not?” Charles asked.

“Check that there is no violation,” Joe said. Again, he took the pen from his pocket so that he could do the same in Robert’s booklet.

Robert had already concluded that you had to be older before you could understand the intricacies of electricity. He had no idea what a circuit or a watt was. Robert wondered if he would comprehend the safety of electricity by the time he was in third grade.

The group moved on to the heating stoves with their pipes that went up and over to the chimneys. Where the pipes entered the chimneys, doughnut-shaped metal plates that were painted in ornamental designs surrounded the pipes.

“If we weren’t already using the stoves,” Joe said, “we’d take off those rings and pull the pipes out to see if there might be any obstructions in the chimney or where the pipes make that angle, but the pipes are already hot. Besides, you’ve seen me clean them every spring at the end of the heating season.”

“So there’s no violation, right?” Charles asked.

“That’s right,” Joe said. Again, he marked Robert’s booklet.

Eventually, the three of them had reached the attic. Robert was a little afraid. One night three years earlier, the fire siren had sounded from the station in town. Joe and the boys had run to the GMC pickup to try to catch up with the firetruck. It was heading west on State Route 26 toward Rainsville. Where the road made a bend, a house was afire. Others who had chased the firetruck parked their vehicles and stood watching and conversing in groups. Although no one was hurt in the fire, the event was frightening. Robert vividly remembered the smoke filled with sparks and the orange flames casting weird shadows that danced in demonic patterns on the cars and the outbuildings. In his recollection, Robert could see the hoses spraying water to save the barn as the trees caught flames in their branches that were too near the house. He recalled glass in the upstairs window of the home shattering and a ball of flame rolling out. Now he glanced worriedly at the window in the upstairs of his house.

Joe, meanwhile, had slid the attic entry panel to one side. He switched on his flashlight and aimed it into the darkness. There was a conch shell that a relative had brought back from Florida. There was a Gilbert wind-up clock from the late 1800s. A dusty violin lay near the clock. A potato bug mandolin

with broken strings caught the beams from the flashlight. A pair of antiquated tennis rackets leaned against the wall. There were so many interesting items, all stacked and piled together, that Robert almost forgot his fear.

"This cord," Joe said, "runs from one side of the house to the other through the attic." He pointed to the cord, which was attached to the rafters. "The electrical service divides fairly evenly with half of the fixtures on one side of the house and the other half on the other side of the house. My uncle Charley—your great uncle—probably had a say in the plan, which is logical and sensible. Also, there is almost nothing hidden that we need to see for our inspection."

The inspection had lasted until bedtime.

Joe, Charles, and Robert felt much better, knowing that everything was in tiptop shape.

When the boys submitted their booklets, they received badges made of red plastic with gold lines radiating outward from a black circle proclaiming the words "Junior Fire Marshal." In the center of the circle stood a white stag against a red background; it was the symbol of the Hartford Insurance Company. Charles and Robert also were given red plastic hats shaped like those that real fire fighters wore. The front of the hat had the Hartford trademark, as well as "Junior Fire Marshal" in large letters.

Every afternoon, the boys played "fire marshal" by wearing their hats and putting out imaginary fires outdoors. Soon, the hats cracked and were no longer usable, but they had been fun while they lasted.

Chapter 17: The Persimmons and the President

American persimmon trees grew naturally in southern Indiana. Before Robert's memory, Joe and Ida had brought one to their yard, where it grew a nice, tall, straight trunk.

That autumn during Robert's first-grade year, Ida chose an ideal time to make persimmon pudding. The first frost had not yet arrived, but it was not far off. The nights were becoming chilly but the days were still warm. Ida, Robert, and Charles gathered the persimmons from the ground while their mother shook the slender tree. The fruits were relatively hard, and their skins were frosty orange with a purplish or bluish tint. They were too bitter to bite into. Ida divided the persimmons into quart size strawberry boxes made of thin wood with eight staples around the upper border. Robert and Charles helped. Robert caught a thumb on the point of a staple. "Ouch!" he exclaimed, putting his thumb in his mouth. The persimmons spent a few days in their cartons on the enameled counter of the Hoosier in the hot kitchen. Then they had become fully ripe and soft. It was time to make pudding!

When the delectable fragrance of the pudding, with its cinnamon, nutmeg, and allspice, arose from the oven, the tantalizing scent permeated the house. Then, when the dark, rich pudding was spooned, still warm, into bowls and topped with whipped cream from the family's milking cows, manna from heaven would have had tough competition!

Near the beginning of November, Ida announced to Robert that he would be keeping an appointment with Dr. Scheurich that afternoon for his last booster shot. When Ida drove Robert to the white house in Oxford that was Dr. Scheurich's office, storm clouds were already overhead and rain was beginning to fall.

Robert knew he could not escape what was about to happen to him, so he went along compliantly. He sat on a red-upholstered chair in the waiting room on the south side of the house. When the familiar nurse stepped up to the counter, looked at a clipboard, and called his name, he went with his mother into the inner office, which reeked of cigar and rubbing alcohol. Had Norman Rockwell been invited to paint an ideal image of a small-town doctor, he would have painted Dr. Scheurich. Even though Dr. Scheurich wore a serious expression on his face and peered through his glasses sternly, he was as roly-poly as Santa Claus. The belt to his trousers was almost lost beneath the bulging white shirt that was always decorated with a stethoscope hanging around his neck. Ida chatted with the doctor while holding Robert's coat. Quickly and efficiently, Dr. Scheurich brought out the

large stainless steel device terminating in its long needle. He sat heavily down on his swivel chair while Robert loosened his belt. Before long, the shot was administered. It hurt like the very devil!

With tears in the corners of his eyes, Robert walked down the concrete steps leading to the front door of the doctor's office and into the car. His coat was wet from the rain.

While Ida drove back to Pine Village, the sky grew darker and the rain fell faster. The landscape was forlorn. The trees had lost their leaves. They stood gray and rain-soaked. Flat land stretched far away until becoming lost in sheets of rain.

When Ida reached home, she told Robert to wait in the car while she got Charles. Robert wondered what was to happen next. Soon, Ida and Charles ran out to the car. Ida drove the short distance to Joe Dan's Restaurant in town. By the time the three of them had taken their seats in a booth near the window, the sky was almost as dark as night. Rivulets of rain glinted down the plate-glass window.

Robert felt that the day had definitely taken a turn for the better. Even though his posterior still felt sore, he knew he could have a breaded tenderloin sandwich with mustard: one of his favorite treats. He could also have a chocolate milkshake.

For some reason, Ida ordered a sandwich for the boys' father, even though he was not there. At about the time the sandwiches were served, Robert saw a figure running across the street from the volunteer fire station. It was Joe, who slid into the booth beside Ida.

"I'm supposed to be using the restroom, so I have to gulp this down," Joe said. When Joe hung up his coat, Robert noticed that his father was wearing good slacks and a Sunday shirt. The slacks were wet up to the knees. "The plumbing at the station broke yesterday, and the election board decided we could take turns coming to the restaurant to use the restroom."

Joe lifted his sandwich and took a big bite.

"This rain may keep voters at home," Ida said. "It's been raining cats and dogs ever since I took Robert for his booster shot. He was good about it this time. He didn't cry. Doctor Scheurich said Robert's shots are all up to date."

"Did it hurt?" Joe asked Robert.

"Yes," Robert said before trying to suck chocolate milkshake up through the big paper straw, which collapsed.

"You need another straw," Joe said.

"You may have to use your spoon," Ida suggested.

Gusts of rain beat against the windowpane.

Having overheard the conversation, Joe Dan, the owner of the restaurant, brought Robert another straw from a tall glass container full of straws and topped with a silver lid. The container stood on the horseshoe counter surrounded by silvery stools that could spin around.

"Who's winning?" Ida asked Joe.

"You know we're not allowed to discuss anything about the election," Joe said, grabbing another big bite of his sandwich.

Ida nodded, accepting his answer.

Then Joe said, "I can tell you that the early reports on the radio say the election's close."

Joe had wolfed down his sandwich. He excused himself from the table, dashed to the restroom, returned to get his coat, wriggled into it, and splashed back across the street to the polling booths in the fire station.

Later the next day, Robert learned that the new President of the United States was John Fitzgerald Kennedy. After having seen only President Dwight David Eisenhower, who looked old to Robert, Robert was surprised that a person as young as Jack Kennedy obviously was could be elected President of the United States.

The sun was shining. Robert's parents talked about how the election was the dawn of a new era. They were excited about the prospects of a bright future, which Alan Shepard's flight in a spacecraft in May seemed to promise.

No one could foretell how dramatic events would dampen those prospects. No one could predict the assassination of the young President in 1963. The slow turning of the tide of public opinion against the Vietnam War, the escalation of the Soviet threat, the racial unrest, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the massive demonstrations in

cities and on campuses were storm clouds on the horizon, but no one saw them yet.

Instead, life on the farm in Pine Village seemed a happy continuation of the happiness at the end of the 1950s. Everything seemed secure. Everything seemed like an innocent way of living not destined to change.

Chapter 18: The Piano and the Pictures

Earlier that year, Robert and Charles had begun taking piano lessons from Miss Ella Beegle, who had a studio at the top of a building that housed Allen's Dance Studio across from the *Journal & Courier* newspaper headquarters in Lafayette. Older than Joe and Ida, Miss Beegle was a kind, gracious woman who could hardly bring herself to correct a pupil. She was well-dressed and well-spoken. After awaiting his turn in a room filled with wicker furniture, Robert would hear Miss Beegle saying goodbye to Charles as the two of them walked down a short hallway. Then it would be Robert's turn to follow Miss Beegle into her studio.

Robert enjoyed the lessons, although he seldom practiced enough. By this time in his first-grade year, he could begin to read simple scores in the beginner's book. One of the short pieces had an illustration of kittens that Robert liked because he had found kittens in his father's barn on more than one occasion. Each week, Miss Beegle asked Robert to write another scale in his booklet of music paper. Robert tried his best to form each note perfectly. "Your scales are better than print," Miss Beegle often said, complimenting Robert's handiwork. Of course, his notes were not better than print, but it was Miss Beegle's method to be unsparing in her praise of a pupil's accomplishments.

Miss Beegle's studio boasted a grand piano. At home, Robert and Charles practiced on an old upright piano that was taller than many similar instruments. To Robert, it seemed harder to play than Miss Beegle's grand. The keys of the old upright offered a little more resistance.

Ida was proud of her sons' progress on the piano, and she insisted that they practice—although both slipped off the piano bench all too soon every day. Whenever Ida and Joe entertained guests, the boys had to play one song each on the piano. While the poor playing in general and the wrong notes in particular must have made it difficult to listen, everyone always applauded rapturously afterward.

Robert spent his time at the piano learning to read music, rather than playing "by ear," as the saying went. He never developed the capacity to reproduce at the keyboard any song that he heard. He had a penchant for exactness, and playing a musical score required the satisfying precision that Robert felt would be lacking, were he to indulge in playing by ear. Many years later, he would wish that he could automatically play any song that he could hear.

For Robert, music lay at the heart of drawing. Ever since he could remember, his mother had provided a seemingly endless supply of crayons, pastels, and watercolor paints. Ida bought numerous large packs of oversized paper and encouraged the boys to make as many pictures as they could. When Robert was three, he sketched Grandma Rhode, and it actually looked like her! He felt that, if he could "hear" the inner music of a surface accurately, he could reproduce that surface in a two-dimensional drawing. No actual sounds were emitted from such surfaces; Robert had to imagine the sounds each surface would make. If he wanted to draw someone's nose, he peered intently at the way the skin stretched across the bridge and imagined what sounds would best express the skin as it came over the bridge and swept toward the cheek—as a stream or a breeze might do. When he heard the sounds as clearly as possible, he put his pencil or his crayon or his paintbrush on the paper and made his hand move in harmony with the sounds he was hearing. Essentially, he was transferring the sounds to the paper, which, in turn, changed three dimensions into two.

So music and visual art were really the same! Visual art was music seen in shading and lines.

Robert had a small chalkboard that had been part of an easel but was now separate from it. He spent many hours drawing with white chalk on the dark green chalkboard.

He sat in a large armchair upholstered in a fuzzy fabric that was nearly knobby and bristly. With the chalkboard across his knees and steadied by his left hand, he drew sequential pictures to accompany stories that he invented and told himself. As soon as one was finished (sometimes even *before* it was finished), he erased it with a handful of dusty tissues and continued on to the next. The drawings were like the major pictures in an animation storyboard. Quite often, he took his inspiration from the TV westerns and from Disney movies. He drew stagecoaches in the desert with mountains in the background, log cabins, forts, and Indians. He never missed an opportunity to sketch Indians and frequently made portraits of them with their feathered headdresses.

Making countless chalk drawings meant that a thick ridge of white dust developed across his jeans. Where he set down his tissues, a broad pile of dust formed on the fabric of the armchair. Mysteriously, his mother never complained about the chalk dust permeating the chair. She periodically brushed and vacuumed the dust away. Robert gained the impression that visual art was approved, no matter how messy it might be.

On many joyous occasions, Ida sat down with Robert and his chalkboard on a davenport in the living room. She invited him to tell a story aloud while he illustrated it, and he complied.

"Your story needs an ending," she always said. "You're reaching a place where you stop, but that's not an ending."

"What should it be?" Robert always asked.

"You can end a story in many ways," his mother would answer. "You can surprise whoever is listening to your story."

"What would a surprise be?"

On one such occasion, Ida replied, "You could have the tribe make the boy in your story an honorary member because he rescued their pony from the deep hole that his father had dug."

Robert quickly drew a picture of smiling Indians standing around the boy and the pony.

"That's right," Ida said. "Another way would be to make a point. You could tell why it's important to keep fences around deep holes so that ponies don't fall into them."

Robert hurriedly rubbed away the existing sketch, set the handful of tissues to one side, and drew a hole with a fence around it. For good measure, he added several trees in the background.

"That's good!" his mother said. "You could also return to what you said in the beginning and make it mean more at the end. Do you remember when you said that the boy wished he could do something for his Indian friends?"

"I see," said Robert. "'So the boy got his wish,'" he proclaimed in a louder voice, to show that the sentence was his ending. At the same time, he drew a close-up of the boy's face with a big grin next to several faces of Indians, also with big grins.

"That's very good!" his mother said. "Whenever you begin a story, think what your ending is going to be. Make everything in the story count toward the ending."

Robert smiled with satisfaction. "I will!" he agreed, but, by the next time his mother sat with him and invited him to tell a story with his chalkboard, he

had forgotten about endings. Patiently, Ida would guide him through various ways to end whatever story he had been telling her.

Eventually, there came a day when he remembered.

"And the puppy that nobody had wanted had grown up to be the prettiest dog of all!" he said, as he put the finishing touches to his sketch of a dog. He could hear the music of its pointy ears, its soft nose, and its twinkling eyes.

Ida smiled and said, "Now you know how to end a story!"

Chapter 19: The Flu and the Visits

Robert's class rehearsed a Christmas song to be performed during a school-wide convocation to occur just before school was dismissed for a few days during the holiday season. Robert struggled to find the correct pitches when he and his classmates were singing a wide variety of incorrect pitches. He worried about what the quality of the song would be on the day when the class had to sing it before the school.

He need not have worried. A day before the concert, Robert came down with the flu and had to stay home. He hated missing school almost more than he hated being sick. He felt he was letting down his classmates, but nothing could be done about the situation. He was sick, and that was that.

This, moreover, became a pattern for almost all of the six years of grade school. Robert would come down with the flu just before the school's observance of Christmas, and he would miss the convocation. After the first few years of catching the flu, he began to dread the beginning of rehearsals of the school's Christmas programs, for he knew he would become ill. And, like clockwork, he caught the flu bug at that same time year after year.

"No, you're going to be well this year," his mother would reassure Robert.

Shortly thereafter, the fever and the sneezing would begin.

"You'll have to stay home," his mother would have to admit.

Year after year …

When 1961 began, Joe took the boys to visit Jim Hooker. It was a short drive into town; if it had not been so cold, they could have walked. Jim accompanied them to his workshop in the small barn beside his house. Windows along the south and east walls met in the corner where the door was. Inside, heavy work tables stretched the length of both walls. The tables were laden with homespun wood carvings.

Jim stood back with his coat open enough for him to rest his thumbs under his red suspenders. He grinned with pride while Robert and Charles stared in wonder at Jim's creations.

Robert felt he could spend all day looking at the carvings and not grow bored. They were intricately detailed yet not photographically real. Each displayed an element of Jim's fanciful imagination. There were miniature wagons with working wheels that were pulled by twenty teams of mules. A

few of his earlier renditions of the theme had mules that were more or less alike, but his later versions featured mules that were all different, with some glancing to one side and with others switching their tails.

Many Conestoga wagons stood among the carvings. They were covered in canvas and pulled by oxen yoked together. Teams and teams of draft horses were hitched to a variety of farm wagons.

Robert did not want to possess a carving as a toy. He understood that these were works of art not to be played with and to be treasured for their beauty. They revealed the talent and the skill and the genius of their creator.

While the boys ogled the mules, horses, oxen, and wagons, their father talked with Jim about the news from around town. Robert paid no attention to their conversation; he studied the carvings with rapt admiration. Although he remembered seeing them when he was younger, he felt he was seeing them for the first time. He had arrived at an age when he could appreciate the deft movements of Jim's carving tools recorded in the wood of the figures.

Next, Joe took the boys to see their great aunt Margaret. With a big smile, she invited them to step inside her warm kitchen. The air was balmy with the fragrance of raisin cookies, which she was baking in her black iron oven. A coal oil lamp that had been converted to electricity hung on the wall above an antique table. The light bulb within the glass chimney gleamed brightly because a mirror-like reflector fanned out behind it. The light hurt Robert's eyes, but, as long as he kept his back to it, there was no problem. He enjoyed looking out the windows and seeing the well-manicured houses across the street. Traces of snow clung to their eaves. One large house was Dutch Colonial and featured a gambrel roof with dormers.

Aunt Margaret offered everyone a cookie as big as a saucer. She leaned forward to hand Robert his cookie. He thought her happy face above her starched apron resembled her cookies. Here and there were little wrinkles embroidering her countenance, and her eyes gleamed in the same way that the raisins sparkled in the bright light from the coal oil lamp!

"The meat should be ready in Otterbein," Joe said. "In the next day or two, I'll drive over to pick it up, and I'll bring you the cuts you wanted."

"Just this morning, I was wondering what I was going to cook this week," Aunt Margaret said. "I had about made up my mind to walk up to Terrell's Market to buy some pork chops, but I'm glad I put it off. Come see my Christmas cactus."

Aunt Margaret led the group into her living room. In the south window on a fern stand was an enormous Christmas cactus with many magenta blooms.

"It was the fullest just before Christmas," Aunt Margaret said, "but it's still giving a good show."

The notched branches hung in all directions. The plant was larger than a bushel basket. The blossoms were white near their centers, but the rich magenta hue was what caught Robert's eye.

"You certainly have good luck with your Christmas cactus," Joe said.

"I don't know why it does so well there," Aunt Margaret said, "but it seems to like that window. All I have to do is to remember to water it."

"I'm considering driving up to Claude Martindale's to see if he has any apples left. Ida wants to bake a pie."

"If he has any, could you get me a dozen?" Aunt Margaret asked. "Did I ever tell you what Claude did when we were children? We attended the same one-room school out there not far from Marshall Rhode's house. Claude got the idea to tie a kernel of corn to a piece of string. It was warm outside, and the window was open. When the teacher wasn't looking, he threw the kernel out the window and held onto the string. There were chickens all around the school. He would tug a little on the string and tug a little more on the string. Before long, he had the kernel up on the window sill. Right then, a big fat chicken that was trying to get the corn flew up, grabbed hold of the sill with its talons, and squawked. At first, everyone was so startled that nobody said anything, then the children were so tickled that they laughed and laughed. The teacher made Claude stand in the corner."

Robert and Charles chuckled along with Aunt Margaret.

"Well, I suppose we should be going," Joe said.

"Don't stay away so long the next time," Aunt Margaret chided in a joking fashion.

The boys and their father climbed back in their car for the short drive to Claude Martindale's orchard in "Oklahoma," the nickname for a group of houses near where there had been a railway that passed the elevator east of Pine Village. Claude wore his customary black cap that resembled those the

newsboys of an earlier generation had worn. His blue denim coat hung loosely on his overalls.

"Yes, I still have some cooking apples in my cellar," Claude said in reply to Joe's question. While the boys stamped their feet to keep them warm, Joe waited until Claude reappeared with a basket under his arm.

"These are mostly winesaps," Claude said, as he handed the half-full basket to Joe.

"Claude, there are many more here than I asked for," Joe said.

Claude raised his hand and shook his head slightly. "I have more than I can use before they go bad," he said.

"What do I owe you?" Joe asked.

"This late in the season, you owe me nothing," Claude said. "Just tell Ida to bring me a slice of her pie."

"Well, thank you most kindly," Joe said. "I'll make sure you get a piece of pie."

Joe set the basket in the back seat. There would be plenty of apples to divide with Aunt Margaret and with Grandma Rhode, as well.

Joe, Charles, and Robert had enjoyed their visits. Robert had learned that people are makers. Jim Hooker made carvings, Aunt Margaret made cookies and Christmas cactus blossoms, and Claude Martindale made apple orchards and baskets of apples that appeared from his cellar.

Chapter 20: The Cereals and the Baked Goods

Robert had an intense dislike for rolled oats, which his mother often served for breakfast. He despised the texture, and he found the taste repulsive. He was forced to choke down many a bowl filled to the brim with the disgusting stuff. Cream of wheat was almost as bad, but he could swallow it with less trouble. During the year when he was in Mrs. Hail's class, Ida began to give up the fight for rolled oats and occasionally set a Kellogg's Variety Pack in the center of the table.

Robert felt a huge relief! Even if his brother took the best cereals (Sugar Smacks, Sugar Pops, Raisin Bran, or Rice Krispies), Robert could easily eat Sugar Frosted Flakes or Special K. Robert found Corn Flakes marginally acceptable. OKs were—well—OK!

On the happy mornings when the Variety Pack made its appearance on the breakfast table, Robert emptied the cereal into a china bowl, put two heaping teaspoons of sugar on top, and poured the fresh milk straight from the cow around the mound of sugar. He was fascinated to watch the milk soak into the sugar, transforming it from white granules to gray layers that gradually slipped below the creamy surface. He spooned the cereal carefully, so that, by the end, the bottom of the bowl would have a thick layer of sugar that he could spoon out with the last of the milk. Kellogg's had been offering variety packs as long as Robert had been alive, but Ida did not yield to their convenience until Robert was in school.

Jell-O was a different story. Ida had fallen fast for the convenience of Jell-O dishes, and she was quick to use all the recipes in the women's magazines. Jell-O (a mixture of gelatin, fruit flavors, and sugar) was served at almost every dinner and every supper.

Orange Jell-O packed full of shredded carrots and chopped raisins was a popular item on Ida's menu. Lime Jell-O featuring crunchy chunks of celery was another. Robert greatly preferred fruit in his Jell-O. Black cherry Jell-O harboring large bing cherries was one of Robert's favorites. Then came lime Jell-O with crushed pineapple and heavy cream mixed together on a bed of crumbled graham crackers and topped with a layer of whipped heavy cream and chopped walnuts. The latter dish became a staple.

On special occasions, Ida made a mold of a fruity Jell-O with mandarin orange slices. A topping of whipped cream was available for most of the Jell-O dishes made with fruit.

Ida bowed to convenience when it came to international cuisine, too. Italian food was Chef Boyardee from cans. Asian food was LaChoy's Chop Suey Vegetables with chunks of pork added and with the dish poured over LaChoy Chow Mein Noodles. Mexican food was Van Camp's Tamales with Sauce (also from a can). Ever since the Korean War, Ida had witnessed a time of a burgeoning variety of foods and ever-greater convenience—a convenience that she embraced enthusiastically (sooner or later).

Even though Ida was a skilled baker, she enjoyed buying doughnuts and bread from Graves Bakery on the State Street hill near Purdue University in West Lafayette. Almost every week, she successfully made the turn from State Street, across the oncoming traffic, over the gravelly hump just beyond the sidewalk, and down into the parking lot, where she moved her foot back and forth from the brake to the gas pedal to the brake and to the gas pedal until she felt the car was parked well enough. Once Robert's nearly carsick vision had cleared, he waited in the Chevrolet Bel Air while Ida gained the sidewalk and hurried out of view toward the front door of the bakery. Robert looked up in fascination at the large billboard on the side of the building.

Regularly, the billboard changed, but it always announced the delights of baked goods from Graves Bakery and it always included a painting, usually a child with rosy cheeks and an endearing smile who was enjoying a jelly-filled doughnut or similar sugary treat. The painting on the huge poster always exhibited a heartwarming realism reminiscent of Norman Rockwell's work but lacking a complete background so that the words could be prominently displayed against a plain backdrop. Robert studied the colors and the ways the artist fashioned the facial features, the clothing, the hands, the light, and the shadows.

Soon enough, Ida returned with two big bags of doughnuts and sweet rolls.

"They had a sale on cinnamon twists, and I bought extras," Ida said with evident glee, as she carefully placed the white paper sacks in the back seat.

The bakery items usually were devoured before the next week's trip to West Lafayette, but, when they were gone, Ida might make cinnamon toast for breakfast.

After many glum mornings staring down a bowl of rolled oats, Robert was ready to dance a jig whenever he awoke to the fragrance of cinnamon toast. Ida mixed butter, sugar, and cinnamon and lightly toasted it on slices of bread that were spread on a cookie sheet and placed in the oven. The satisfying crunch when he bit into the caramelized sugar was only part of the

pleasure of eating his mother's cinnamon toast. The sugar coating would flake slightly to reveal the hot buttery toast beneath. On especially fortunate mornings, Ida served mugs of hot cocoa. Dipping half a slice of plain buttered toast in hot chocolate was a delicious experience, but dipping half a slice of cinnamon toast in cocoa would make anyone over the moon!

Yes, Ida could bake cookies with the best of them, and her persimmon pudding was out of this world. Her forte, though, was pie. Robert could not remember a time when there was no pie cooling beside the meat grinder attached to the enameled counter of the Hoosier. Apple, peach, banana cream, cherry, blackberry, sugar cream, pumpkin, lemon meringue, chocolate, mince (but not made with meat), rhubarb, gooseberry, and even mulberry (on rare occasions) were only a few of the pies that came hot and mouth-watering from Ida's oven. Almost every dinner was fortified with a generous slice of pie for dessert. It seemed she never missed! Ida's pies never failed!

In addition to being baked in a pie, rhubarb took several delightful turns toward the dessert side of the dinner plates: rhubarb cobbler (sometimes mixed with strawberries), rhubarb coffee cake, rhubarb sauce (sometimes mixed with cherries) for ice cream, rhubarb crunches, and rhubarb crisps.

Ida's gooseberry shortcake stole the show.

Quite often, Ida brought her brown cups of custard hot from the oven. Using a rasp, she grated nutmeg on top of each. Sometimes, the custard cups were filled with butterscotch pudding, chocolate pudding, or vanilla pudding.

Cakes were plentiful, too. Ida, Aunt Margaret, and Grandma Rhode all made delectable German chocolate cakes. Robert's favorite birthday cake was a white layer cake with pink peppermint icing, but black walnut cake was also high on his list.

With the butter and cream that were fresh from Joe's Holstein cows and with lard that was truly lard and with flour that knew how to behave, the baked goods that flowed from Ida's oven were delicious beyond anyone's powers of description. They more than compensated for the rolled oats and the cream of wheat that Robert had to consume at the start of the day now and then.

Chapter 21: The Ice

That winter, there had come a spell of light snow that would melt a little before the temperature dipped below zero, producing a sheet of ice over the ground. Joe walked into the kitchen and spoke in a low voice to Ida, who promptly told the boys to put on their parkas, stocking caps, and gloves. She had to take Joe to see Dr. Scheurich.

Robert felt a wave of apprehension as he quickly followed his mother's instructions. He had thought that only he and his brother ever had to visit the doctor, not one of his parents. When he saw his father sitting in a strange posture on one of the kitchen chairs, his face pale and gray, Robert felt his apprehension deepening into anxiety.

Ida ushered the boys toward the car. Joe came slowly from the house. She held open the passenger door for him. He ever-so-slowly sank into the seat. Ida slammed the door, ran around the car, and, with considerable agitation, put the key in the ignition. When the Chevy started, she did not wait for it to warm up. She backed fast down the driveway and out onto the state highway. In a heartbeat, she was driving to Oxford.

Joe had been checking on the Chester White sows that were soon to have litters. One young sow had been pushing against the wooden panels that held her captive in a small exercise area beyond the door of an individual hog house on skids that Joe had pulled into place with his Minneapolis–Moline Z tractor. Painted red, the house had a V-shaped roof, half of which consisted of hinged doors that could swing over, permitting a view of the interior. Joe bought his hog houses from the grain elevator, where they were built at the lumberyard. On this day, Joe had decided that he needed to sink one more metal post to support the panel that the sow had been abusing. He had brought a tall fence post and a sledge hammer. After looking over the situation, he had decided to put the post on the inside of the small lot, so he had climbed over the panel.

Hammering the fence post into the frozen ground was a time-consuming job. Ping–ping–ping! His hammer had sounded a short bell-like tone each time that he had struck the post. Finally, he had driven the post into the ice deep enough to prevent the sow from working on the panel.

He had brought several strands of baling wire, with which he had secured the panel to the post, being careful to push the ends of the wires to the outside so that the sow would not be scratched. With a snap of his wrist, he had used a heavy pair of pliers to give each twist of wire two additional

twists, tightening the wires. Finally, he had taken his sledge hammer and had climbed back outside the panel.

That is when it had happened. His feet had become cold, even though he had been wearing boots, high-top laced shoes, and brown woolen socks. He could barely feel where he put his toes in between the boards of the panel. As the gap between the bottom two boards was narrow, he had not pushed the toe of his boot through far enough. His foot slipped and dropped down on the ice. His balance thrown off, Joe had lost his grip on the panel but not on the hammer. Meanwhile, the foot that had suddenly reached the ice skidded out from under him, pivoting him. He had fallen on his side. As bundled up as he was with long johns, a flannel undershirt, a work shirt, a lined denim coat, and a regular denim coat over the lined one, he might have withstood the fall, but he had landed on the handle of the sledge hammer. He had writhed in pain for a few minutes before he had realized that, pain or no pain, he would have to get back on his feet and go to the house.

For the first few steps, standing had felt somewhat better, but then the pain had intensified. He felt certain that he had broken a bone.

Before he was married, he had been helping the members of the threshing ring to separate his wheat, and he had fallen from the grain wagon. His left upper arm had gone between the wooden hound that supported the wagon tongue behind the doubletree, and he had broken the bone with a spiral break. On this day, he remembered that pain.

While Dr. Scheurich examined Joe, Robert and Charles sat quiet as church mice in the waiting room. Before they had entered the doctor's office, their mother had told them to behave themselves by sitting still and not causing trouble. She had accompanied their father into the examination room. Robert's fears were mounting. Tears were gathering in the corners of his eyes. He had never seen his father look so pale, so gray, and so unsmiling. Robert still did not know what had happened, although Charles had whispered to him something about ice.

Eventually, Joe emerged. Ida was at his side. The nurse was close behind. Ida and the nurse walked with him down the front stairs to the car. Robert and Charles followed. On this occasion, Robert had ridden in the back seat of the two-door car so his father could sit in front. Robert had managed not to have motion sickness, but, on the way home, he felt the dizziness starting. Still, he listened carefully to his parents' conversation. Little by little, he felt his worries subside as he began to understand that his father had fallen on the ice, that he had cracked some ribs, and that there was nothing that

could be done except take aspirin and wait for the bruising to heal. Dr. Scheurich had wrapped a stretchy bandage around Joe's side and over one shoulder to keep Joe steady, as much as anything; otherwise, the bandage had no effect, as the doctor had readily admitted.

"You'll have to milk the cows and feed and water the sows," Joe was saying to Ida. The doctor had advised him not to move about much for the first two days and for Ida to handle the chores. "I'm sorry for you to have to do my work," Joe said.

"It's only for a few days," Ida reassured him. "The boys can help me."

After school, Robert and Charles helped their mother all they could. They threw down hay from the mow. They scooped ground feed into buckets to be carried to the sows, each sow in her own paneled lot. They mixed feed and water for the ducks. They scattered feed for the chickens and the turkeys. Robert thought it was funny to watch Ida at work. She wore four-buckle boots that made her feet seem too big for her body. She did everything differently than the boys' father did. She positioned the stool differently when she sat beside the cows to milk them. She spoke more jokingly to the cows—as if they were people! "You like that clover, don't you, Flossy!" Ida would say. At the end of each day, Ida had completed all the same jobs that Joe would have accomplished, even though she had done them in her own way.

Eventually, Joe had begun to move about in a gingerly fashion and had resumed doing the chores himself.

"Don't let your dad try to use his sore side," Ida had warned the boys. "Think ahead, and help him lift things that he shouldn't be lifting!" she ordered. Robert and Charles were good about providing as much assistance as they could to their father.

Then, one cold night, Ida set a bushel basket in front of the Norge heating stove in the kitchen. She arranged an old blanket in the bottom. Joe came through the door to the porch. The gloved hand on his good side was holding something that squirmed. He put it in the basket.

"She may have another one before I get back out there," Joe said, as he went through the porch and out into the night, a flashlight in the hand on his sore side.

Robert peered into the basket. A pink piglet was standing on the blanket. It looked up at him with its inquisitive eyes beneath white eyelashes. Soon, Joe brought another pink piglet and deposited it in the basket.

The boys' mother prepared a second basket. Later that night, there were nine piglets all in all.

"I think they could go back to their mother now," Joe said.

Robert put on his coat, hat, and gloves and walked with his mother as she carried the first basket out to the hog house containing the sow that had just had her litter. It was the sow that had given so much trouble. Robert stood on a straw bale to look down through the doors that Joe opened in the roof of the house. A heat lamp cast a reddish light around the inside, which felt warm on Robert's face. Ida was handing each piglet to Joe, who was setting them down in the fresh straw inside. When the first basket had been emptied, Ida brought out the second basket of piglets. Before long, the newborns were lined up along the belly of the sow and were having their dinner.

"We'd better close the doors now," Joe said to Robert, who stepped down from the bale. The piglets were so cute that Robert silently questioned why his parents never kept one for a pet. Then he thought about how big the sow was and how it was not nearly as cute as a piglet, and he answered his own question.

Chapter 22: The Masons

In April of 1961, Grandpa Rhode died.

Seymour Alfred Rhode had been born in 1884. After growing up on his father's farm on the road to Independence, Seymour had graduated from Attica High School. Briefly, he had taught school. The remains of the one-room schoolhouse, nicknamed "Rock College," stood in a gloomy tangle of weeds across the road from College Rock. Joe and Ida had taken Charles and Robert past Rock College on Sunday afternoon drives. The boards of the building were gray with age. For a time, Seymour had sold musical instruments in Lafayette. A few years after his marriage to Kosie Ruby Cobb in 1909, he had served on the Board of Directors of Standard Live Stock Insurance Company of Indianapolis.

Rue J. Alexander, born as James Ruevelle, had had a direct influence on Robert's life because, before World War II, he had helped nudge Seymour into political posts in Indianapolis. Beginning in the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, Seymour had later become an examiner for the Indiana Department of Insurance. He had been named Chief Examiner after fifteen years in the department. When he had begun accepting what were largely political appointments, he had become much more successful than he had been previously.

The family of Grandpa Rhode's beloved sister, Bertha, and her husband, John Claypool—who lived in New York—mourned the passing of Seymour and sent condolences to Joe. Over the years, they had made several excursions to visit the Rhode clan in Indiana, and they now planned another to keep the far-flung family as close together as possible.

Grandpa Rhode was to be buried in the Pine Village Cemetery after services at Shipps Funeral Home in Oxford. As Grandpa Rhode had been a Mason, he was to be given Masonic rites.

It was the first time Robert had seen the members of the Masonic Lodge wearing their aprons, and it was the first time that he had heard his father give the funeral oration.

Joe had memorized the entire oration, and he was nearly always the one who spoke it at a funeral for a Mason from Pine Village. In the years preceding Grandpa Rhode's death, Robert had often heard Fred Holdcraft and Robert's father conversing quietly in the living room. Fred and his wife, Glynalee, were members of the Euchre Club that Joe and Ida played in and the parents of Joy and Jenny, two of Robert's friends. Fred was a Masonic

Past Master and member of the Scottish Rite Valley of Indianapolis. The purpose of his talking in low tones with Joe was to make arrangements for Joe to present the funeral oration for a fellow Mason. For the next few evenings, Robert's father was not to be bothered, so that he could practice, ensuring that his memory of the speech was perfect.

At the services for Grandpa Rhode, Joe and his fellow Masons wore over their suits the white aprons trimmed in blue with the all-seeing eye symbol above and the symbol of Freemasonry below. Robert found the aprons strange. They were so out of the ordinary as to make Robert doubly conscious of the solemnity of the occasion.

Robert knew that his father wanted to make no mistake in the oration, and, indeed, Joe made none. His sentences flowed effortlessly with perfect cadences and emphases.

Seymour's brother Marshall C., who was born in 1888, was a 32nd Degree Mason in the Scottish Rite. Great Uncle Marshall stood near Joe during the ceremony.

The Masons had memberships in the Order of the Eastern Star, to which women could also belong. Ida was a member. Throughout the year, she attended Eastern Star meetings, which were held in lodge rooms on the second story of the Brick Block, a row of shops on the north side of Lafayette Street that had been built in 1902 and 1903.

At the funeral, Ida wore her five-pointed Eastern Star pin with its red, blue, yellow, white, and green triangles.

A few days after the funeral, Joe took his family in his GMC pickup to Indianapolis to attend to the apartment where Grandpa Rhode had lived for many years. Joe's first cousin Jay, a son of Charles J. Rhode, Seymour's older brother that was born in 1882, drove his own pickup so that there would be two trucks to haul furniture and boxes. Jay's wife, Claire, who was a Cajun from New Orleans that Jay had met while he was in the Navy in World War II, remained at home.

It rained cats and dogs almost all day long!

Ida had given Charles and Robert strict instructions to be useful but not in the way. Robert stood quietly in corners of rooms until he was called upon to carry lightweight boxes to the trucks. When it was time to clear Grandpa Rhode's desk, Ida asked Joe and Jay if the boys could have any of the small items that decorated the desktop. Jay nodded.

“You boys can pick out something for yourselves,” Joe said.

Robert took an iridescent conch shell, and Charles accepted a small metal horse that he later gave to Robert.

Robert clutched the seashell all the way home in the dark of night as the rain pelted the windshield and the tarp that had been tied down over the furniture and boxes in the bed of the pickup.

The death of Grandpa Rhode plunged Robert into a solemn frame of mind. Robert’s pensive mood lasted for a week. He overheard his mother asking his father what should be done. She said that, perhaps, Robert should not have attended the funeral. She added that, maybe, Robert should not have helped carry boxes from Grandpa Rhode’s apartment. Joe suggested giving Robert time to work out everything in his mind.

Robert held the shell in his hand. He was fascinated with the way the mother of pearl tones reflected the light. It was as if the shell were glowing while light was passing through it—as if he were holding the moving light itself in the palm of his hand. Suddenly, he felt that the shell pointed to something greater: a transcendent force just beyond what can be seen. His grandfather was still alive somewhere, sustained and protected by the same light. Were not angels portrayed as beings of light? Could the shell correspond to everlasting life in other dimensions linked to this world through light and its meaning? All at once, Robert thought he knew what was meant in First Corinthians when the Apostle Paul writes, “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

Robert emerged from his contemplative week a more cheerful boy. Ida could not figure out what had brought about the change.

Chapter 23: The Battle of Tippecanoe

Robert, Charles, and their parents were seated around the dinner table when Ida asked Joe, a student of history, to tell the boys about the Battle of Tippecanoe.

"The battle took place in the early morning hours of November 7th in 1811," Joe began. "The town of Battle Ground north of Lafayette is named for it. The Shawnee leader, who was named Tecumseh, had been gathering many tribes between where the Tippecanoe River flows into the Wabash River and where Wildcat Creek meets the Wabash River. Tecumseh wanted to block American settlers from expanding further into Indian territories. The Governor of the Indiana Territory was William Henry Harrison. He learned that Tecumseh had gone to the southern states to recruit more tribes, and he marched his troops northward from the territorial capital at Vincennes to fight a pitched battle against the Indians. He wanted to break up the confederation that Tecumseh had been forming. You remember the historical marker that we stopped to read near the Andersons' place about four miles from here. That marker designates where Harrison's army marched. Harrison had about a thousand men. When Harrison arrived at the Indian village on the 6th, Tecumseh's brother met him. Tecumseh's brother was called 'the Prophet.' Harrison accepted the Prophet's offer to camp on a stretch of wooded, narrow, triangular ground between two ravines."

Ida had percolated coffee, and she poured a cup for Joe. He dipped a teaspoon into the coffee and blew on it to cool it before sipping the coffee from the teaspoon. Robert and Charles waited expectantly.

Joe continued, "That night, representatives of the tribes discussed what to do. The Prophet wanted to negotiate with Harrison to buy time for Tecumseh to return, but most of the other leaders wanted to attack. The Prophet felt outnumbered. He agreed to attack the soldiers just before dawn the next morning. A half mile southwest of Battle Ground, there's a rocky cliff high above the low land where the rivers and creeks flow together. The Prophet, who was a spiritual leader, said he would stand there and offer holy chants to protect the Indians from the soldiers' bullets. Today, the cliff is called 'Prophet's Rock.' It is said that Indians crawled unseen through the underbrush to within a few feet of the sleeping soldiers and that some of the Indians silently climbed the trees at the perimeter of the army's campground. Just before daybreak, the firing began almost simultaneously at the northern and southern ends of the triangular point of land. The fighting soon spread throughout the soldiers' encampment. Many lives were lost on both sides. After about two hours, the Indians withdrew because they were running low on ammunition. Harrison regrouped and buried the dead

soldiers on the spot. The Indians had dispersed because they expected Harrison to come after them. Harrison ordered his men to burn the empty Indian village, which he referred to as Prophetstown. On the return march to Vincennes, Harrison buried a few more soldiers who died of their wounds along the way."

"How many were killed?" Charles asked.

"Some sixty soldiers were killed and well over a hundred wounded. The Indians carried off their dead, so no one knows how many were killed. Harrison's first estimate was that about forty Indians had been killed. The country decided to blame the British for inciting the Indians, and the Battle of Tippecanoe was one of the factors that led to the War of 1812. After the battle, the Indians rebuilt Prophetstown, and Tecumseh managed to keep the confederation together, but Harrison called the Battle of Tippecanoe a decisive victory. It may be true that the Indian confederation had been weakened somewhat by the battle. Many years later, when he was in his late sixties, Harrison ran for President, and his having supposedly won a victory over the Indians helped him win the election of 1840. He died of pneumonia in the spring of 1841 only a month after taking office."

Ida told Robert and Charles, "We're going to see the reenactment of the battle."

"What's a reenactment?" Robert asked.

"People in costume," Joe explained, "will fight the battle again—but without bullets—so that visitors can watch what took place back in 1811. This year is the sesquicentennial."

Robert found the word "sesquicentennial" surprising.

"It means that a hundred and fifty years have passed," his father said.

On the afternoon of the 19th of August—when the reenactment was to occur—the boys and their parents drove to Lafayette. Joe and Ida had not been prepared for the massive turnout. Over ten thousand people attended. Traffic was snarled on the highways leading to Battle Ground. As the family's Chevrolet inched its way forward in the bumper-to-bumper procession, the reenactment began. The sound of guns popping in the distance told them that they were missing the battle. When they finally were within sight of the battlefield, which was surrounded by a tall iron fence, they saw Indians walking along the road who had obviously already done their part toward replicating the fight and were conversing casually with one another.

It was one of the rare times that Ida had not been first in line, and she was not happy that the reenactment had come and gone long before Joe could park the car. The delay could not have been avoided, though. Who would have thought that so many people would assemble for such an event?

Rather than stay for the barbeque dinner on Main Street in Battle Ground, Joe and Ida decided to return home.

Even though the family had missed the reenactment, Robert felt he had experienced a significant event. He had seen Indians wielding guns, and, even though they were "out of character," so to speak, they were symbolic of conflict. Robert had watched many a Western, but he had not given much thought to the nature of warfare, for which he felt a deeply instinctual revulsion.

"Why would Indians and soldier have to fight each other?" Robert asked his father later that evening. Joe was sipping coffee, and Robert was sitting cross-legged on the davenport. Joe's eyebrows drew downward, and he pursed his lips as he tried to think how best to answer Robert's question.

Joe began, "History is full of wars. They seem inevitable." Joe thought longer about what to say. "Your ancestors were Quakers. Many of them are buried in Quaker Cemetery near the Independence Road. We've taken you there on Memorial Day. The Quakers believed in peace. They would not fight. For that reason, they were generally trusted by Indians. Even though our family has attended the Methodist Church for the past four generations, some of the Quaker beliefs may have been passed down to us. I've given considerable thought to whether or not Quaker teachings may have persisted into the Methodist years, and I've concluded that there could well be Quaker attitudes among us. If you're thinking that people lost their lives unnecessarily at the Battle of Tippecanoe, you might be getting that feeling from bits and pieces of Quaker philosophy. It's also true that, customarily, nations respect the nobility and honor of those who fight for them."

While Robert felt satisfied with the answer, he continued to ponder why two groups of people would try to kill one another.

Chapter 24: The Spelling Bee and Halloween

Robert was wary about starting the second grade. He was accustomed to Mrs. Hail. When he entered the school on the first day that fall semester and saw Mrs. Hail welcoming a new class into her room, he felt somewhat abandoned, although he knew that passing from one grade to the next was the way the system worked. Now he would have Mrs. Arvin, who was older than Mrs. Hail and who sometimes wore a face of what he took for severity.

After a time, Robert adjusted to Mrs. Arvin's classroom manner and began to appreciate her methods. For Mrs. Arvin, the answers had to be strictly correct. Give her the correct answers, and she was your greatest supporter!

The year unfolded gradually, as did all the years back then. Time seemed to be in no hurry. Each minute was round and full of promise. One of Mrs. Arvin's pedagogical strategies was to conduct spelling bees during the second half of the lunch period when the weather was so inclement that the students could not go outside for recess. Robert came to look forward to the spelling bees so much that he hoped for rain. On the drizzly days of autumn, he raced back to school after eating lunch at his home across the street so that he could take part in the contests.

The students chose up sides, and Robert felt proud to be one of the first chosen because he was considered a good speller. He tried as hard as he could not to let down his team. He correctly spelled such words as "separate": S E P A R A T E. One day, Mrs. Arvin gave him "receive," and he correctly spelled R E C E I V E. Another day, Mrs. Arvin said, "Robert, spell 'definite.'" He said, "D E F I N I T E."

On one rainy noon, Robert wolfed down the lunch of chili and grilled cheese sandwich that his mother had prepared and ran back across State Route 26 to the school building. His class had already chosen sides and had already begun the spelling bee. The moment Robert walked through the door, Mrs. Arvin said, "Robert, while you were gone, Susan chose you to be on her team, and it is your turn. Spell 'twenty-three.'" Robert felt relieved to be given such an easy example. He took his place with Susan's group, which was standing in front of the chalkboard, and he said, "T W E N T Y - T R E E." Mrs. Arvin said, "That is incorrect. Robert, you may sit down." With the blood rushing to his face, Robert stumbled toward his desk and took his seat. Susan was staring at him accusingly. Mrs. Arvin gave the opposing team "twenty-three," and Alan spelled it correctly. Robert was too embarrassed to ask why his spelling was wrong, but the questioning look on his face must have revealed his bewilderment. Robert felt certain he had given the correct spelling. Mrs. Arvin said, "Robert, you omitted the *h* in

'three.'" Although he knew how to spell "three"—and although he thought he had spelled it correctly—he could remember the sound of his own voice skipping from the *t* to the *r* without saying the *h*.

Robert had failed his team, and his chagrin was palpable. He felt his face grow redder and redder. Perspiration dripped down his neck. He had felt so confident, only to have erred and to have disappointed his team. He realized that, in the future, he could not allow himself to experience the luxury of confidence unless he had first taken every precaution to ensure correctness. One of those precautions was to take his time. He had rushed into the classroom, had immediately been given a word to spell, and had hurried to spell it. In the future, he would take a deep breath, concentrate with a steely steadiness, and not speak until he was sure that he could speak correctly. The lesson was one of the most important lessons he would ever learn.

As Halloween approached, Mrs. Arvin hung a cardboard skeleton on her classroom door. The bones of the arms and legs could swivel and hold various positions. The skeleton was taller than the children in Mrs. Arvin's class. Halloween fell on a Tuesday, and, for an undisclosed reason, Mrs. Arvin had to be gone during the final period that day. Glen Bisel's daughter, who was a high school student, took over the class. Mrs. Arvin had provided her with a stack of paper from the purple ditto machine in the main office. The pages retained the pungent but not unpleasant smell of the ink. They bore the outlines of a jack-o-lantern. The children were asked to color the pumpkin.

Robert and his classmates took out their crayons and set to work. While Robert preferred to create his own pictures, he enjoyed art of any kind, including coloring within the lines already laid down for him. He carefully shaded his pumpkin to make it as three-dimensional as possible. Beyond the windows, the skies were heavy with gray clouds scudding eastward and threatening rain. The students worked diligently at their drawings and gave their substitute teacher no trouble.

At the end of the period, Robert hurried home. He presented his mother with his jack-o-lantern drawing, which she appeared to appreciate. The evening became blustery. Now and then, the wind moaned. The weather was delivering the perfect atmospheric conditions for Halloween.

On the previous Saturday, after Robert and Charles' piano lessons in Lafayette, Ida had shopped at the L. S. Ayres store, a branch of the big department store in Indianapolis. On display near the front doors were plastic Halloween masks.

"You boys, pick out your masks for trick-or-treating," Ida had said.

The masks featured a fuzzy surface that felt almost like velvet when touched with the fingertips. Charles had selected a gray donkey mask, and Robert had chosen a brown dog mask.

When it was time to go trick-or-treating, Ida gave each of her sons an old sheet to wrap around the shoulders, concealing their identities. They had brown-paper grocery bags, which they had decorated with crayon pictures of bats, witches, and black cats. Joe drove them downtown and parked the car up the street from Grandma Rhode's house.

Robert and Charles happily donned their new masks and wrapped the sheets tightly around themselves as the wind tried to whip the cloth away. They scurried to Grandma Rhode's front door and knocked boisterously. When she saw them, she stood back in mock alarm and exclaimed, "Well, sir! Who might these animals be? I can hardly guess!"

"Did we fool you?" Charles asked laughingly, as both boys removed their masks.

"You most certainly did!" Grandma Rhode said.

"Trick or treat!" Robert joyfully shouted, holding forth his paper bag and waiting for the popcorn ball that he knew would be forthcoming.

Grandma Rhode and Great Aunt Margaret, who lived on opposite corners of an intersection, always got together to prepare popcorn balls for Halloween. They made the best! The balls were huge, the popcorn was tender, and the caramel was rich.

While Grandma Rhode placed a giant popcorn ball in each bag, Joe and she chatted about the weather and how they hoped the rain would hold off.

With Joe not far behind in the shadows, the boys next hammered their fists on Aunt Margaret's door. A big smile spread across her face.

"What do we have here?" she asked. "I see a dog. He seems friendly enough. And here's a donkey. He won't kick, will he, Joe?"

"Trick or treat!" yelled Charles.

"I think you're Charles, and you're Robert. I see that you already have your popcorn balls from your grandmother, and I will give each of you another one."

While the boys waited for Aunt Margaret to bring the sweets, the wind whistled around her house and dashed her bushes from side to side.

Robert made his popcorn balls last. He ate only one of them later that night and saved the other for another day. They were the greatest treats of his childhood days.

Joe took his sons to a few other houses in town—enough for each boy to gather four candy bars. Milky Way and Three Musketeers were Robert's favorites.

The next day, as Robert went to school, he felt sorry that Halloween was over, but he looked forward to the lunch period. The clouds were spitting rain, and he thought it likely that Mrs. Arvin would hold a spelling bee.

Chapter 25: The Rev. Lowell E. Morris

"Your Grandpa and Grandma Morris are coming to dinner today," Ida reminded the boys. "Robert, I need you to dust, and, Charles, I want you to straighten up your room and put all your toys away."

Whenever the demands of a farm permitted, the family traveled southeast to Kirklin, Indiana, to visit Grandpa and Grandma Morris. He was the minister of the Methodist Church there. Before Robert could remember, the Morrises had lived in Westville, Indiana, where Ida taught school for the first time after earning her teaching degree at Indiana State Teachers College. Throughout his long working life, Grandpa Morris had taught school in Kentucky and Montana, and had served as minister in such Hoosier towns as Circleville, Frankfort, Hillsboro, Indianapolis, Newtown, Pence, Pittsboro, Waveland, and Wheatfield.

The Morrises came to see Ida, Joe, Charles, and Robert whenever a busy minister could find an opportunity.

Robert's mother had told the boys, "They're not related to you the way grandparents usually are, but they're your grandparents, all the same." Robert had failed to understand what such a cryptic statement meant, but, just by listening to the adults' conversation, he had discerned that the Reverend Lowell Everett Morris was Ida's surrogate father who had taken her under his wing when she was a thirteen-year-old girl in the Methodist Children's Home in Lebanon, Indiana.

Using the dust cloth that his mother handed him, Robert carefully cleaned the surfaces of the furniture in the living room while Charles repeatedly filled a cardboard box with toys that he then deposited in a small room at the foot of the stairway.

Robert enjoyed visits from Grandpa Morris, who was an educated gentleman with thick glasses, thin nose, thin face, thin hands, a ready smile, and … a toupee. Robert's father had said that Grandpa Morris gave the best sermons of any preacher Joe had heard because Grandpa Morris researched his topics thoroughly, wrote compellingly, and spoke eloquently. Robert had never heard him in the pulpit, but, when Joe married Ida, the Rev. Morris was the minister at the Methodist Church in Pine Village, and he officiated at their wedding, which took place at the parsonage. Robert had no reason to doubt his father's assessment of Grandpa Morris' abilities as a scholar, a writer, and an orator. At all times, Grandpa Morris' intelligence and his intellectual attainments were obvious to Robert. (Many years later, Robert had the opportunity to hear Grandpa Morris give a guest sermon at the Methodist

Church in Pine Village, and Robert was appropriately appreciative. Grandpa Morris quoted great literature while constructing an argument of biblical interpretation worthy of an English department degree in a leading university. His delivery was impeccable!)

Before long, Ida greeted Grandpa and Grandma Morris at the front door and welcomed them into the living room. Grandma Morris' name was Fern. She was Grandpa Morris's second wife. His first wife, Ella, had died many years earlier.

While Joe put the guests' coats on the bed in the main bedroom, Ida asked about their drive.

"We made good time," Grandpa Morris said. "We talked about little else other than how much we were going to enjoy another one of your home-cooked meals."

Ida excused herself to return to the kitchen while Joe, who taught the adult class at the church, talked to the Rev. Morris about recent class activities. Soon, Ida called everyone to the dinner table.

Grandpa Morris said the grace: "Father, we ask that you bless this food to our good and us to thy service, and we ask a special blessing for the hands that prepared this dinner."

Then a heaping platter of fried chicken was passed to Fern. Next came bowls of mashed potatoes, lima beans, and corn. A gravy boat made the rounds. Side dishes included strawberry Jell-O with banana slices. Ida had made her yeast rolls for the occasion. They were fat and fluffy! The conversation flowed effortlessly, with Grandpa Morris talking about various churches he had served, including Flackville near Indianapolis. Ida had lived with the Rev. Morris and Ella in Flackville while Ida taught elementary school in Indianapolis. Grandpa Morris also spoke about his service to the settlement schools in eastern Kentucky when he was a young man starting out. Robert listened intently to the Rev. Morris' stories about the mountain boys and girls that, so long ago, had attended the Red Bird Mission School to learn skills that could readily be put to use.

While the dessert of angel food cake was being served, Grandpa Morris said, "I have good news. Fern and I will be moving back to Pine Village."

Ida beamed and glanced happily toward Joe, as he said with a big smile, "You don't say!"

"Yes, I do say!" Grandpa Morris confirmed with a smile bigger than Joe's. "I have decided to retire from the active ministry, and Fern and I want to live here. A house is available less than a block south of the Methodist Church, and we intend to sign for it."

"It'll be so nice to have you living nearby!" Ida exclaimed.

"We wanted to surprise you," said Grandpa Morris.

"You've done that alright," said Ida.

"I've always felt a special connection to the church here in Pine Village," Grandpa Morris continued. "This is Fern's hometown, and we want to be near you and your family."

A few months later, the Morrises moved into a tidy white house on the east side of Jefferson Street. A few steps led up to the front porch. The front door opened into a cozy living room. Quite often, Robert's family looked in on Grandpa and Grandma Morris, who were frequent guests at Sunday dinner. Grandpa Morris usually could be found sitting in an easy chair with his feet up while he was reading a book or a church magazine. Robert liked visiting the Morrises because Grandpa Morris had a special place in his heart for Robert and Charles.

Once, on a hot summer day, Grandpa Morris walked up to see Ida and Joe. He found Robert trying to saw a board that Robert wanted for a birdhouse that needed a new bottom. The handsaw's teeth had become flattened through hard use, and Robert was making only slow progress.

"Let me show you how to saw," Grandpa Morris said. Robert gladly let the Rev. Morris take over.

"You want to move your arm straight back and forth from the elbow," Grandpa Morris instructed. Then he began to demonstrate.

The saw caught and bowed, so Grandpa Morris pulled back on it to straighten it out. He slowly drew the saw in the groove to give it a good start. He again tried to demonstrate how to work the saw forward and back, but it snagged as before.

The saw kept jamming up. Beads of perspiration were forming on Grandpa Morris' forehead and trickling down his neck. He unbuttoned his outer shirt, removed it, and draped it across the clothesline. In the process, he bumped his toupee, which slipped to one side. He straightened it, and then, with his

undershirt clinging to the perspiration, he threw himself into the project with all his strength. By the sheer power of his will, Grandpa Morris finally managed to saw through the board.

He grinned, handed the saw back to Robert, reclaimed his shirt, put it on (this time carefully, so as not to dislodge his toupee), and buttoned it up. "As Ecclesiastes says," Grandpa Morris began, "'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might!' I think I will ask Ida for some of her sweet iced tea now."

Robert thanked Grandpa Morris for the lesson.

Chapter 26: The Foragers

That fall, Ida drove Charles and Robert to "the secret farm." She headed toward Rainsville. North of where the road made a bend, a farm had once stood. Nature had reclaimed the site. The buildings had long ago rotted into oblivion, leaving no trace above ground. Even the wagon tracks that had led from the location of the barn out to the road had vanished, except for two ruts that could barely be seen amid the tangled growth on the north face of a low hill. Somehow, Ida knew how to weave through islands of blackberry vines and not get scratched. The boys followed her exactly, so that they would not get scratched either. All three carried buckets.

In the vicinity of where the buildings had stood far back from the highway, Ida strode up to "her" crab apple tree. The bright red fruit was two inches in diameter. The tree had set on heavily that year. She helped the boys fill their buckets with crab apples, which she would later slice and boil to make a clear orange jelly that was Robert's favorite of all the jellies his mother ever made.

"Look," she said, holding a crab apple in one hand and cutting it open with a paring knife that she had brought in the pocket of her dark blue jacket, "what color are the seeds?"

"They're brown," Charles said.

"That's how you know the crab apples are ready to be gathered," Ida explained. "If the seeds were not yet dark brown, we'd leave them on the tree a little longer. See how white the apple is on the inside? That's another indication that they're ready."

With buckets full of crab apples, the three made their way back to the car. They emptied the buckets into two bushel baskets in the trunk. Then they returned to the tree to get more of the red fruit. Robert noticed that the skins of the apples were a darker red where the sunlight bathed them.

They made two more trips to the car. By then, the baskets were almost full.

Next, Ida guided her sons to a slope to the north of the crab apple tree. There, she located "her" pawpaw tree.

"What's a pawpaw?" Robert asked.

"I'm going to show you," Ida replied. She reached up to loosen a brownish green fruit from the branch. She held it in front of Robert and teased it open with her paring knife.

"The inside is like a mushy banana," she said.

"Can I eat it?" Robert asked.

"I don't think you'd like it raw," Ida cautioned. "The pawpaws might need to be a little sweeter for you. I'm going to put them in Jell-O."

The small tree had only a few pawpaws, but they had reached the ideal ripeness. Ida carefully laid them in the bottoms of the buckets so that they would not bruise.

"How did you know the pawpaws were ready?" Charles asked.

"It's just the time of year for them," Ida said. "Now, you can look at them to see if they are just beginning to turn a little brown. That's when they're at their best. If they're too brown, they're past their peak and could be rotten."

Soon, the family was headed home. Ida said, "I sure hope nobody else ever finds my farm."

Ida was a skilled forager. When March winds gradually straightened the curls of her permanent, she could be found bent over in the yard while harvesting spring greens. She collected the mustard called "bittercress." She made sure she had plenty of dandelions. Into her bowl went chickweed, the tiniest leaves of the early dock, and a few leaves of the broadleaf plantain. Many of these plants entered into her fresh salads while others were cooked and served steaming hot and generously peppered.

In the spring of the year when the crab apples had been so numerous, Ida would take Robert, Charles, and a friend back to the abandoned farm to collect a few sassafras roots to make tea.

The boys would use shovels to dig just below the surface of the rich soil to expose the thin roots of the shrub with its three distinctively different shapes of leaf, one of them like a mitten. Their mother and her friend then would kneel on an old blanket and gently cut sections from a few of the roots. These she would bundle together to bring home.

"There was an article in the paper not long ago that said sassafras has been banned because the chemicals in it can be harmful, but one not-very-strong

cup should be good for us anyway. It's a tonic that purifies the blood, which has been too lethargic during this long winter," Ida would say.

At home that evening, Ida would steep the sassafras roots for a minute or two—until each of the four teacups contained a bright amber liquid. She would add honey, and the tea would be ready to drink. Robert would enjoy the flavor so much that he would wish he could have more of the tea.

"The roots are good for tea for only a few weeks, aren't they?" Joe would ask. Ida would nod. "I wonder," Joe would continue, "if the government studies were conducted with roots that were past the time when they could be boiled for tea. Maybe the properties change in the other months of the year."

On another occasion that spring, Ida would take the boys and her friend mushroom hunting at the old farm. She would collect only the morels, which she would dredge in flour and fry in butter.

Back in that same autumn when the crab apples were so numerous, Mrs. Bowen, one of Ida's best friends, was visiting with Ida over a late afternoon cup of coffee in Ida's kitchen, and the topic turned to mushroom hunting. Mrs. Bowen's name was Irene, but Ida always called her "Mrs. Bowen."

Mrs. Bowen said, "I've been giving some thought to that old neglected farm out there by Rainsville. I'd bet you there might be mushrooms back in there."

Ida gulped. She opened her mouth to say, "No, there aren't any. I've been back there, and you'd be wasting your time." She hesitated, instead.

Mrs. Bowen's sharp features sharpened further. She peered into Ida's soul. "I do believe you were about to say something," Mrs. Bowen said, meaningfully.

"Oh," Ida sighed. "I want to let you in on a little secret. Yes, that old place is where I find my morels. It's also where I get my blackberries, my crab apples, and my pawpaws."

"Your secret's safe with me," Mrs. Bowen said, setting down her coffee cup with a loud bump on the table, as if she were a queen affixing her seal to a court document. "Just make sure you come get me every time you go out there!"

“I will,” Ida said. … and, as already implied, Ida would be true to her word, taking her friend with her to “their farm.”

Chapter 27: The Red Coat

For that winter, Ida bought Robert and Charles new parkas. Robert asked if, rather than the usual dark blue or gray coats, he could have the red one on the rack at Sears, and—surprise!—Ida consented.

Robert loved his red coat! It was bright red throughout. Even the fuzzy stuff that took the place of fur around the hood was the same red! He could hardly wait to wear it on the playground at school.

He had fewer chances to wear it than he might have. The onslaught of childhood diseases had begun, and he had to remain at home with them, as well as being "quarantined" with what he eventually came to expect: his Christmas flu.

Over the next few years, Robert had the chicken pox, measles, mumps (on both sides), and a different kind of measles that was much more virulent than the first kind had been. He heard his parents referring to "the German measles," so that must have been what the bad ones were.

Robert hated missing school and falling behind in his assignments—even while he tried to keep up from home.

… and he hated Vicks VapoRub. Whenever he had a cold or flu, his mother smeared the intensely aromatic VapoRub on his chest, covered the gooey mess with a square torn from a worn-out pair of flannel pajamas, and buttoned up his new flannel pajama top over the square. Even when she had pulled the sheet, the bedspread, the gray woolen blanket, and the crazy quilt with its thick batting up to Robert's eyes, Robert could still smell the VapoRub. While he slowly baked beneath the heavy bedding, he felt sick because he smelled VapoRub, which he associated with feeling sick. It was a vicious cycle.

Robert was not terribly fond of the vitamins, either. They were in a brown bottle. Ida would pour the thick liquid into a teaspoon and hold out the spoon for Robert to take the vitamins, which had a strong aroma from the sulfur in the composition.

In the medicine cabinet above the bathroom sink were other medicines. There was tincture Merthiolate for cuts. It was applied from a thin glass rod attached to the inside of the cap, and it colored the cut a glaring reddish orange. For inflamed membranes or rashes, the light pink salve from the tube of Taloin ointment did the trick. Rubbing alcohol cleaned scratches.

Whenever Robert experienced a particularly stubborn bout of flu, Ida took him to see Dr. Scheurich. The good doctor might or might not set his cigar aside long enough to insert a tongue depressor in Robert's mouth and to peer down Robert's throat. Then, invariably, he would hand Ida a bottle of little red pills. Did the pills help? Not that Robert could determine.

Behind one of the upper hinged doors of the Hoosier was Joe's arsenal of aspirin. There was also an extra tin of the udder balm, with which Joe soothed his cows' sensitive skin after milking them. Joe and Ida applied udder balm to any dry patches that appeared on their hands, arms, or legs during the winter months.

Illnesses could not hold out forever, and—finally!—Robert got to wear his red coat on the playground! Alan and Terry led Robert's class in building a beauty of a snow fort. Simultaneously, the two Steves of the class above Robert's class guided their classmates in fashioning a most menacing fort within a snowball's distance of the other fort.

One of the Steves yelled across the no-man's-land, "I dare you to be the first to throw a snowball." At the same time, to taunt Alan and Terry's side, the other Steve stood on his head and waggled his legs.

"I say we attack 'em now," Terry advised.

"Have we made enough snowballs?" Alan asked.

"Sure! There are plenty."

"They're asking for it," Robert said.

"Fire at will!" Alan commanded.

Suddenly, the air between the two forts was full of snowballs. With several allies from older and younger classes, each fort numbered as many as twenty troops. Steve the Taunter nimbly dodged multiple snowballs hurled in his direction. His arm was a blur as he gave back as good as he got, firing snowball after snowball at his opponents.

A snowball found its mark on the right side of Robert's face, shattering lightly all about. Robert laughed as a chunk of the cold stuff went down his neck. Almost immediately, another snowball burst off the left side of his face, and more snow rolled inside his collar and down his neck. Robert was laughing so hard that he was almost incapacitated.

Gasping for air and laughing uncontrollably, he yelled, "Stop! Stop!"

Wham! Another snowball hit him on a shoulder.

"It's your coat," Terry shouted over the din of the battle. "The red is a target!"

Robert ducked behind the highest wall of the fort and regained his breath.

Nearby, Dennis jumped up to throw a massive snowball toward the enemy fort. At the same instant, he was hit full in the face.

"Oh, they got me," he said, falling to the ground and pretending to be a casualty—but only for a second. Then he was back on his feet and sending snowballs through the frosty air.

Susan, Linda, Randy, and Jean had reinforced the fort. They scurried out the back, formed snowballs in their gloved hands, ran inside the enclosure, and threw them as hard as they could, many of them finding their mark.

Before long, the sides had increased to over thirty troops apiece.

Just when the fight was becoming the best in history, someone heard Mrs. Arvin calling. The recess was over. Laughing and chuckling, the students filed from both forts across the playground to the school building. There were no hard feelings. Students that had been enemies only seconds earlier were swapping tales of valor with one another on the way back to the classrooms.

As Robert thought about it later, it may well have been the best snowball fight in history. By the next day, an abrupt warming trend had melted much of the snow, and the forts were destined to disappear from the playground landscape. The bonds of friendship that the battle had only strengthened were strong enough to endure the vicissitudes of lifetimes.

Chapter 28: The Glasses and the General

"I don't think Charles is seeing as well as he should," Ida said to Joe over the supper table one evening in the spring of Robert's second-grade year. "He's having trouble reading what Mrs. Winegardner writes on the chalkboard. I think we should take him to see the ophthalmologist."

An appointment was made not only for Charles but also for Robert (just for good measure), and, on the given day, Ida took the boys to Lafayette.

Robert enjoyed his time in the ophthalmologist's office. He thought the experience of having his eyes dilated was sufficiently novel to keep his attention. When he sat in the chair in the darkened room that was painted a deep green, he could have fallen asleep because everything was so restful. … but he remained awake to answer the doctor's questions, spoken in a low voice.

"Now look at the row of letters beginning with L and P. Do the letters look better like this or like this?"

The doctor had arranged the big machine that stretched across Robert's face so that only one of Robert's eyes was peering at the wall chart, which seemed to float in the air and to glow with an inner light. A whispering sound near Robert's ear of a lens sliding into place accompanied the doctor's words "like this," and another whispering sound of another lens sliding into place occurred when the doctor repeated "like this." Initially, Robert could see a difference and could reply with "the first one" or "the second one," but, eventually, he could detect no difference. "I don't know," he would say. "They look the same." … and the doctor would take a note somewhere in the darkness.

"This or this?" "This or this?" The pattern continued until both eyes had been tested.

Then there were more eye drops to stop the dilation and to return Robert's eyes to normal.

Charles had already been tested.

In the outer office, while the boys waited for their eyes to begin to adjust, the doctor said to Ida, "Both boys are nearsighted and will need glasses." He recommended a shop where they could be fitted with frames and lenses made to his prescription.

"I didn't know Robert was having any trouble," Ida said to the doctor.

"His eyes are similar to his brother's, but, naturally, his nearsightedness has not advanced quite as much yet."

The doctor handed the boys dark plastic glasses with white cardboard temple pieces that hooked over their ears. Ida walked them to the car.

Robert felt amazed that the whole world looked so fuzzy!

In a little over a week, the boys had their new glasses.

One of the first sights that Robert saw through his glasses was a century-old steam locomotive.

The United States was commemorating the Civil War, which had taken place between 1861 and 1865.

Joe, who had been a valedictorian and who read avidly about history, said to Charles and Robert, "A century may sound like a long time, but bear in mind that I talked with veterans of the Civil War who were farmers around Pine Village. I wasn't very old, but I remember those men very well. You had several ancestors that served in the war; some were on one side, and some were on the other. Your great great grandfather was a musician in the 100th Indiana Volunteers. He played a fife. The musicians also were soldiers who fired their guns during the battles."

The 32-year-old Daniel M. Fenton, who stood five feet six inches tall and had a fair complexion with light hair and blue eyes, was mustered into Company G of the 100th Indiana Volunteers on September 27, 1862, at Indianapolis, whereupon he was paid a $25 bounty. Indeed, musicians in the Civil War often joined in the fighting, and, apparently, Daniel was no exception. The 100th Indiana Volunteers supported at Vicksburg and Knoxville. The regiment fought in the most exposed location on Missionary Ridge and in a similarly deadly position at Kennesaw Mountain. The 100th supported again at Atlanta and experienced yet another sharp battle at the beginning of General William T. Sherman's march toward Savannah. It was at Grand Junction, Tennessee, in February of 1863 that Daniel faced the privations of a cold winter in the field.

Fifers such as Daniel played music to march the armies toward battle and helped to clear the field of the wounded and dead after battle. Daniel saw more than he wanted to see of the terror of warfare, and, physically, he broke down. For the rest of his life, he complained of chronic diarrhea and

rheumatism from the exposure he suffered in Tennessee. He had jaundice and disease of the liver.

All of these facts Joe narrated and explained to his sons.

Joe also said that Isaac Belew had been a member of the 100th Indiana and was the great grandfather of Glen J. Brutus, with whom Joe shared an enthusiasm for agricultural steam engines. Further, Joseph D. Farden had served in the 100th; Joseph's son, Millard, was a leader in local businesses, and Joseph's daughters, Flora and Fairy—both 1899 graduates of the Pine Village School—became teachers.

As part of the nation's observances of the conflict that temporarily tore the nation apart, the locomotive named *The General* was coming to Lafayette on its way to Chicago from Nashville, Tennessee.

On April 12th in 1862, civilian James J. Andrews and twenty Union volunteers, acting on orders from General Ormsby M. Mitchel, sneaked through Southern lines and succeeded in seizing *The General* and three boxcars at Big Shanty, Georgia. The raiders drove the train northward toward Chattanooga, cutting telegraph lines, prying up rails, and attempting to burn bridges to sever Confederate communications. Unfortunately for the raiders, the conductor of *The General* and Confederate troops closely pursued them, and rain defeated their efforts to set fire to bridges. With journals close to the melting point, *The General* eventually ran out of fuel and water. The raiders abandoned the train but were rounded up and imprisoned. In June of 1862, James J. Andrews and seven of the raiders were executed by hanging. Engineer William Knight and eight others escaped and found their way back to Union lines. In 1863, the rest were released in a prisoner exchange. Six of the raiders received the nation's first Medals of Honor. Fess Parker starred as Andrews in Walt Disney's movie *The Great Locomotive Chase* only five years before Robert and Charles stood beside *The General* in Lafayette.

Robert thought that the storied locomotive, which had been the subject of so many books, was enormous! Steam sighed from the cylinder cocks, and moisture sizzled around the hot boiler of the elegant machine.

The engineer finished oiling the boxes. He turned to my father and said, "Would your boys like to climb up on the platform to see the firebox?"

"I'm sure they would," Joe replied.

Robert was too shy to take a step forward, but Charles jumped at the opportunity. Joe helped Robert up the tall steps. The engineer swung open the firebox door, exposing the orange flames within. After staring at the fire through his new glasses, Robert's wide eyes took in the shining brass details of the cabin. Years later, he could instantaneously recall the scents of oil and smoke, the sounds of crackling and hissing. The visit to see *The General* made a profound impression on him: an impression made all the more indelible because he could see every detail so clearly.

Chapter 29: The Sow and the Drive-In

Early that spring, sows were farrowing, and Joe had one sow left over after filling all his individual hog houses. He arranged panels wired to metal fence posts to form a narrow chute to help guide the sow from the hog lot to the stall in the southwest corner of the barn. Unbeknownst to Joe, Robert was hiding near the chicken house. Robert held a corn cob that he planned to throw at his father in an ambush whenever Joe might walk within range. Joe often entered into the fun of such mock attacks, and Robert looked forward to the surprise.

Meanwhile, Joe was ready to steer the sow toward the barn. He stood behind her, and he took hold of the top edges of the panels to steady himself, should the sow try to back up. He began nudging her forward.

"Go on! Get on up there!" he spoke sharply to the rather reluctant sow. Just as the hog had reached the high threshold of the open Dutch door, she balked.

"Come on! Get up in there!" Joe shouted.

Suddenly, the sow flexed her fat body, bringing her front legs around to her left and placing them on the edge of the panel, as if she would attempt to jump over the panel.

"Pshaw!" Joe exclaimed, as he struggled to shove her legs off the board.

No sooner had he dislodged the sow than she whirled to her right and tried to leap over the tall panel.

"Dog my cats!" Joe yelled while making a superhuman effort to shove her front legs back down to the ground. In the process, he scratched his forearm on the end of a baling wire, and blood trickled down to his elbow.

Robert watched, wondering if he could do anything to assist his father.

Joe managed to get the sow oriented in the right direction, and, with a mighty push, he made her jump up over the tall threshold and into the stall. Working at breakneck speed, Joe swung shut the bottom half of the Dutch door and locked it in place. He breathed a sigh of relief and climbed over a panel to tend to matters outside the chute.

All at once, with a splintering crash, the sow flew through the air and fell to the ground. She found her legs and bolted for the hog lot. The remains of the broken Dutch door hung from the hinges.

Joe uttered a word that Joe never said.

Robert remained hidden. Robert's eyes were wide. He knew the word because some of his classmates at school had kindly taught him what it meant, but he never expected to hear his father use it. His father never used a naughty word!

Robert slunk away, so that Joe would never know that his son had overheard his father's transgression. Robert would keep the secret for years to come, and he never divulged it to anyone. Robert felt certain that his father, who taught the adult class at the church on Sundays, had instantly repented!

The sow that had escaped the barn held off having her litter. Joe felt that the litter by the first sow to have had pigs in the present round was old enough to be released into the hog lot, and he readily confined the stubborn sow in the hog house vacated by the oldest piglets and their mother.

To trim down the number of pigs on the farm, Joe later loaded three pigs in his GMC pickup. He could haul them to a variety of nearby markets: Boswell, Attica, and Lafayette were the principal outlets. On that Saturday, he chose Lafayette. Charles and Robert accompanied him. After unloading the pigs at the stockyard, the morning had been spent. Joe and the boys were hungry, so Joe pulled into the Park 'n' Eat, a drive-in restaurant on State Street with the Tastee-Freeze and the Cities Service station on the east side and the Standard gasoline station on the west side.

When the waitress stepped up to the truck, she made a face. "Pew!" she said in disgust, as she smelled the hog manure in straw lying in the bed of the pickup. Without saying another word, she turned and went back to the dining area.

"I wonder what the hold-up is," Joe said.

Before long, the owner of the restaurant walked out to the truck. With an apologetic smile, he said to Joe, "I'm sorry. I'm afraid we can't serve you. The smell of the pigs is too strong and will scare away our other customers."

Robert felt embarrassed. He understood the owner's point, but Robert knew better than to say anything.

With a sharp look in his eye, Joe returned the owner's smile and said, "That's the fragrance of money. I just sold three pigs, and I have good American money to spend on three of your hamburgers."

The owner shrugged his shoulders and enhanced the apologetic look on his smiling face. "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid I have to ask you to drive on. If you will come back in your family car, I will personally ensure that your meal meets your expectations."

"You needn't go to such trouble," Joe replied over his shoulder, as he backed out from under the roof of the drive-in and headed home.

"I'm sorry you boys have to wait a while longer before we eat," he said. Robert and Charles didn't mind, but they could see that Joe was seething.

It came as no surprise that the family never returned to the Park 'n' Eat.

The occasion when the sow broke the barn door and the occasion when the restaurant refused service were the only two occasions when Joe was angry—at least, they were the only two times when Robert could detect Joe's anger. Joe was otherwise consistently peaceful, even amicable at all times! Robert concluded that pigs were the ingredients to upset his father's proverbial apple cart. After all, hogs were the common denominator in both incidents. Robert developed the misgiving that, in working with swine, situations could arise that would inspire ire; for that reason, he always tried to keep his equanimity and his sense of humor when feeding pigs or helping care for new litters. Robert had reached the conclusion that pigs were catalysts for disaster.

Chapter 30: The Summer Plays

For several years, Charles and Robert had been enrolled in Mrs. Elizabeth Clements Sharpless' Children's Summer Theater at Columbian Park in Lafayette. Robert would never forget the first day that he attended. Back then, he was not yet in first grade.

With hopes that Mrs. Sharpless might help Robert to finish overcoming his inability to "say his *r*'s," Ida had deposited Charles and Robert at Rush Pavilion overhanging the lagoon.

Columbian Park was a magnificent facility sprawling over a triangular area in between Scott Street, Park Avenue, and Main Street. A zoo with a large animal house occupied one end. The animated conversations of monkeys often rose above the tranquil lapping of the water in the lagoon. Buddy the Chimpanzee frequently accompanied the engineer of the miniature locomotive that pulled a train on the well-built tracks weaving around the park. Zebras roamed a fenced enclosure.

In the main room of the pavilion, Mrs. Sharpless reigned. Her dynamic personality was constantly in evidence. On that first day, she assigned one of the Best sisters to teach Charles and Robert the words to "Frère Jacques," which they and other children would sing while dancing in a circle as part of one of the stage productions. Breezes from the lagoon wafted through the large open windows of the room, otherwise faintly redolent of the leotards and ballet slippers that the children were required to wear during rehearsals.

A painter widely recognized for her watercolors and her oils, Mrs. Sharpless was also a gifted musician and director. Over the years, Robert's appreciation of her enormous talent only grew. In Robert's second-grade year, Jenks Memorial Rest Center, otherwise known as "Jenks Rest," was built. It was a new facility with ample room for rehearsals of the large-scale productions for which Mrs. Sharpless was revered. A winding walkway dividing the lagoon connected the pavilion and Jenks Rest. Robert and another budding actor also named Robert—Robert Eugene Pechin III, to be exact—collected the green, heavy seed pods from the lilies that filled the edges of the lagoon with spectacular colors. With the other Robert's penknife, they and their friend Tim Funcheon carved out part of the pods to form canoes, which they set afloat. They watched their miniature boats drift lazily away until the Roberts were called back to rehearsals.

Mrs. Sharpless had assembled a vast staff. There were set designers, lighting and sound experts, costume designers, seamstresses, and musicians. One pianist among them could play as well as Jo Ann Castle on

The Lawrence Welk Show. The beloved Mrs. William F. McDill, whose children Sandy and Sherry were cast members, worked wonders with costumes, which she oversaw while assisting Mrs. Sharpless in the countless other ways that a schedule of five plays per summer demanded.

Young people who were really young adults customarily performed the major roles, so the theatrical productions often attained the stature of full-blown plays and musicals.

Each summer featured three or four large productions, and Robert found himself memorizing lines for the next show while still polishing lines for the current show.

Over the years, he absorbed and learned volumes of information from crew members. For a production set in Arabia, the artists on the staff painted many plywood cutouts in such a way that they appeared to be three-dimensional vases, some of them taller than a human being. Robert paid attention to the shading and the highlights that made the vases seem to be glazed pottery.

He was taught how to project his voice toward the microphones, some of which hung above and others of which were amid the footlights.

During one afternoon rehearsal when the lead actor was called away, Mrs. Sharpless asked Robert to read the actor's part from the script, thereby helping the rest of the cast to practice the scene. Robert thought that this was his chance to show Mrs. Sharpless how well he could do in a lead role. He reached a moment when the character was taken by surprise. Robert gave a shout into the microphone. He heard his exclamation reverberating from the speakers around the park. "No, no!" Mrs. Sharpless snapped. "He would *not* scream like that! Quite the contrary! He would remain silent! Always remember that less is more!"

On the evenings when the shows were presented on the great outdoor stage that was on Memorial Island at some distance from Rush Pavilion, electricity was in the air as performers changed into their costumes and the aroma of greasepaint filled the porches of the pavilion, which served as headquarters. As the lights on the great outdoor stage came up, the large audience grew silent, and the music (either live or recorded) began, Robert's heart beat fast.

Dennis, one of Robert's friends in his class at school, often visited an aunt who lived near Columbian Park, and he could be found in the audience.

Robert always tried to do his best to entertain everyone, including Robert's parents and his classmate.

Tom Sawyer featured scary scenes. The graveyard was so realistic as to be downright spooky, and the cave with Injun Joe was truly frightening. The actor who performed Muff Potter looked nothing like himself in real life. For his role as the drunken misfit, he had wild red hair and a scraggly beard, thanks to the excellent make-up artistry that Mrs. Sharpless could command.

When talented singer and actress Roberta Preston donned her elaborate mock turtle costume for *Alice in Wonderland*, Robert knew that the production would be a huge hit.

Babes in Toyland offered enchanting sets with fascinating effects of lighting. Robert's big line was "Oh no! It's the water from the Laughing Water Well!" Then (as scripted) Barnaby made the mistake of drinking the water!

Poor Ida drove the twenty miles to and from Lafayette at least once a day and often twice a day *almost every single day* during those summers when Charles and Robert were in Mrs. Sharpless' plays.

There were many amusing moments backstage. During the *Mikado*, the minstrel was in the midst of a story he was telling to crew members when he heard out front the music to the song he was supposed to be singing to the audience. Robert never saw someone run so fast! In that same production, Robert carried a bamboo umbrella above the emperor, ably—and nimbly—performed by Kevin McGuire. Robert's job was to keep the umbrella high above the actor's head, no matter where he walked. At one point, the emperor began to dance. He flung his hand holding a fan straight up, and the fan struck against—and broke—several of the thin wooden arms supporting the umbrella, which suddenly folded down around the emperor. He ducked from beneath the ruined umbrella and adlibbed a look of displeasure before resuming his dance. The audience roared with laughter. Robert felt the deepest chagrin, but, as soon as the number was completed and he carried the collapsed umbrella backstage, Mrs. Sharpless ran over to Robert and said, "Did you do that on purpose, or was it an accident? Never mind! It was brilliant! We'll rig the umbrella to collapse that same way every time!" Robert abruptly felt huge relief.

One night, Mrs. Sharpless walked onto the stage shortly after the show had begun. No one—not even the performers—knew what she was doing. She gestured for a staff member on the ground level to hand up a microphone over the footlights. Then, in a measured voice of reassurance, she said, "We

have received a report that a tornado is approaching Lafayette from the southwest. We ask that you calmly walk to Jenks Rest, where you can take shelter. Everyone needs to vacate this facility at this time."

Robert and Charles met up with their parents. As they strode briskly toward the building at the end of the winding walkway, Joe said to Ida, "We're parked near Jenks Rest. Why don't we go to the car and drive home?" Ida agreed, so the family hurried to the Chevrolet. As Joe was driving through Lafayette, the evening sky turned a greenish black. Ida kept looking up through the passenger window. Joe decided to head south, rather than west. He made the right choice, as the car passed quickly from beneath the threatening wall cloud. Fortunately, the funnel did not descend on Lafayette.

For the bright lights of the stage, relatively heavy makeup was deployed. Once, Mrs. Sharpless was running past where Robert was having greasepaint applied. She whirled around and said, "Make him darker." She rummaged among the tubes and found a particularly dark one. "Use this one," she told the makeup artist. "He's so bloomin' fair, he's a ghost on stage!"

Robert long remembered those summers at the park with billowy cumulus clouds almost motionless in a sky of vibrant blue, the actors in small groups rehearsing lines outdoors, the vivid orange and yellow and purple flowers everywhere, the exotic ducks preening beside the rippling waters of the lagoon, the indolent warmth, and the faraway chatter of monkeys.

Chapter 31: The Handwriting and the Soap

"Make your loop come back to the line before you swing out," Ida said to Robert. She was making Charles and Robert practice their cursive handwriting.

The boys were sitting at the kitchen table. Ida had given them ball point pens and yellow paper with thin blue lines, and she was having them practice the letter *l* over and over again.

"Your father has beautiful handwriting, and I want you to have beautiful handwriting, too," Ida reminded them. "Robert, you're not bringing your loop all the way back to the line first."

Robert found these exercises intensely boring. His mother would go for weeks without making him sit down for a session of cursive practice, then, for some reason, she would get the idea of forcing him and his brother to fill line after line with the same letter of the alphabet. Robert could only imagine how bored his older brother must be. Charles had already been using cursive for two years. How could he stand to sit there for an hour or more while forming the letter *e* endlessly?

The numbers were even worse—or so it seemed to Robert.

"Robert, you're not closing your zeros at the top. Let me show you," Ida would say, as she took the pen from his hand and, reaching over his shoulder, demonstrated a proper zero. "See? Make sure your loop comes all the way back again so that the top of the zero looks exactly the same as the bottom."

Robert would take up the pen and write 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0—filling the line.

Not quite all the letters and numbers in the book were designed in quite the same way as the foot-tall white letters and numbers printed on heavy cards with dark green backgrounds that lined the tops of Mrs. Arvin's chalkboards, but they were similar enough to meet the teacher's demanding standards.

One sunny Saturday afternoon, when the family had returned from the boys' piano lessons in Lafayette—and Ida's shopping spree—Ida said to Charles and Robert, "We're going to make soap today."

The family did not have to make soap. Ida bought bars when she shopped. Once, she had permitted the boys to use paring knives to carve Ivory bars

into the shapes of recumbent lions such as the concrete ones that lined the driveway of the occasional house. Ida had clipped the lion pattern from a magazine. When the lions were finished, she had made the boys wait to float them in the bathtub. Ida wanted to be sure that Grandma Rhode and Aunt Margaret saw the lions first, before they were rubbed into sudsy lumps.

Always the teacher, Ida had a reason for making her own soap: she wanted to show the boys how it had been done when she was a girl. She skipped the step that Grandma Rhode and Aunt Margaret would have followed of boiling hardwood ashes for half an hour in rain water, then skimming the lye off the top. Ida reached for her can of Gillett's Lye, which she had purchased at a grocery store.

While Ida tied on her apron, she put Charles and Robert to work in the kitchen.

"Charles, how many pints are in a quart?" Ida asked.

"Two," Charles answered.

"How many cups are in a pint?"

"Two."

"Then how many cups are in a quart?"

"Four."

"That's right. Measure out four cups from this gallon of lard," Ida said, handing Charles the tin measuring cup and a butter knife to scrape the lard level at the upper edge of the cup.

Meanwhile, Ida measured slightly less than 4 1/2 ounces of lye, which she accurately weighed on the kitchen scale. She handed Robert a Pyrex 4-cup measure and a pitcher of water from the hydrant beside the well in the front yard.

"Robert, pour the water up to the 10-ounce line here," said Ida, pointing to the line.

Next, she carefully carried the water, the lye, and a heavy Dutch oven outside.

"Never pour the water into the lye," Ida warned. "When I pour the lye into the water, the bowl is going to become very hot. Don't touch anything!"

Robert and Charles kept a safe distance while Ida slowly poured the water into the Dutch oven and the lye into the water.

"We're going to let that cool," Ida said. "Let's go back to the kitchen."

Ida melted the lard over low heat on the range. Then she told the boys to remain in the kitchen while she brought in the lye and water mixture.

She set the Dutch oven on the table and handed Robert a big wooden spoon.

"You're going to wash that spoon in this clean bowl," Ida said, as she poured clear vinegar in the bowl. "Scrub the spoon with this Ivory soap and keep rinsing it in the vinegar until I tell you to stop."

"You can quit rinsing now," Ida said after a few minutes. She took the spoon from Robert and ran water over it from the faucet at the kitchen sink.

"Stand back, while I pour the lye and water into the lard," she instructed. She slowly poured the contents of the Dutch oven into the lard that had been melted on the stove and kept hot. Lifting the wooden spoon from the towel where the spoon had been drying, she quickly began stirring the lye and water into the lard. "Watch what happens!" she said.

Robert and Charles looked on while the mixture turned into something resembling cake batter. Ida kept lifting the spoon and dribbling some of the batter across the surface. After about five minutes, the dribbled line kept its shape for a time before becoming submerged. Ida put a lid on the pot and kept it hot for an hour. Then she called the boys back into the kitchen.

They watched while she poured the mixture into a sheet cake pan.

"Now we're ready to wait until tomorrow," Ida said.

The next day, Ida used a sharp knife to cut the soap into large rectangular bars, which were a deep tan color from the Gillett's Lye. One bar lasted for months and had a pure scent unlike store-bought soaps.

Joe stepped into the kitchen and admired the bars of soap.

"I think you boys deserve a treat after helping Mom make soap," he said. "I have to go to the elevator, so you come along, and you can have a Coke."

Charles and Robert happily climbed into the pickup, and Joe drove east on State Route 26 to the elevator.

Usually, the boys had to split one small bottle of Coke, but their father generously let each have his own bottle. Further, each could choose what kind of pop he wanted: Coke, root beer, orange, cream soda, or grape.

Joe dropped the coin into the slot at the left and opened the lid on top of the cooler. Charles went first. He wanted root beer. He took hold of the fluted cap and the bulged neck of the bottle and slid it along the slot in the metal channel that held the bottle upright. He continued to guide the bottle into the opening where he could lift it up and it was his. He inserted it into the enclosure where he could pry the cap off. Then (as he had been taught) he checked the top of the bottle to make sure the glass was not chipped. Had it been, he would have told his father, who would have told Mr. Hail, who would have given Joe a refund.

Robert wanted a grape soda, but it was blocked by bottles containing other flavors.

"Let me help," Joe said. He slid bottles along channels and moved them out of the way like railroad cars at a switchyard until he could guide the grape bottle into the opening. He pried the cap off and handed the bottle to Robert. Finally, Joe helped himself to a Coke.

Nothing could have been better, unless Robert could have had a "black cow." The float was made at home by combining vanilla ice cream and Coke in a tall glass. All the same, the grape soda was a delicious reward for helping his mother in the kitchen.

Chapter 32: The Paddle and the 4-H Club

Robert so admired Mrs. Arvin that he was sad to leave her second-grade classroom. He moved on to Mrs. Moyers' third-grade room. Mrs. Moyers was a dignified teacher with a heart of gold. Attired in slender skirts of pleated brown plaid with matching fox-brown blouses and jackets, Mrs. Moyers appeared to be as sophisticated as she indeed was. She collected birds' nests, several of which adorned her shelves. She was happy to be asked about them, and she delighted in describing how she baked them to eliminate insects, mold, or mildew.

Every elementary teacher could wield a paddle, but Robert could tell that several of them greatly preferred not to resort to paddling a student. Mrs. Moyers was one who truly disliked her paddle, but, with Robert's class, she encountered a difficulty.

Who knows why? For some reason, Robert's class had a tough time memorizing multiplication tables. Mrs. Moyers tried every strategy she could apply toward helping the students remember such products as 9 times 7, 9 times 8, and 9 times 9. Finally, in desperation, she said, "I will paddle anyone who answers incorrectly when I ask for a product resulting from the multiplication of two factors." She arranged each day so that, in the final period, she could go up and down the row, asking students, "What is the product of seven and eight?" or "What is the product of six and nine?" When a student gave the wrong answer, she walked toward her desk, slowly removed the paddle from its drawer, and turned toward the student. Then she would say, "The period is nearly over, and I've yet to give the homework assignment; for that reason, I'll postpone paddling you for giving the wrong answer." … and, the next day, she seemed to have forgotten that she was to have paddled someone!

One afternoon, she came to Robert's desk. "What is the product of nine and six?" she asked. Suddenly, Robert felt confused. He remembered the product of nine and five: forty-five. He recalled the product of nine and seven: sixty-three. He could not—for the life of him—remember the product of nine and six. He blushed. Ultimately, he said, "I forget."

He felt his classmates' eyes staring at him—burning into him—from all sides. He pictured how it would feel to be marched to the front of the room, to be commanded to bend over, and to receive the humiliating blows of the paddle across his backside.

Mrs. Moyers glanced up at the large clock on the wall of her room. "Well, Robert, the period is almost over. I still need to give the homework

assignment for tomorrow. You'll have to wait to be paddled another day, but I want you to be sure to tell your mother that you do not know your nines."

All the elementary teachers respected Robert's mother because she, too, had taught elementary school for some fourteen years before Charles was born, when she quit teaching. When Robert returned home from school, he walked up to his mother and said, "Mrs. Moyers told me to tell you that I do not know my nines."

Ida was rolling pie dough. Flour was clinging in dusty patches on her forearms and her apron. She stopped in mid-roll and stared at Robert.

"What do you mean? You don't know your nines?"

"I forgot the product of nine and six today."

"Mrs. Moyers called on you, then? Is that it? And you couldn't answer her question?"

"Yes," Robert said meekly.

"Sit down here at the table while I finish the dough."

Robert took a seat on one of the bentwood chairs.

"Let's go through the nines," she began. "What is" she pushed the roller forward "nine times two?" she drew the roller back.

"Eighteen," Robert answered.

"What is" she pushed the roller forward "nine times three?" she drew the roller back.

"Twenty-seven," Robert answered.

Ida went all the way through the nines and made three circles of dough for pies while Robert responded to the drill.

While she prepared the pie fillings, she took him through the sevens and the eights. Then she went back to the nines to see if he would forget any of them. Luckily for him, he remembered all.

Then Ida sat down across from him. She looked him straight in the eye and said, "Are you embarrassed that you didn't know the answer when Mrs. Moyers asked you?"

"Yes, very much so," Robert replied.

"See that it never happens again," she said, and, after a stern moment, she smiled her trademark smile. "You know the answers now, and you need to know them for the rest of your life."

After that day, Robert never again came close to a paddling in school.

One of the greatest experiences of that school year was joining the 4-H Club, of which Charles was already a member. The sponsor was Mr. Coffman, a jolly elf of a man with a huge smile for everyone and every occasion. He was not terribly tall and a tad roly-poly. He wore black rimmed glasses through which his honest eyes sparkled, and his black hair was always cut somewhat short. He taught agriculture and shop classes, and he was the Future Farmers of America advisor, to boot. The 4-H meetings were held in Mr. Coffman's classroom in the basement of the gymnasium that opened out to the track and field to the north. A carved wooden owl for FFA meetings stood at the front of his desk. Thanks to the owl, he had gained the nickname "Bird." Everyone liked Mr. Coffman, and, before 4-H meetings were called to order, someone would say, "What's the word?" To this question, the universal reply was "Bird!"

Robert quickly memorized the 4-H motto: to make the best better. He soon mastered the promise: I pledge my head to clearer thinking, my heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger service, and my health to better living for my club, my community, and my country.

Robert and Charles' father, who had been in 4-H when he was a boy, decided to enter Charles in several projects that year, one of them the raising of a dairy cow. Robert, meanwhile, was enrolled in swine and gardening (plenty for a boy his age). Joe had a promising Holstein calf that he thought might do well in the judging. Charles was given the responsibility of training her to be exhibited in the coliseum that coming summer. Robert helped Charles because both boys thought the world of the calf.

Her name was Buttercup. She was as gentle as a lamb, but her personality was as powerful as a lion. She loved to be around people, and, at times, she seemed human, herself! Her coat of velvety black and purest white was always shiny (from the frequent brushings she received), and she fluttered her long lashes in a way that was most becoming.

Joe hoped Buttercup's conformity to the expectations for her breed would earn her a strong showing at the 4-H fair. She was duly registered as a purebred Holstein.

With thanks (in part) to Robert's 4-H project, Ida would have an extra helper in the garden that spring. His parents would teach him to keep exact records as he went along. Robert could hardly wait to see the vegetables grow!

Chapter 33: The Obstacle Course

Robert glanced toward the front gate and saw Alan, the boys' cousin, about to come in. Alan lived in Ladoga and was visiting his grandmother, Lena Rhode, who lived in Pine Village. Lena resembled the sweet old woman in the illustrations in one of the children's books that Ida had read to Robert when he was small: white hair in a braid encircling her head, wire-rim glasses, and an embroidered apron. In the book, the woman popped corn, and Robert wondered how often Lena did the same.

Robert ran to meet Alan, whom he looked up to. A visit from Alan meant fun on the farm. Charles sauntered through the screen door and waved at Alan.

Alan was closer to Charles' age, and the two of them devised what Robert considered fascinating games that he could not have imagined on his own.

Ida came to the door to greet Alan.

"Can you stay with us for dinner?" she asked Alan.

"Yes," Alan said simply.

"Then you boys play for an hour, and I'll have dinner ready by then."

"What would you like to do?" Charles asked Alan, who glanced at a red Schwinn bicycle lying on its side.

"Let's ride the bike," he suggested.

After taking turns riding back and forth on the sidewalk a few times within the yard, Alan and Charles decided to take the bicycle through the south gate into the chicken yard.

The boys cleared an oval track around the westernmost chicken house. They had to move a five-gallon metal bucket out of the way, and they had to pull up gypsum weeds by their roots along the south side of the chicken house. Soon, Charles and Alan were alternating fast rides around the building while Robert watched.

"Would you like to ride next?" Alan asked Robert.

"Yes, I would!" Robert exclaimed.

Alan turned toward Charles. "I think your brother would like to take a turn."

Charles yielded the bike to Robert, who pedaled slowly at first but eventually gained enough speed to keep the bike from wobbling. The boys had gone around the track often enough that the path had grown dusty. It felt soft beneath the tires.

After Robert had made two circuits, Alan said, "You know what we need. We need an obstacle course."

Charles agreed. He and Alan placed the metal bucket directly in the path. Then they took turns steering around it while riding at top speed.

While Charles rode, Alan looked over a small metal drum and the unhinged door from a hog house. When Charles came to a stop, Alan said, "Why don't we lay this barrel on its side and lean this door on it to make a ramp? Then we could ride the bike up the ramp, fly through the air, and come down on the other side."

Charles smiled broadly the moment he heard the plan. He and Alan tugged the drum into place and propped the door to make the ramp, which was steeper than either he or Alan had realized it would be.

"What do you think?" Alan asked. "Can we keep the bike upright after flying through the air?"

"I think so," Charles said.

"I dare you to go first," Alan said.

"I double dare you to go first," Charles replied.

"Well, alright!" Alan said. "If you're going to double dare me, I suppose I'll have to show you how it's done."

He set the bucket out of the way, so that the oval was clear, except for the ramp, which seemed pointed at the sky. Alan rode once around the chicken house to gain speed. On the second pass, he bounced the front wheel over the edge of the wooden door. The bike dashed up the incline and dropped heavily just beyond the upper edge. Alan stayed standing on the pedals as a cloud of dust arose, and, wobbling to the right and back to the left, he kept the bike upright. The stunt was magnificent! Robert applauded in glee!

"Now it's your turn," Alan said to Charles.

Having had the advantage of watching Alan, Charles imitated his predecessor's strategy as exactly as he could. He built up his speed around the track, and, the second time around, he flew up the ramp. With his legs almost straight up from the pedals, he rode the bike in its short arc back to Mother Earth and managed to pedal the bicycle forward beyond the dust cloud marking the point of impact.

"That was impressive," Alan said, in his customary droll manner.

"Robert, would you like to try?"

Robert quickly declined the opportunity. Shaking his head, he said, "I'm not old enough."

"Shall we go again?" Alan asked. He accepted the handlebars from Charles and made his second attempt, which was less wobbly than his first. Then it was Charles' turn again.

This time, Charles had a little less speed than he had on his first effort. When he reached the top of the ramp, the bike leaned to one side, and he and the bike fell.

"Oh, no!" Alan said. "Are you alright?"

Charles dusted himself off. He had torn the knee of his jeans, and he had a small cut on one elbow; otherwise, he had come away unscathed.

"Boys!" Ida called from the back door. "Dinner's ready! Charles, go get your father!"

Charles walked to the barn to tell Joe it was time to eat the noon meal.

When everyone entered the kitchen, Ida looked at Charles and asked, "How did you rip your jeans?"

"I fell off the bike," Charles said.

"You should have seen it!" Robert said, but a look from Charles made Robert understand he was not to reveal the dangerous ramp, which the boys had dismantled. "He just … fell … off!" Robert extemporized.

"Put some tincture Merthiolate on his elbow while I give the boys their Fizzies," Ida said to Joe.

Alan, Charles, and Robert eagerly dropped the Fizzies tablets in their glasses and watched as the flavored bubbles rose through the water.

After the meal, Ida told Charles to change his pants and to bring her the torn jeans. When she straightened out the rolled up cuffs, a handful of dust fell from each one.

“What were you boys doing?” she asked, with an inkling of the truth.

No one replied.

“Whatever it was, nobody was seriously hurt, at least,” she said, as she prepared a patch for the jeans.

As Joe had to go to Keith’s shop for a tractor part anyway, he drove Alan back to Lena’s house. Having had great fun, Robert looked forward to more adventures the next time Alan would visit.

Chapter 34: The Figurine and the Feed

That spring, Joe and Ida brought home the last boxes of items from the house of Grandma Rhode, who had passed away in her sleep on the final day of March. The only remaining thing that had to be moved before the property could be sold was the cultivator that Joe stored in the garage when it was not in use. Ida drove the Chevrolet into town while Joe ran the Minneapolis–Moline tractor into position to receive the cultivator. Charles and Robert were with their mother. They tumbled out of the car and stood waiting to help their father.

In years past, the boys nearly always had been on hand when Joe had attached the implement to his tractor. Grandma Kosie Rhode would serve everyone orange juice in tiny glasses with oranges painted on the sides. It seemed odd for Grandma Rhode to be missing the fun. Joe carried the heavy front sections of iron with their V-shaped hoes to either side of the tractor. He balanced each on a concrete block while he slid heavy bolts through the holes he had patiently aligned. When it came time to lift the doubly heavy back section, he enlisted the help of Ida and both boys: Ida to assist in lifting and the boys to steady and guide the ironwork into place. While Joe was fastening the nuts, Ida and the boys took one more look around the empty house.

Their footsteps echoed in the small rooms. Robert peeped into the tiny bathroom.

"Mom, you missed something," he said.

Ida came to look. On the shelf above the sink was an inexpensive porcelain container in the shape of a lady at a costume ball in the 1700s. The upper portion—including her head with a funny hat—was a lid that covered the bottom portion—her light blue gown. The container had nothing in it and had been kept spotlessly clean. (Grandma Rhode had been meticulous in dusting and sweeping.)

"I guess we missed that," Ida said.

Robert looked up with eyes that asked, "Could I have it?"

Reading his expression, Ida questioned, "Do you really want it?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Then you may have it."

On the way home, Robert held the upper half of the container in one hand and the lower half in the other hand, to keep them from harm. He put the fragile piece out of the way on the bookshelf above his bed so that he would not accidentally break the figurine.

Joe, meanwhile, took Robert and Charles to the feed store in town to order ground feed for the shoats.

He switched off the GMC in the alley beside the store, and he and his sons walked into the office, where "Fireball" greeted them.

Lester Crane had two nicknames: "Let" (the more obvious of the two) and "Fireball." Let's father had known not only Joe but also Joe's mother, her brother, and her parents. The roots of camaraderie between the Cranes and the Cobb family (Kosie's maiden name) ran deep.

"Hi, Let," Joe said.

"What can I do for you today?" Fireball asked.

"I need to load the bed of my pickup with ground feed for my feeder pigs."

"Let me fix you up," Fireball said good-naturedly, as he pulled an order form backed by carbon paper into place on top of the metal box that held the blank forms. He felt around the pocket on the bib of his overalls until he found the pen that he knew he had stuck there.

While Let was preparing the form, Joe peered through the window at the street to watch the traffic. His back was turned when Russell Mitchell entered the office.

"What d'ya say, Fireball?" Russell began, then, noticing Joe, he said, "Hi, Joe!"

Surprised to hear his name, Joe spun around. "Hi, Russell," Joe said.

"Are you keeping those boys of yours in line?" Russell inquired, nodding in the direction of Charles and Robert.

Joe smiled. "I reckon so," he replied. "How are your boys?"

"Oh, I have them working in the barn today. I thought I'd sneak off to order some feed. They probably haven't missed me yet."

Robert listened to the conversation, while he looked forward to seeing the ground feed falling from the chute into his father's truck. He always enjoyed the sight of the rushing feed making a mountain in the bed of the GMC and the dusty fragrance of the crushed grain.

"When I drove past your place the other day," Russell said, his eyes becoming narrow, "I saw your boy there—"

"Charles." Joe provided the name.

"Charles—leading a heifer around the yard."

"That's right," Joe said. "He's training her for the 4-H fair."

Russell smiled. "So he'll have her entered in the heifer class, then."

"Yes. It's his first year for the dairy project."

"I was gonna say you've had pigs at the fair before this."

"Yes, and we'll have our Chester Whites there again this year."

Fireball interrupted, "Joe, I need your signature right there."

After Joe had signed his name with his customary elegant cursive, he handed the pen back to Let and said, "I reckon your boys will have cows at the fair."

"Roger and Richard," Russell said with a twinkle in his eye. "Yeah, we always have our Holsteins in the various classes."

Joe hesitated, then he asked, "The heifer class, too?"

Russell peered intently at Joe. "We have a nice looking heifer that we think is gonna bring home a champion ribbon for us."

"Is that right?" Joe commented, smiling.

"'bout so," Russell said.

"You've generally had the champion in that class, haven't you?"

"Fairly consistently," Russell agreed, nodding.

Accidentally dropping the carbon copy of the form that Fireball handed him, Joe fumbled to pick it up from the dusty floor but managed to grab it on the third try. He carefully folded it and slid it in the pocket of his overalls.

"Pull around there, and I'll get you loaded right now," Fireball said to Joe.

"We'll be seeing you, then," Joe said to Russell.

"Take 'er easy," Russell responded.

Robert was not disappointed. The ground feed cascaded into the truck with a satisfying rumble.

His father's conversation had given Robert an idea for the use of his figurine: he would keep his 4-H pins in it.

Chapter 35: The Television

The television brought people face to face with a world far larger than Pine Village: a world that had hidden in the shadows of the imagination as farmers of the late 1940s and 1950s had listened to their radios and a world that, despite being described in detail in the dailies and the fat newspapers on Sundays, remained aloof. In the beginning, television's limited news coverage imitated the highly crafted newsreels viewed in movie theaters, but, gradually, that coverage became better adjusted to breaking news with its raw qualities and lack of polished shapes. With televisions in more and more of the homes in town and on farms, the world no longer lay in newsprint on the kitchen table. There was the world! There, on the television!

Granted, the news occupied only fifteen minutes on weekday evenings. Joe and Ida's Zenith TV brought in two of the three networks clearly enough. Although the networks already had a commercial stake in ensuring high numbers of viewers, the journalists who read the news, often taken from wire stories, strictly avoided opinion and, in perfect spoken English, offered only the facts as those facts could best be understood at the time.

Broadcasts and telecasts told of the agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union to establish a hot line for the leaders to forestall nuclear war, and Charles, Robert, and their classmates were led in drills to kneel beneath their desks in the event of an exploding nuclear bomb, perhaps in Chicago, which was too close to Pine Village for comfort. In Joe Dan's Restaurant, veterans of both World Wars openly speculated about World War III. They had seen the world and were wary of it.

The daily news increments may have been tiny, but television sets *showed* that troubles were not illusions. Radio news had enabled listeners to picture troubles in their minds, and, not infrequently, the troubles as pictured in listeners' imaginations became either magnified or tinged with a fancy bordering on unreality. Televisions and the evening news came to be trusted as living room repositories of the stark truth: a truth not contaminated by the imagination and not shaped into newsreels. Turn on the set for the evening news, and there they were: *true* troubles in spoken words illustrated by pictures only a few feet away—just past the footstool! At first—with journalists that had undergone rigorous training and with exacting adherence to high ethical standards—TV news programs could legitimately claim to encapsulate the truth or whatever was carefully considered to be the most likely truth at the time. Little by little over several decades, entertainment with its penchant for shock value would nudge truth aside. Unfortunately, the trust would remain, even when the truth had vanished.

No one was so deluded as to dream that the rural community had been the Garden of Eden before TV sets arrived. The Great Depression had dealt poverty to many families that had no means of recovery. Lives lost in Europe, in the Pacific, and in Korea had left behind broken hearts that could not be comforted. In spite of their vigilance, some farmers had fallen victim to accidents that left grievous injuries. All the same, Pine Village had succeeded in giving its residents a foundational stability: the bedrock of continuity. The television was sending tremors through that substratum.

The television seemed to pose difficult questions. What was Pine Village to do with the threat of nuclear annihilation? What was Pine Village to think about the varieties of unrest that began surfacing in cities across the nation? What was Pine Village to be in a troubled world?

Meanwhile, Ida's friend Mary Akers dropped her boys, Matt and Lon, in the yard, where they and Robert and Charles played cowboys and Indians with their Western toy guns while she entered the kitchen. Ida switched off the TV set.

"I brought my books," Mary said, waving her right hand filled with several booklets, then waving her left hand filled with sheets of S&H Green Stamps, "and my stamps."

Mary was younger than Ida, but they were fast friends. That spring, both had sunburned necks from driving tractors to help their husbands in the fields. They sat at the oilcloth-draped kitchen table and attached stamps to the pages of their booklets. Clerks handed the stamps to customers in grocery lines and at the checkout counters of other stores; the stamps could be redeemed for discounts on goods at a wide variety of establishments. While they affixed stamps to fill their booklets, they swigged instant coffee and chatted about events on the farms and in the town.

"Did I tell you what I did?" Mary asked.

"What did you do?" Ida returned.

"Last weekend, I came around the school driveway past where they're building the new tennis court on the corner right across the road from you. The workers had left for the day, and I saw three Coke bottles lying in the grass. So I parked and picked up the bottles. I needed just that many to fill my last carton. That way, I had four cartons full."

"You don't say."

"I felt inspired, so I drove straight to the IGA in Oxford and redeemed all four cartons. While I was there, I picked up a box of Crispy Critters for the kids and a bottle of Mrs. Butterworth's syrup for me."

"What did Don get?" Ida wanted to know.

"He doesn't need anything!" Mary joked.

Ida laughed.

That evening, Joe and Ida took Charles and Robert to Columbian Park to the ball diamond, where they sat on bleachers to watch a demonstration of traditional dances performed by members of the Miami tribe. Men and women, boys and girls, were attired in the clothing of Indians—not the often ridiculously flamboyant costumes of Hollywood Indians but the authentic dress of the various peoples of the Miami, such as the Wea and the Piankeshaw.

As musicians struck the deep-toned drums, a circle of dancers formed. Slowly the circle revolved as the men and women shuffled sideways. The dance was intended to ensure a good harvest. As Robert was enrolled in the 4-H gardening project, he hoped the dance would be effective.

Robert watched in fascination as the circle inched around and around. He wondered if Charles might be enjoying the performance as much as he was, but, when he glanced at his brother, Robert could tell that Charles was bored. Robert stayed focused on the dance after that.

In between dances, an announcer explained to the audience that, long ago, the Piankeshaw and Wea had lived on the land where Lafayette and West Lafayette stood. Robert suddenly felt transported back in time. He felt he was witnessing a culture that had arisen from the rivers, creeks, marshes, prairies, and woods that he knew. The circles formed by the dancers were cementing bonds among the performers and members of the audience while honoring not only the land but also what could not be seen but what could be profoundly felt: the spirit flowing around and through the water, the soil, and the air.

At the end of the exhibition, the audience gradually began applauding. It was not that people were reluctant to clap their hands to show their appreciation—it was that nobody quite knew whether applause was appropriate after such dances that the announcer had carefully placed in the context of Indian spiritual concepts. It felt as if a congregation were

applauding after a church service. All the same, the children in the tribes smiled, as did several of the adults.

While Joe drove home, Robert pondered the dances and their meaning. For many days thereafter, Robert slipped away from the evening news telecasts. When he was by himself outdoors, he tried to perceive the natural world in front of him with enough precision to sense its vast spiritual backdrop. A rhythm—a music—lay within the wind. It was faint and came from far away. What was the meaning of that music? Robert tried shuffling sideways in imitation of what he had seen the Miami do, until he had traced a circle in the grass.

Chapter 36: The Checkup and the Catalog

"Mr. Coffman's here!" Charles announced, loudly enough for Joe, Ida, and Robert to understand every word, no matter where they were in the house.

By the time Charles reached the front gate of the white-board fence surrounding the yard, Mr. Coffman was already standing there with his friendly smile and a clipboard under his arm. His neatly ironed shirt was worn outside—not tucked in—as if he were at a picnic.

"Are you ready for me?" he asked, while Charles unlatched the gate.

"I think so," Charles replied. "What do you want to see first?"

Mr. Coffman checked his 4-H clipboard. "I have Robert down for a gardening project. Let's see the garden!" Mr. Coffman's smile widened.

By this time, Joe and Ida had joined their sons. Everyone walked along the edge of the garden, Ida's pride and joy.

The garden lay between the Rhode family house to the east and Cecil Gray's house to the west. At one time, Cecil's house had belonged to Joe's mother's family, and Joe had been born there. The rows of Ida's overly large garden were arranged from south to north. As people drove past on State Route 26 or walked beside the school playground, they could look up and the down the rows of lettuce, beets, carrots, turnips, onions, potatoes, tomatoes, cabbages, beans of all sorts, pumpkins, and sweet corn. Throughout the spring and early summer, Ida worked tirelessly to plow and hoe the weeds, leaving clean, straight rows of vegetables. Now that Robert was in the 4-H Club and enrolled in gardening, she had a constant helper.

"Are you keeping good records?" Mr. Coffman asked Robert.

"Yes, I am," Robert said proudly.

"That's good!" Mr. Coffman smiled. "We like good records!" He turned to Ida. "Everything is coming along nicely."

"The rows are starting to fill in," Ida agreed.

"Will you can again this year?" Mr. Coffman asked.

"Yes," Ida said with a smile as big as Mr. Coffman's. "I always have more jars in the cellar than we can get to. I'm planning to make sauerkraut again

this year. I didn't make any last year because the cabbage looked wilted. I guess it wasn't, but I didn't trust it."

"Do you make it in crocks?" Mr. Coffman wanted to know.

"Blue crown crocks," Ida answered, "without lids. I keep them in the cellar under the smokehouse. I put plates on top and weight them down with bricks. Then I drape cotton towels over them."

"The kraut you make yourself is so much better than the kind sold in the grocery stores," Mr. Coffman said.

"The taste is different," Ida agreed. "It's not so biting. The flavor of homemade kraut is richer."

"It's more complex," Mr. Coffman offered, "but subtle, too."

"If my sauerkraut turns out well, I'll make sure you get some," Ida volunteered.

"That would be very nice of you," Mr. Coffman returned.

Throughout this conversation, the group had been ambling up and down the garden and admiring the plants bathed in sunshine.

"You have a beautiful garden," Mr. Coffman concluded.

"Thank you," Ida said. "Robert has been a big help."

Mr. Coffman turned to Robert and said, "You can take pride in a job well done." Glancing at his clipboard, Mr. Coffman asked, "Dairy?"

"I have Charles' heifer in the barn," Joe said.

While Ida returned to the house, the rest walked the dusty path between the chicken houses, through the gate beside the raised gasoline tank from which Joe fueled his tractors, and into the center aisle of the barn. The air was redolent with the fragrance of new hay.

As soon as Buttercup saw Mr. Coffman, she walked right up to the front of the stall and held her nose over for Mr. Coffman to pet.

"She's a friendly heifer!" Mr. Coffman said, as he patted her velvety nose.

"I think she looks good, too," Joe hinted.

"Have you been taking good care of her?" Mr. Coffman asked Charles.

"I've been teaching her to lead," Charles said.

"I wouldn't think you'd have any trouble with her," Mr. Coffman smiled. "She's too friendly to be a nuisance." He turned to Joe. "If there were a sweepstakes ribbon for congeniality, I'd give it to her."

Mr. Coffman looked toward Buttercup. "The Mitchell boys have some good-looking heifers," Mr. Coffman commented.

Joe's smile flickered for a moment, as if a small cloud had passed before the sun.

"The Mitchells always have good stock," Joe said.

"I think Buttercup will do very well at the fair," Mr. Coffman said, rocking back on his heels and putting a big check mark on the page in his clipboard.

After Mr. Coffman had driven away, Joe entered the kitchen to have a cup of coffee. Ida looked up from where she sat at the table with the Spiegel catalog open to a page depicting a dress and hat combination similar to the style that First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy wore.

"I'm thinking about ordering a dress like that," Ida said. "I would have to get some new gloves to go with it on Sundays."

With coffee cup in hand, Joe stood peering over Ida's shoulder.

"Does the hat come with it?" Joe asked.

"Of course not!" Ida exclaimed, laughing. "If I order the dress in blue, I can wear my blue hat, which will be close enough, once I take off the beaded thingamajig and the veil. I *am* going to have to order gloves, though. Mine aren't like these new white ones. It won't be long before Della will be visiting the Cheesmans, and, when she comes here and all of us go to church, I'll have a new dress that's more in style."

Della was Ida's sister that had lived in Fort Lauderdale and had moved to Atlanta a year earlier. Della, Harold, and their daughters, Sally and Becky, were coming to see the Cheesman family in West Point, Indiana. Della had developed close ties to the Cheesmans long ago. Della's family would be

coming along to Pine Village afterward. In her letter, Della had said she was looking forward to seeing the Rev. Lowell Morris and Mrs. Morris.

Ida and her family always looked forward to visits with Della, Harold, Sally, and Becky. … and, on this occasion, Ida also looked forward to a new "Sunday best" blue dress and white gloves!

Chapter 37: The Movie and the Cousins

As Joe took the family to the Wabash Drive-In near Attica to see Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*, he slowed down and ran the right-hand wheels of the Chevrolet onto the berm when he passed Russell Mitchell's farm. Joe's eyes roamed across the Holsteins in the pasture. He worried that Russell's sons might have a heifer so promising that she could challenge Buttercup for the championship at the county fair.

After eating his popcorn, Robert fell asleep for most of the movie. Ida considered waking him, but she found the motion picture so preposterously long that she thought a sound sleep might outweigh the historical value. To her, the extravagant scenes felt pompous and out of place with the mood of the country that the television was establishing. About a year earlier, the family had attended *The Music Man* at the Mars Theater in Lafayette, and Robert had eagerly watched every moment of that rousing musical. Now Ida glanced into the back seat to see Robert peacefully dreaming. She began to wonder if she would miss anything if she, too, were to take a nap during *Cleopatra*. The squawking speaker hanging on the edge of Joe's window kept droning on and on.

The weekend arrived when Uncle Harold's car crunched the pebbles of the half-circle driveway in front of the house.

"They're here!" Robert called from his perch at the front window, where he had been vigilantly watching.

It was early Sunday morning, and everyone was dressed for church. The summer day had turned off blessedly cooler after a hot week—almost like the springtime!

Dapper Uncle Harold wore a neatly trimmed mustache and was one of the few mustachioed men in Robert's experience. Uncle Harold escorted daughters Sally and Becky and Aunt Della through the front gate. Robert loved hearing Uncle Harold's Georgia accent!

Wearing her new dress, which had just arrived from the mail-order house, Ida greeted her sister, who took Ida's hand and held it closely in her own. Robert looked back and forth from his mother to his aunt and noted the resemblance.

"You look so pretty, Ida," Della said.

"The dress is new," Ida beamed. "Look how much your daughters have grown!" Ida turned to Sally and Becky. "You're young ladies now," she said.

Robert considered his cousins more beautiful than the girls in *The Music Man*.

Charles said, "After church, we can ride bikes!"

Sally laughed. "Charles," she said "I wonder what I would look like wearing this dress and trying to pedal a boy's bike?"

Joe said, "You know how much you enjoyed steering the tractor the last time you visited. I can put a blanket on the seat and we can go for a ride on the Minneapolis–Moline Z, if you want to later on."

Ida said, "I think the girls may want to walk with Della and me around the garden and see the flowers this time."

Meanwhile, Uncle Harold handed Ida a box full of oranges.

"You didn't grow these in Georgia!" Ida exclaimed.

Harold smiled. "No, these are from Florida."

"Well, they look wonderful," Ida said, as she turned to carry the box into the kitchen. "We'll be having a big dinner after church," she called back over her shoulder. "Maybe we can add some oranges to the fruit cups."

Harold and Joe drove their families to the Methodist Church, where Grandpa and Grandma Morris were waiting on the steps.

"It is so good to see you," Grandpa Morris said, shaking hands with Harold while Fern quickly hugged Della.

"Aren't your girls dressed so nice!" Grandma Morris said.

"They're young ladies," Grandpa Morris observed.

"That's exactly what I said," Ida commented.

In the car, Ida had put on her new white gloves and had adjusted her blue hat, which she had simplified to match the new styles. As Ida and Della walked down the aisle, Robert thought his mother and his aunt looked

radiant and charming. He felt proud that his aunt was so becoming in her dove-gray dress and matching hat of the latest fashion.

Pastor David Richards invited the congregation to sing the first hymn. Although he felt that he did not sing well, Robert could easily read the music. He enjoyed listening to his mother's clear soprano voice and his father's resonant baritone voice. As a young man, his father had performed with a quartet, and his experience showed in his confident singing.

The sunlight streaming through the stained glass windows cast pastel patterns on the pews. While the Rev. Richards gave the sermon, Robert watched the pink, gold, and turquoise lights play across his mother's gloved hands, which she held clasped together until it was time to lift the hymnal again from the varnished rack attached to the back of the pew in front. The spring-like weather made the day seem like Easter in the middle of summer.

Ida and Della had much to talk about over the lavish dinner that Ida had prepared. Sally, Becky, Charles, and Robert sat at a folding table beside the main table. (Joe had removed the davenport to make room in the crowded kitchen.) Grandpa and Grandma Morris, Harold, Della, Joe, and Ida sat around the big table, which had been greatly expanded with extra leaves. Both tables were covered with antique linen tablecloths that Ida had ironed until there were no traces of wrinkles to be seen.

After the meal, everyone sauntered into the yard.

Charles glanced longingly at the red bike lying on its side near the well, but he realized that Sally and Becky's dresses prohibited riding. Ida's summer flowers were in full bloom. Becky clapped her hands when she saw a hybrid tea rose covered with big yellow blossoms.

"I love this," she said, gesturing toward a rectangular flower garden running almost all the way across the yard from the house on the west to the garage on the east. In the center was an arched trellis with a climbing rose that was enjoying a second blush of red blooms.

"I was standing by that trellis," Ida said, "on the morning when Robert was born. I can hardly believe he'll turn nine in a few days."

"He's already steering the tractor when I haul cornstalks to the cows," Joe said, with a smile toward Sally.

"I'll steer for you the next time we visit," Sally said, smiling back. "Aunt Ida, what is this called?" Sally asked, pointing toward a large, tangled bush.

“Do you mean the Japonica?” Ida returned. “It blooms in the spring.”

“I think what I’m seeing is blooming now,” Sally said.

“Show me,” Ida suggested.

Sally found a way into the flower bed without stepping on a plant, and she pointed directly at what looked like a miniature ear of green Indian corn on a stem.

“Oh, those are the seeds of Jack-in-the-pulpit!” Ida exclaimed. “They turn red in the fall.”

“Has it already bloomed then?” Sally asked.

“Yes, it bloomed in the spring. The pulpit looks like the old-fashioned ones that had an ornate canopy overhead. Under the canopy is this same stem, only much smaller when the plant is blooming. His name is Jack.”

“Can you eat the seeds?” Sally wondered.

“No,” Ida said. “The plant is poisonous, but the Indians had a way of preparing it as medicine.”

“It’s beautiful!” Sally exclaimed.

“It’s so peaceful here,” Della said, peering intently at her sister. “Everything else seems to be in such turmoil these days.”

Ida nodded, not able to put her thoughts into words but fearing that the world that Sally, Becky, Charles, and Robert would one day inhabit as adults might not be so peaceful.

The time had passed too quickly. Uncle Harold, Aunt Della, Sally, and Becky had to leave. They were going to stay overnight in West Point before returning to Georgia the next day. Aunt Della hugged Ida. The sisters’ eyes glistened.

Uncle Harold waved from the driver’s window as he made a U-turn and headed east on State Route 26. Charles and Robert waved back. Robert felt sad to see them go, but he knew they would come again before long.

In the mean time, Joe changed into his work clothes and went to the barn to start the evening chores. He looked carefully at Buttercup strolling with the other Holsteins along the path in the meadow. She glowed in the honey and amber light of late afternoon. Had she grown into the young lady that would take the championship ribbon at the fair? Joe would soon find out.

Chapter 38: The Champion

The first day of the 4-H fair week dawned, and Joe had already been busy, loading the new wooden box that held the brushes, halter, and products necessary to keep Buttercup looking beautiful. As soon as the sun peeked over the horizon, Ida and Robert were walking the rows and scrutinizing the vegetables to decide which ones to pick for the gardening display. With sunbeams lighting its yellow feathers, a meadowlark perched on a fence post and sang, "How are you today? How are you today?" in answer to the crowing of a rooster in the chicken yard. Then the meadowlark flapped its wings and flapped them again as it dipped and rose, dipped and rose, above the pasture.

Yawning, Charles came to help Joe as he led Buttercup up the chute into the pickup for the ride to Williamsport. She seemed eager to go. Having seen *Francis the Talking Mule* at the movie theater in Oxford and *Mr. Ed* on television, Joe and Charles had little difficulty imagining that Buttercup was saying, "Let's get this show on the road! My fans await me!"

With Robert as her passenger, Ida drove the Chevrolet behind Joe's GMC, where Charles was seated next to his father. When Joe passed the Mitchell farm, he kicked up dust on the berm as the pickup's right tires ran just beyond the edge of the pavement. Joe was too busy looking for the Mitchells' cow to watch the road. Russell, Roger, and Richard were loading a stylish Holstein heifer in their truck. Joe waved. Russell winked and waved back. Joe ran the tires back onto the asphalt.

When the truck and car passed Mrs. Arvin's house on the left, Robert spotted his former teacher in her garden, and he yelled, "Hi ya, hi ya, hi ya, Mrs. Arvin!" He waved through the open window. Robert was so loud that Ida flinched, grabbed the steering wheel tightly, and pushed the throttle to the floor. The car lurched forward before Ida lifted her foot and brought the vehicle back to a normal speed. Mrs. Arvin straightened up and watched the Chevrolet as it went on down the road.

"Do you think she saw me?" Robert asked.

"Oh, she saw you alright, and she *heard* you, too," Ida confirmed. When she told Joe about Robert's outburst later, he laughed. The saying "Hi ya, hi ya, hi ya, Mrs. Arvin!" became a family quotation, repeated on seemingly endless occasions for years thereafter.

Driving the pickup with Buttercup happily watching the world go by, Joe, meanwhile, was whistling the tune to

Late one night, when we were all in bed,
Old Mrs. Leary left the lantern in the shed,
And when the cow kicked it over,
She winked her eye and said,
"It'll be a hot time in the old town tonight!"

Red-winged blackbirds sitting on the passing fences chortled in harmony.

Soon enough, the pickup pulled into the fairgrounds of the county seat. Joe maneuvered his GMC into the line of trucks unloading animals to be housed in the south wing of the coliseum and livestock barn. The men in charge of the dairy exhibits assigned Buttercup the southeast corner: an ideal location! No sooner had she taken up residence in the large space than teenage girls walking past saw Buttercup and came up to pet her nose. Ida had parked in one of the regular spots along the shady road, and Robert ran to help his father and brother scatter golden straw in thick crests around and under Buttercup. Joe wrestled the show box in place just behind Buttercup. For weeks before the fair, Charles had decorated it with vibrantly colored Amish star symbols around the sides, and he had perfectly painted large green letters spelling RHODE in the center of the lid. Then he had given the box several coats of glossy varnish. It was a work of art!

Robert ran back to help his mother carry the vegetables to the aisle beneath the bleachers where the gardening exhibits were arranged. In preparation for the event, he had used marker pens, crayons, and poster board to duplicate the Great Seal of the State of Indiana. A magenta and fuschia sunrise colored hills pink and violet while a cinnamon and ginger bison leapt over a log and a woodsman swung an ax to chop an emerald and turquoise tree above aquamarine grass dotted with pale yellow flowers. The kaleidoscopic depiction hung from tiny gold chains behind Ida's oversized cornucopia basket with a huge cabbage in its maw as beans, corn, carrots, onions, kohlrabi, and turnips poured forth in spectacular array.

Having fed and watered Buttercup, Joe sauntered down the aisle and took a close look at the competition. He felt satisfied that the Mitchell heifer might take the honors away from Buttercup.

"That heifer of yours," Russell said, as he chewed on a straw and squinted in Joe's direction, "will put a smile on the judge's face."

Joe grinned. "So will yours," he admitted.

Russell glanced appreciatively at the better heifer of the two that his boys were going to show. "She'll be a contender," Russell remarked.

"With the Holstein judging as the first event tomorrow morning, we won't have too much longer to learn what happens," Joe said.

Russell turned to Joe. "May the best heifer win!" he said, chuckling.

In the afternoon, the whole family helped give Buttercup a bath in one of the special pens set up for such purposes. She obviously loved being shampooed and rinsed, toweled and brushed, until her coat shone.

The day passed rapidly away. At dusk, the GMC and the Chevrolet caravanned back to Pine Village. That night, Joe hardly slept a wink. At four in the morning, he sat sipping instant coffee as his mind mulled over the finer points of Buttercup and her adversary.

Charles dressed in his show clothes. He wore jeans of the purest white and a new plaid shirt with white, avocado, and light blue squares. Buttercup wore a brand new halter of shiny black leather that Joe had purchased at considerable expense.

The crowd began gathering in the coliseum. Mr. Charles Coffman slid onto the bench before the electric organ on the platform stage, smiled at the audience, and launched into a rousing rendition of "Fine and Dandy." He completed the song with a flourish and nodded to the families seated on both sides.

Mr. John F. McKee, county extension agent, clapped his hands and strode to the microphone. "Very fine! Very fine!" he exclaimed. He adjusted his silver hair and his equally silver glasses. "Now will the 4-H members bring in their Holstein heifers."

Roger and Richard Mitchell led their cows into the ring. Then Charles brought Buttercup, who put on her best show for the crowd—and for the judge, a professorial gentleman wearing glasses, a dazzling white shirt, and what appeared to be snakeskin boots. In all, five cows were competing in the class, two led by girls.

Wearing a printed shirt and slacks for show day, Joe stood near one of the wooden panels leading to the judging area, his arms folded and his brows drawn in what Robert called his "eagle-eyed look." Joe's friend, Don Akers, strode up from the hog barn. Don's cap was pulled forward, shading his eyes. His smile, as white as his T-shirt, lit up his tanned face as he rested

one foot on the bottom board of the panel and put his hands on the top board. “Well, Joe, how does she look?”

As soon as Joe had seen Don, Joe had dropped his arms, tucked his thumbs just inside the upper edges of his back pockets, and leaned forward in a characteristic posture that meant he would now give the fullest consideration to whatever Don had to say. “I think she looks good,” Joe said, grinning and blushing from having complimented his own heifer.

Don offered, “It’s a small class—”

“—but there’s strong competition,” Joe added, shaking his head with worry.

At the same instant, Joe and Don looked across at Russell Mitchell, who waved at them. With one accord, Don and Joe raised and lowered the first fingers of their right hands in the universally accepted gesture of acknowledgment.

“Russell often wins this class, doesn’t he?” Don asked.

“Yes,” Joe answered, repeating, “yes, he does.”

“Don’t you wish you could tell what the judge is thinking!” Don exclaimed. “But maybe it’s just as well that we don’t know. He might be wishing he had a coin he could flip.”

Joe laughed, removed his seed corn cap, ran his hand over his head, put his cap back on, and said, “We could give him a quarter, but people might think we were trying to bribe him.”

“What counts is what those boys and girls are learning out there,” Don said.

The judge had the 4-H members walk their heifers around the ring and then stand them. Buttercup needed no encouragement or instruction. When she walked, she strutted, and, when she stood, she posed. Passing his hands along their backs and flanks, the judge studied every detail of each cow.

He approached the platform. A hush fell throughout the coliseum. The judge pointed toward Buttercup and immediately pointed toward Richard’s heifer. “Number one and number two,” the judge barked.

Robert, who was seated beside his mother in the stands, could not be sure what the judge meant. He glanced worriedly from Ida’s face nearby to Joe’s face across the ring.

"I think Buttercup just won," Ida said, but she was uncertain, too. From their angle, it was difficult to know which way the judge had pointed. Ida looked at Joe. He was frowning, staring straight ahead, and not moving a muscle, but Don was smiling.

The man with the ribbons in his hand stepped down from the platform and into the ring while the judge ascended the platform and strode toward the microphone.

Smiles crept across Ida's face and Joe's face and Robert's face as the man with the ribbons came closer and closer to Charles. The man briefly held the champion ribbon over Buttercup's neck before handing the coveted purple treasure to Charles, who grinned from ear to ear.

While the reserve champion ribbon went to Richard's entry, the judge said, "These winning heifers are so nearly alike that they could be twins. It's really splitting hairs to say there's a difference between them. For me, it came down to personality. I like the attitude of the champion." The judge paused; then he shrugged. "She just *acts* like a champion!" he declared, to the amusement of the crowd. Farm wives and farmer husbands turned toward one another and laughed heartily, nodding in agreement with the judge. "These 4-H'ers," the judge continued, "deserve a great deal of credit for raising such fine animals, training them, and bringing them to our attention." With that, he signaled the helpers to assist the boys and girls in leading their cows from the ring.

Robert and Ida were standing with Charles at Buttercup's stall before Joe and Don got there. Don's wife, Mary, came up, almost on the run.

"I was helping in the Craft Building," Mary said, nearly out of breath, "but I caught the tail end of the judging—" Mary hesitated a second, catching her pun and adding, "so to speak. Congratulations!"

"I have the camera," Ida said, lifting the Kodak Brownie Hawkeye to show Joe.

"Let's take Buttercup around the corner outside where there'll be more light," Joe suggested.

Charles held the lead strap while Buttercup took her position with the glistening championship ribbon draped across her back. Sun dappled the white-painted building, and Buttercup's black-and-white coat wore a velvety

sheen. The heifer fluttered her long lashes; she *knew* she was the champion. The snapshot would be preserved for years thereafter.

"That makes it feel like all the work was worth it, doesn't it, Charles?" Don asked.

"Yes, it does," Charles assented, while he led Buttercup back to her stall.

"Let's all get together for dinner in the Cafeteria Building to celebrate," Mary said to Ida and Joe.

"Want to meet there around 11:30?" Ida asked.

"We'll see you there!" Mary smiled. "I need to get back to the Craft Building," she said while excusing herself and dashing away.

Don said, "Now that we know the best heifer won, I can get back to cleaning up my hog pens!" With that, Don headed down the aisle.

"The gardening exhibits should be judged by now," Joe said.

"We'll go see," Ida said. She and Robert marched off to the room, which had been locked during the judging. The wire door stood open. When they walked to where the Great Seal of Indiana stood in all its glory above the cornucopia, they could not believe their eyes. A big pink rosette with the words "Reserve Sweepstakes" on it was pinned to the basketry. An older 4-H member's exhibit had taken the sweepstakes, but, with so many entrants, being second best was the same as winning.

Even as exciting as the reserve sweepstakes in gardening was, the family felt that the most thrilling experience had been watching Buttercup win her championship.

On the way home that night, Joe silently concluded there had been other champions that day: Don and Mary.

Chapter 39: The News

After the week of the fair, Buttercup returned to her meadow, where she reigned as queen for the rest of her long life.

Ida wanted to tell everyone the good news, but she quickly realized that practically everyone she wanted to tell had been in the coliseum and had watched Buttercup win the championship. Ida had to be content to bask in the warm glow of victory.

Just before school was to begin, Ida took Robert and Charles to the school cafeteria to buy their books. Robert always looked forward to the occasion, for he loved to walk up and down the tables to see the covers of the books for all the grades. The fragrance of the volumes resembled that of a cup of fine tea. Ida scrutinized the used copies to make sure they were the same editions as the new books, and she bought used whenever the books contained no marks, underlining, or notes. Quite often, she purchased new printings. On the way back across the road, Robert and Charles carried armloads of books.

Just at the end of August, the television carried news of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The cameras panned across a multitude of people—more people than Robert could imagine in one place at one time! Robert tried to understand what the newscasters—with their perfectly trained voices and equally perfect grammar—were saying, but, at key moments in their sentences, their vocabulary exceeded Robert's and he lost their meaning. He had a penchant for words, so he kept trying, and, during commercials, he asked his mother what various terms meant.

Her early teenage years in the Methodist Children's Home in Lebanon, Indiana, had given Ida a steadfast faith. She hoped that past maladies leading down to the present hour could be made well, but she feared that the illnesses afflicting the nation might not find cures.

In defining words, Ida attempted to conceal her vague sense of foreboding, but Robert discerned her worry about the future.

Robert entered Mrs. Winegardner's fourth-grade class. Mrs. Winegardner was as steady as the Rock of Gibraltar. Her eyes fixed each student in place, and she held all students to the highest standard. She had one of those faces of artistic concentration like a Willa Cather or a Gene Stratton–Porter. Like Joe, Robert's father and her classmate from long before, Mrs. Winegardner loved history. When she taught about Clay and Webster and Calhoun, she brought to life their powerful points of view. Little by little, she

nudged the class toward an understanding of the long history of conflict that was the foreground for current events. Robert found the concept of inequality incomprehensible, yet his American history book reported a story the theme of which was inequality from the American Revolution forward.

The school year promised to be rewarding. Mr. Charles "Charlie" Coffman had been named the interim principal; the beloved teacher, 4-H leader, FFA sponsor, and organist at the county fair was admired by all the students.

In November, Ida wrote on the back of the wall calendar provided by Messner and Sons (Clothing and Shoes for the Entire Family, Phone Dudley 5-2041) of Oxford:

ironing
get gander
sell chickens
see egg man
finish cleaning
straighten drawers
Christmas presents
freeze turkeys
shell popcorn
rake leaves
cook pumpkins

At school that November afternoon, Mr. Coffman came to Mrs. Winegardner's door. Robert looked up in astonishment. Mr. Coffman was crying!

He said, "I'm sorry to interrupt. I don't know a good way to say this. President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas, Texas, and he has passed away. School will end early today. I've already called in the bus drivers." With that, he put his handkerchief to his eyes, turned, and was gone.

Mrs. Winegardner, who was sitting at her desk, slowly closed her book. She was staring through the open doorway. She took a deep breath and faced her class.

"Well," she said. "This is a difficult time. Please put away your books and wait quietly."

Mrs. Winegardner stood and walked just outside her door, where she spoke softly with the other elementary teachers. Mrs. Leighty, the fifth-grade

teacher, was crying. Buses began appearing in the parking lot outside the fourth-grade windows. Soon, everyone was sent home.

Now Ida knew what her ominous feelings had meant. She was witnessing the shattering of the age.

The television remained on throughout the waking hours that weekend. Ida did not feel like cooking Sunday dinner, so she suggested the family go to a restaurant in Boswell. Joe drove into town to invite Aunt Margaret, who put on her winter coat, gloves, and hat and accompanied Joe back home. When he parked by the front gate, Aunt Margaret walked into the house. The TV camera was showing the basement of the Dallas Police Headquarters where Lee Harvey Oswald was to be transferred to the county jail. Just then, a man in the crowd approached Oswald. A commotion ensued, deepening into pandemonium.

"I think somebody just shot Lee Harvey Oswald," Aunt Margaret said. No one else said anything. It was stunning to be watching an event of such magnitude as it happened. The family stood in front of the television for several minutes, until Ida thought everyone had seen enough for the time being. She switched off the set. In the cold outdoors, Joe, Ida, Aunt Margaret, Charles, and Robert filed to the car for the short trip to the restaurant.

School was cancelled for Monday so that everyone could watch the funeral on television. Images on the TV burned into Robert's memory, the eternal flame one of the last.

It was exactly as has often been said: those that were alive then would remember for the rest of their lives what they had been doing when the news of President Kennedy's assassination arrived.

The often expressed presumption that the nation had entered an exciting period of youthful vigor characterized by a relatively young President had vanished.

Nothing felt the same after that.

Chapter 40: The Surprise

Robert was fortunate to have been in Mrs. Winegardner's class at that precise moment in history. Her measured viewpoint was exactly what was needed. Her class participated in her deliberate weighing of ideas in the scales of historical truth. Mrs. Winegardner was a gyroscope, keeping everything in balance.

Even with Mrs. Winegardner's steadying influence, Robert well understood that the country had entered an epoch of upheaval. As Bob Dylan would sing that January, " … the times they are a-changin'."

It would remain to be seen whether the children of Robert's generation could weather the storms that were yet to come. For a little while longer, the kids had to be kids.

When Robert had been in the third grade, the snows had been frequent and deep, but the winter of his fourth-grade year was unusually snowy.

… and cold! Whenever he took the first breath outdoors, Robert felt the linings of his nostrils crinkle as if they might freeze.

Robert had only recently recovered from his annual pre-Christmas flu. The roads were barely passable with drifting snow. The cold air rapidly drew the heat out of the multiple layers of winter clothing that Ida made the boys wear. Even so, she insisted that the family go for a ride.

Robert considered her perseverance remarkable in view of the weather. Robert's father was all too ready to agree. What could have gotten into his parents?

All bundled up, Robert and Charles squeezed into the Chevrolet, which never felt warm for the entire trip to Attica. Robert wondered why Joe chose Attica, which was ten miles away, when he could have selected Oxford, which was only five miles away. A ride was a ride. On such a bitterly cold day, why go farther away when you could stay closer to home?

In Attica, Joe took roads that he did not typically follow. After a time, he pulled into an icy drive beside a farmhouse close to the town.

"Why are we stopping?" Charles asked, taking the words right out of Robert's mouth.

"I reckon you'll find out soon enough," Joe said with that Bing Crosby twinkle in his eye.

Ida and Joe apparently knew where they were going. They circled the house and knocked on a side door, which a gray-haired man answered.

"I'll be right out, folks," he said. "Just need to put on my coat!" In a jiffy, he bounded down the steps of the side door and led the group to a white-painted outbuilding. The glow of red heat lamps lit the frost on the windows.

No sooner had Charles and Robert stepped inside the building than their eyes focused on a litter of black-and-white puppies! The boys ran up to the fenced enclosure that protected the puppies within the structure.

"We've already picked out one," Ida told the boys.

"You mean we get to have one?" Charles asked.

"We're a few days early, but he's going to be one of your Christmas presents," Joe said.

"Which one is ours?" Charles wanted to know.

The owner of the kennel pointed to one of the friendliest puppies. It was standing with its front paws against the wire and was yapping joyously.

"He's yours," the gentleman said. He turned to Joe, "And he's had his shots and is ready to go."

Without the boys' knowledge, Ida had concealed in the trunk of the car a stout cardboard box with a blanket in the bottom. Joe brought it, and the wiggling puppy was placed inside. Ida closed the flaps. She carried the precious cargo as carefully as she could over the ice and snow and set the box in the center of the back seat. For once, Robert didn't mind riding in back because he got to sit next to the box!

On the drive homeward, Charles occasionally lifted the flap a little, so that the boys could see their dog.

"Keep that flap closed," Ida warned. "It's too cold for a puppy to be exposed to the air, even in the car." She glanced worriedly at Joe. "Do you think he'll survive this cold trip?"

"Oh, sure!" Joe exclaimed. "Animals are tough—even puppies!"

“What kind of puppy is it?” Charles asked.

“It’s a male purebred shorthaired fox terrier,” Joe answered.

“A fox terrier,” Charles repeated.

As soon as the car pulled in beside the front gate, Ida lifted the box and practically ran with it into the house. She sat on the davenport before the Norge stove in the kitchen and pulled the puppy from the box. She held it in her arms to keep it warm.

“What should we name him?” Ida asked.

Robert looked at the big black spot on the puppy’s back and immediately said, “Spot!”—as if the name were obvious!

“That’s such a common name,” Charles said.

… but Ida intervened, saying, “Robert named him, and so that’s his name!”

After dinner that night, Ida was holding the puppy when it was time for the boys to go to bed.

When they awoke the next morning, they ran to see Spot. Ida was still holding the puppy. Joe had brought her a pillow and a blanket, and she had catnapped on the davenport with Spot in her arms. She had been reluctant to leave the puppy by himself, she had wanted to keep him warm, and she had decided to begin his doggy form of potty training right away.

Spot was a member of the family from that first night onward. On Christmas morning, he shredded wrapping paper, shaking it from side to side and growling. When the weather would permit, he romped with the boys in the yard. Charles and Robert helped him become accustomed to a harness and a leash—just in case he would succeed in penetrating the fence and would have to be chased down.

As Spot grew older and could spend more time outdoors, he proved that he was equal to the task of escaping and running downtown as fast as his legs could carry him. The boys would race after him on foot while Joe would jump in the car and drive after the puppy. Spot would look back and would seem to smile while he led everyone on such merry chases. Eventually, he would permit the boys to catch him, harness him, and lead him to the car—or Joe would simply hold open the car door and Spot would jump in!

When Spot first met Fuzz, now eight years old, the cat bristled to twice his normal volume while Spot, barking loudly, rocked back with his front legs almost flat on the ground. Fuzz slunk to one side before running off and flying through a gap between the boards of the fence. Spot could have caught him, but the dog didn't even try. He was content to watch the cat make his escape.

He wanted to catch chickens, but the fence was too strong for him to burst through into the chicken yard.

Spot became a frequently photographed dog. Many a snapshot was wasted as he was faster than the shutter and was only a blur in the print that came back from Hinea's Camera Shop in Lafayette. Other photographs captured him napping while draped over the arm of the davenport or posing with his paintbrush tail wagging beside the hollyhocks.

Spot was often the subject of Robert's art, as well. Robert depicted Spot in a series of pastels, one of which Ida framed.

Spot was the greatest Christmas gift of Charles and Robert's childhood.

One day, Joe was scraping the icing from the mixer bowl with a butter knife. In between mouthfuls of chocolate, Joe said, "I thought Spot would be my dog, but you've stolen his affections away from me. I now think that's why you held him all night long the first night we had him."

"Don't keep scraping! You'll scrape clear through the side of the bowl some day! Go ahead and give me the bowl," Ida said, "so that I can wash it while I still have suds in the sink."

Ida smiled as she submerged the bowl. "You may think he's my dog, but *I* think he belongs to Charles and Robert."

"Well, that's a good thing," Joe said, "because he's theirs." Joe pointed toward the davenport. Ida looked, and their sat Charles and Robert with Spot in between. All three were sound asleep.

THE END