THE MYSTERIES OF POMPEY HOLLOW

Postwar Historical Fiction

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The stories are based on true happenings. Although they have foundations in truth, they are a work of fiction in this novel. Names, characters, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Inspired by my wife and muse, Pamela. Some characters are made from actual childhood friends. Some are combinations of my brothers and sisters: James Joseph, Paul Robert, Richard Francis, Frederick Holman, Michael Charles Jr., Dorothy Louise, and Mary Margaret. My mom and dad are real.

JMA

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TO MY DAUGHTER

FOREWORD

If you're of a mind to wonder who Aunt Kate is in this book, you'd appreciate the legend. It came to light after the war, the year following our move to Delphi Falls, when my dad took me aside and told me the family secret about Aunt Kate's name—in secret.

I was seven, maybe closer to eight, when a close friend of mine, a nice old man, died. My tears for the loss of my old friend jarred my dad. It's been my thought that it was then when my dad came to realize that children born just before the Pearl Harbor attack, like his boy Jerry—that's me—already had childhoods of too many lost someones throughout the war we grew up in. It dawned on my dad that our young eyes had witnessed a frightening, cruel world at war for more than five years. A war that killed 80 million people.

"Seven, eight, and nine-year-old boys and girls today," he concluded, "have already lived through a horrendous war, and are sadly much older and wiser than their years for it."

I remember my dad kneeling on one knee and looking me straight in the eye. "You've earned the right to deserve the truth, son, Aunt Kate is not your aunt."

"What do you mean she isn't my aunt, Dad?"

"She never was."

"I don't understand."

"She's your grandmother, son."

"Aunt Kate is my grandmother?"

"Her name is Catherine Bell."

"My aunt—Aunt Kate is my grandmother? I don't understand."

"It's Christmastime, son. I thought you'd like to know the truth."

As the story goes, in 1902, my real grandmother gave birth to a daughter, who would become my mom in 1941. When my mother was just a four-year-old little girl, in 1906, her mother's (Aunt

Kate's) husband (my real grandfather) ran off like the rotten-tomato lowlife scumbag bastard he turned out to be, abandoning them both—my mom and her mom, my grandmother. (My words—my dad never uttered a curse word in his life.)

Turned out 'Aunt Kate's' sister and her loving husband loved the little girl who would grow up to be my mother so much they legally adopted her (making the girl's real mother legally my aunt–but she was still my real grandmother). This was done in those days so people wouldn't be saying things about a single mother with a child in 1906. It was frowned on in those days. Growing up in the 1940s we were led to believe the lady who was my mom's real mother was my aunt, Aunt Kate. After Dad told me the secret, anytime Aunt Kate visited the house and would read to me and tuck me in with a good-night kiss, I'd be certain to reach up and put my hand gently to the sweet old lady's velvety soft, wrinkled cheek, and whisper the secret.

"Night, Grammy, I love you."

That would help her sleep warmer on those evenings, I was certain.

Learning the truth about my grandmother changed my life. It surely did. It taught me it was never too early to say hello to someone—the war us kids lived through had already taught me and my friends it might be too late to say goodbye, so don't ever be afraid to say what's on your mind.

This story is about me, in my own words, the year I learned the family secret.

JMA

Thanks, Dad

My dad, Big Mike, at the falls.

DELPHI FALLS PARK, N.Y.

CHAPTER ONE
LABOR DAY, 1949

My dad was the tallest man we knew anywhere at six feet, six inches–even taller in his dress hat. Many called him "Big Mike." No matter when you saw him, he always wore suspenders, nice ties and a really happy smile and was ready with a wink of the eye to sit down to hear any stories about our great adventures, the taller, the better.

He found me staring out my window in a trance, sitting on the edge of my bed. His head narrowly missed the top of the door frame as he carried in two large bread boxes he had borrowed from the bakery in Cortland, and that Mom had packed with clothes.

"Whatcha doin', Jerry me boy?"

He put both boxes on the bed opposite me. My name was scribbled in large crayon letters on the side of the one he picked up from the stack and placed on my bed next to me. He pulled up the flaps to show me that it was my clothes that were to be put away.

"Why'd we move way out here, Dad?"

"The war's over, son, now we can get the materials we need and fix the place up and make it into a nice home."

"But we're out in the woods, Dad."

"Think of it, Jerry me boy—eighty-four acres, with our own two waterfalls. Your mom and I used to picnic out here on our Sunday drives. You weren't even born. I bought it before the war, son, during the Great Depression."

"Dad, I've been sitting here watching the road down by the front gate for exactly twenty-two minutes and there hasn't been one car drive by yet. That's pretty depressing. Where are we, in Africa?"

Dad sat down on the other bed.

"You'll like the country, son, even more than Cortland. Here you can get out of the house, go exploring, without asking.

Not like the city."

"We're in the woods."

"You'll have so many more adventures here, son."

"Did you see how tall the cliffs are, Dad? They're jahoomus."

"Out here you'll meet a whole new set of friends, I promise."

"But—"

"Just be patient, son. Give it time."

I interrupted—pointed out at the road.

"Twenty-three minutes, seventeen seconds—a junky old beat-up truck."

"Jerry, look at your first day in a different school tomorrow as a big adventure. Make every day a new adventure. It'll be fun. We each have to write our own books in this life, son. No one will write them for us."

"The only people I met all week were carpenters from Cortland. We're, like, lost in the wilderness."

Dad reflected a moment and met my challenge head on.

"You met Charlie Pitts."

"Yes."

"Well, Mr. Pitts to you."

"I know."

"You like him?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Pitts has a small farm about a mile away with a horse and buggy. It's just down to the corner and right, about halfway up the hill."

"He has a real horse and buggy?"

"He does, and he's going to take care of chickens for us, so we can have eggs."

"Real chickens, like live chickens, Dad?"

"Real chickens, son, and I think it would be a good adventure for you to walk to his farm every week and pick up the eggs. Would you like to do that? See his horse and buggy?"

"Sure."

"Good! That's your chore starting this week. Picking up our eggs. Ask your mother what day."

I turned from the window and looked in my box,

recognizing my P.F. Flyer sneakers on top of the pile. Dad palmed his shirtsleeve back and looked at his wristwatch. Seeing the time, he stood, gazed out my window.

"Son, that's Mr. Parker across the way."

I stood up to look.

"Where?"

Dad pointed out the window.

"Farmer Parker and Mrs. Parker live in that house—over there across the way—he's walking toward the side of the road now."

"Where's he going, Dad?"

"He's about to call his cows in."

"What do you mean call his cows?"

"For their night milking. The cows have to be milked twice a day."

"And he just calls them and they come?"

"You've never seen that done before, Jerry. Why don't you run over there, fast as you can, and watch how he does it?"

I sat back on the bed and looked at my boxes again.

"Now?"

"You can put your things away later."

"I can?"

"Don't forget to introduce yourself like I taught you. Offer your hand. Shake his hand."

"I will."

"Now go! Run!"

I jumped up.

"Dad, will you reset my alarm clock?"

"Hand it here, son. Did it unwind?"

"I don't have a stopwatch, so I set all the hands at twelve when I started to watch the road so I could count the minutes and seconds easier."

Dad grinned.

"Run!"

I ran out of the house, down the eighty or ninety yards to the front gate for the first time, turned left up the short, steep, curving hill on Cardner Road to where Mr. Parker was standing.

I introduced myself and shook his hand.

Farmer Parker in overalls, blue work shirt, and train

engineer hat smiled and handed me his hoe to hold for him like he needed my help while he held both opened hands by his mouth like a megaphone and yodeled up to the steep pasture hill on the other side of the road from his house and barn. Watching him cow calling began to give me a new look on the different world I was in now. He wasn't embarrassed to sing out.

"Caho bossies! Caho bossies!"—meaning, "Come home, bossies!"

It was almost like I was in the audience at a stage play, and he was on stage performing like he was an actor in a Saturday morning picture show at the movie house. He stood there and yodeled as if no one was watching him, until we saw the cow's heads moving and they started walking down the path on the hill. I cautiously stood behind him, being as I'd never seen a cow up close before. At least I hadn't seen one that wasn't behind a barbed wire fence. I wasn't about to take any chances. Twenty cows came down off the hill and through the gate, slowly crossing the road, passing gently by and down his drive toward the back of the barn.

Farmer Parker turned to me, took the hoe from my hand and shook my hand again.

"Nice to meet you, Jerry. You come back anytime. Right now, I've got some cows to feed and milk."

He adjusted his train engineer hat, turned on his heel and started down the slope of a gravel driveway toward the barn.

Mrs. Parker stepped out from behind a screen door onto their gray back porch, emptied a white porcelain bowl of dishwater on her rose bush, and waved hello just as she was walking back into the house. I waved hello and walked home.

When I got to my room there was a book on my pillow. My copy of the Hardy Boys' *Secret of the Old Mill,* which I must have left in the car. I pulled open the drawers on my side of the closet, stuffed my clothes in, butted them closed, and stepped into the hall. Mom and Dad's bedroom had a door on either side. I took the shortcut through their room to the dining room and kitchen. The cupboards were opened—on top, over the counters, and the bottom, near the floor. Mom and Dad were emptying boxes of dishes, the toaster, waffle iron, pots, pans, bowls, soup cans, and

cereal boxes, putting them away.

My oldest brother, Mike, was standing in the dining room with a pencil over his ear. He was wearing a new white chef's apron he had asked for as one of his graduation presents. Dad got it at the bakery.

"What cha doing?" I asked.

"I'm taking inventory," Mike said.

"What's that mean, inventory?"

"Don't bother me, I'm busy."

On the table in front of him were two shoe boxes filled with an assortment of strange, smelly foods, spices, relishes, muddy mustards, and smushed olives. Everything in little tin cans with printing on them and small glass jars with lids and labels. My brother collected junky food no normal person would give a whit about. Stuff so bad they'd never put it in big cans or pint bottles. He saved up for it and an old Chevy he paid thirty dollars for, working all summer. He was wrapping the cans and bottles in the shoe boxes to take with him to college in a couple of weeks. A new electric hot plate was on the table, sitting on top of its box. Probably another graduation present, I guessed, so he could stink up his dorm room with this stuff, cooking. I stepped closer to check it out. He pointed a bunch of garlic in my direction.

"Don't even think about it."

"Huh!?"

"Don't touch a thing."

I couldn't stand the smells. He acted as if I'd even go near this stuff.

I had to be patient. Mike hadn't been the same since his face cleared up, that's for sure, and now he had his driver's license. Mike had always been a snob. He thought hot dogs were disgusting and that most table food, except for maybe corn-on-the-cob and watermelon, were scraps for common people. Not for him. He said he had good taste. He graduated high school in June with what Mom called "honors." Dad called them "delusions."

Something about him just wasn't normal anymore. Even Mom couldn't put a finger on it, saying, "It's a stage."

Dad said, "Well, I hope he gets on one"—that is, a stagecoach— "and it leaves before he makes us all nuts."

I was just a kid, what would I know, but I'd read enough

of the Hardy Boys detective mysteries to understand what clues were and my suspicion was that Mike was becoming a gourmet, which, for all I knew, could be a strange disease with considerable inclinations.

I stood there and stared at my own brother taking his inventory. He'd hold up jars and tiny cans like a chemist in a scary movie laboratory, reading the labels. His lips mouthed the French or Italian words on them. Mike always talked about being a surgeon after college, so he could discover cures, live a life of importance and elegance, not live like us—as commoners. At least that's what he said the time he caught Dick drinking milk straight out of the milk bottle and admonished, "One doesn't have *to be* a disgusting pig, if one chooses not *to be* one."

Dick looked him in the eye, tilted the half-empty bottle up, took a last swig from it, and handed it to Mike, saying, "To BE or not to BE." Then he belched and walked away.

Even though he'd grown as tall as Dad, and they both had the same first name, Mike, there was no way he was ready to go off to college alone with a hot plate. I had my reasons for believing this. From the car on Sunday, I overheard Mom standing on the sidewalk talking to Father Lynch in front of our new church in Manlius. They were going on about Mike and his heading off to Lemoyne College. I could swear the "gourmet" word came up, causing me to sit up straight and press my ear to an opening in the car window. Father Lynch sure enough leaned close to Mom and asked, "You don't suppose Mike has capers, do you, Mary?"

I knew it, I thought. I knew Mike had something. I quietly rolled the window down further, not drawing any attention, and not wanting to miss a word.

"I'm almost certain he does, Father," Mom confessed. "He's had them for some time now."

"Oh my," Father Lynch said. "Capers are so rare, so rare indeed, ever since the war—most difficult to get. Wish the lad luck in college for me, Mary. My prayers are with him."

I had no idea what a caper was, but that was all the proof I needed. I knew it was enough to suspect this gourmet thing was serious, maybe even rare and "incommunicable," like those diseases I heard about on Army Radio all during the war.

I wasn't putting it past Mike to eat ants or grasshoppers,

maybe even frogs and lizards, just like in the pictures in the *National Geographic* magazine he kept in his room. This sort of thing was an addiction. Why, he could open the lid of one of those little glass jars filled with something disgusting—take a big whiff of it just as easily as he could warm up for his "at bat" in a Sunday baseball game over at the stone quarry. It just wasn't normal.

Dad saw me staring at Mike's mess on the table, and probably didn't want me to get infected.

"Son, the radio was delivered today. Go plug it in and listen to your shows."

"Where's Dick?" I asked.

"Mr. Rowe went back to Cortland in a bakery truck to bring the last load of boxes," Dad said. "Dick rode with him to say goodbye to his friends in our old neighborhood. They'll both be here any minute. They'll be along."

"Did you put your clothes away?" Mom asked.

"Yes ma'am."

"I heard NBC is rebroadcasting Superman and Sergeant Preston radio programs as a Labor Day treat because school starts tomorrow," Dad said.

"They are?"

"You missed them last night. Go tune them in, son."

"Okay."

I leaned my back against the dining room wall and slid along, edging around Mike, making sure nothing he was touching got on me. I made my way into the living room. Walking over to the radio I could see out the front window, and the bakery truck was coming through the front gate down by the road. Dick would be here any minute. I plugged it in. I got down on the floor in front of the Zenith and turned its familiar old knob to "on."

While I waited for the radio to warm up, it dawned on me how much Superman and I had in common. Superman came from Planet Krypton. He crash-landed in a field in the country when he was a kid, and he grew up on a farm. I came from Cortland, a city, where last year I could walk to school. Now I was out in the country, in the middle of nowhere. I was surrounded by woods and waterfalls and had a farm with lots of cows right across the road. Superman rode a school bus to school—now I had to take a school bus to school.

Any Superman radio fan my age knew that, like him, we were all *faster than a speeding bullet—more powerful than a locomotive*. He could leap tall buildings, though, in a single bound. *Look!—up in the sky. It's a bird, it's a plane—it's Superman!*

I sat and waited, watching the comforting, glowing dial on the Zenith I had relied on all through the war. Its golden hands pointing to radio station numbers shaped like streaks of lightning. During the war we would sit on the floor at night and listen to war news from London, Africa, or the South Pacific. We'd hear about the bombings and killings—of planes being shot down and ships being torpedoed and sunk. We could hear the ship-to-shore Morse Code messages.

The only relief kids had throughout the war was sitting on the floor and listening to Superman or some other radio program to help keep our minds off the atrocity of it all. If their parents could afford it, some kids got the new comic, *Captain America*. His comic book came out a month before I was born in 1941. Although my life may have been turned upside down all summer not knowing we were going to move into the wilderness at the Delphi Falls, at least I still had my favorite floor model Zenith radio, and I had my friend Superman on Sunday and Wednesday nights.

Maybe I could survive.

As the radio tubes warmed and brightened, their soft glow reflected off the wall behind, the scratchy hissing sounds coming through the speakers evolved to whistles and then to a clear voice of a radio announcer.

Just then Dick appeared. First his head, poking cautiously in through the front hall doorway. He peeked around, casing the joint, to see who was in the living room with me and if the coast was clear. Seeing I was alone, he scooted toward me and, with a quick slide on the rug, sat down next to me on the floor. With Dick I always had a sense something was up when he made an entrance like that. I was usually right.

"Where've you been?" I asked.

"Cortland, with Mr. Rowe."

"Did you go to our house?"

"It's not our house anymore, but yes, we picked up some boxes there." "You mean Dad sold our house?"

"Somebody's already moving in."

"I'm ruined."

"How?"

"We're stuck here in the woods forever. Now my whole life is ruined."

Dick didn't respond.

"See anybody in the neighborhood?"

Dick sat up and lifted his head and gave me a sheepish grin. He was sporting the prettiest, brand-new black eye, a sort of raspberry jam, blue-grape-purple-colored shiner.

"Yeah, I saw Patty Kelly washing her dog."

"Holy Cobako!" I gasped.

I had only seen one other black eye like it before—in a Saturday morning picture show. I was impressed. His shiner couldn't have been two hours old, still puffy around the eyelid. The white of his eyeball was a beet red. He stared at me as if he was trying to read in my expression how he looked—or just how much trouble he might be in for having a black eye.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

The sound of my voice jolted his stare.

"Huh?"

He turned his good eye and looked at the Zenith radio dial. He was stalling to buy time—maybe so he could come up with an answer Mom would buy. Believable lies didn't come easy. He had to think of one fast. He turned again, looked at me, and tested one in a loud, whispered threat, using his best machinegun gangster Jimmy Cagney murder mystery movie voice.

"Okay—listen up, pal. You'd better hear me good or you're done for. You threw a baseball at me when I wasn't lookin', see? Yeah, that's it—you threw a baseball, and it was a wild pitch and the ball went wild and it cold-cocked me in the eye—yeah, that's it—that's what happened. It cold-cocked me when I wasn't lookin', you got it, punk? That's the way it was, ya little squirt. Squeal on me and I'll pulverize ya."

Dick knew I'd help him, but he also knew he wouldn't pulverize me if I didn't. He just had an image to keep up.

"What happened?"

"I kissed Patty Kelly and got slugged."

Now this I believed. Dick had a reputation for liking girls and thinking they all liked him. I imagined Patty's brothers, cousins, or even her father and mother catching Dick kissing Patty and taking him behind our garage in Cortland and whupping up on him. Mom wouldn't have minded Mrs. Kelly pounding him—Patty was Dick's age but only half his size and really shy.

"Patty's boyfriend caught you, right?"

Dick didn't say a word.

"Did Bobby Grumman see you kiss her?"

No response.

"He told, right?"

No response.

"It was Patty's dad, wasn't it?"

No response.

"C'mon, what happened?" I begged.

Dick tightened his lips and edged them over to the side of his face with the good eye, in a devilish smirk.

"Patty slugged me."

I stopped breathing. My imagination whirred. I fell sideways, tipping like a falling tree to the floor with a thud, giggling, holding my sides, gasping for air.

Dick was twelve, the smartest kid in the whole family—with a genius IQ. His problems started when someone told him how smart he was when he was little and ever since he'd managed to do something really stupid, with regularity, to get into some scrape or trouble constantly. Seems ever since they told him his actual IQ and what it meant, he'd either think everything he did was okay, because he was so smart (his brain could never be wrong), or he couldn't help himself because his brain was faster than he was and his body couldn't keep up. Here I was, my first day in the wilderness, and I already had to lie for him, again, or else. I spent more time in the church confessional confessing my lies about Dick's sins than I did confessing my own sins.

The Superman music began, so we both sat up to listen.

"Why'd we move from Cortland here to Delphi Falls?" I asked during a commercial.

"I guess because we have more people than we had rooms in the house in Cortland," Dick said.

"That doesn't make sense," I said.

"Mom and Dad wanted us to grow up in the country. I don't know—lots of reasons."

He mumbled something intelligent about the war being over, about the Iron Curtain in Russia, the atomic bomb and air raids.

I thought—why?

"We moved right in front of two seventy or eighty-foot waterfalls."

"Sixty-foot," Dick said.

"It's like we're in the woods," I said.

The falls bothered me because I never imagined water could make so much noise.

"I think I'm going to hate the country," I said under my breath.

"Shut up," Dick said.

"I miss my friends," I said.

"I got it worse than you," Dick mumbled.

"How?"

"I'm twelve—what are you? Seven? Eight? Nine?"

"Huh?"

"I'm older."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Being older I knew my friends longer than you knew any of your friends."

Dick was making absolutely no sense whatsoever, again.

"Shut up," I said.

Just then a radio announcer told about the runaway train coming down around the side of the mountain, and of Superman, seeing this from two hundred miles away, flying in and lifting the car that was stuck at the railway crossing up over his head. He got it off the railroad track just in the nick of time and saved the family and their dog. Listening to Superman was always the good part of my week.

Later that night, I lay in bed looking back over my head out the window of my new room with a rattling window frame and no curtains. I stared past the glare of the front porch light at the stars in the distance and I thought about farmer Parker's yodeling and the cows and how gentle they seemed, crossing the

road and walking by. My window frame rattled from the sounds of the water crashing over the falls in the back yard.

"Will somebody close the door, please?" I shouted in the dark.

"It's been closed two hours. Shut up and go to sleep," Dick growled from his room.

"Don't say *shut up,* dear," Mom warned from their bedroom.

The next morning, I had to get on a school bus, which I'd never done before—ride to a school I'd never seen before and meet a teacher I didn't even know. That was all my brain remembered thinking about before I fell asleep.

Walking behind Dick down our long dirt driveway, I repeated to myself with every step I took to the front gate—

"This is an adventure. This is an adventure. This is an adventure."

Mr. Skelton, the school bus driver of the big yellow #21 school bus, wore a newsboy hat like Babe Ruth wore in the book we had about the Great Bambino—just like the hat I wore in Cortland when I had to wear my knickers, knee socks, and newsboy cap to school.

Mr. Skelton said, "Hello," when the bus door opened. He seemed nice enough but gave the impression that part of his job was not smiling— especially after he saw Dick's shiner. He'd squint his eyes tight, curling his forehead up, wrinkling bushy eyebrows as he looked up through the mirror and back at the kids to make sure nobody was getting into trouble on the bus. His eyes followed Dick through his mirror all the way to the back of the bus, as if he wanted to remember exactly where he sat down.

I sat in the first empty seat behind Mr. Skelton.

I looked attentively out the bus window at sights as we would drive by. Nearly everything I saw was new to me. Big red barns with tall silos, cows grazing on hillsides and in green pastures. Some were brown but most had black and white spots on them like farmer Parker's cows. At one stop, Dale Barber got on and made me his instant friend with a big grin. He sat down next to me. Dale Barber had big locks of wavy brown hair, in need of a trim but wet and neatly combed. He had freckles on his nose and smiley eyes. He liked to talk and tell jokes. I soon

learned he was in my grade. Dale would point and tell me who lived in every house we passed by—if there were kids who lived there, what grades they were in; how many cows were in each barn—how many heifers they had— if their bull had a ring through its nose or not.

"You ought a walk over and meet the Parkers. It's just across the way from your house," Dale said. "He's a nice man."

"I already met them."

"You did? When?"

"Last night," I said.

"His dog's called Buddy and he don't bite," Dale said.

"I know, I petted Buddy."

"Well there ya go," Dale said, pleased with my spirit of adventure.

A line of kids got on the bus in the center of the Delphi hamlet. Dale told me everybody's name as they passed our seat. One boy stepped on with a baseball glove on his hand. Dale called him *Bases* and said he was in our grade. Dale invited Bases to sit with us through my tour of the countryside ride to school, scrunching me to the window for better lookout vantage.

Dale's tour continued. He would point at things as we passed by.

"That's where the Cooks live—back around behind those trees near that barn. There's a ton of Cooks, every one of them good at sports."

The bus slowly began its climb up a steep hill.

"This hill we're going up would be good sledding in the winter if we were allowed," Dale said.

"We ain't allowed," Bases said.

"I've never been on a sled," I said.

"You've never been on a sled?" Dale barked in disbelief.

"No," I said.

"Shut up!" Bases growled.

"Where you from, anyway, Mars?" Dale asked.

"Cortland."

"Are you American?" Bases asked.

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Jerry, but my mother calls me Jerome in front of

people."

"That's American," Dale said.

"Are you poor? No sled, you must be poor," Bases said.

"No hills on Helen Avenue in Cortland. We just don't have a sled," I said.

"We have a toboggan and a sled," Dale said.

The bus climbed over the top of the long hill and leveled off, picking up speed.

"You sure could go fast sledding on that hill, I'll bet," I said.

"Too many milk and farm trucks use that hill," Dale said. "Best sledding is at the Pidgeon place. One of 'em— Bobby Pidgeon—is in our grade."

Dale pointed a finger. "See that barn over there, in the middle?"

"I see it."

"That's the Dwyer farm."

"Okay."

"They're big farmers, came with the pilgrims, I think."

"They're pilgrims?" I asked.

"See that boy behind us back there with the red baseball cap?" Bases asked.

I turned around to look.

"That's Ray Randall. He's a good baseball pitcher," Bases said. "I watch them play at the stone quarry."

"What's a stone quarry?" I asked.

"The stone quarry—everybody knows the stone quarry," Bases said.

"Not everybody," Dale said.

"Well everybody I—" Bases started.

"He's been here one day, how's he s'pose to know what a stone quarry is?" Dale asked.

"Oh, right," Bases said.

There was no talking for about half a mile.

"On Sundays the older guys pay me a dime each to fetch foul balls outta the creek," Bases said. "The creek behind the quarry."

"That farm on the corner we're going to turn at up ahead is where Conway lives. Lots of land, lots of cows and corn. Big

farm."

Dale went on and on.

He had a way about him. He could find the best in everyone and everything. He said his nickname at home was "Bub," but I could call him Barber. From that moment on, Barber it was.

I couldn't help looking over at Linda Oats with her curly red hair, freckles, and blue eyes. She sat on the seat across the aisle. She was very pretty. She was older and probably a Presbyterian, with my luck. The rest of the kids getting on the bus were bigger, like high school older, and sat in the back.

By the time we were pulling past Shea's store near the school, Barber had me pretty well convinced he knew just about everything important there was to know about the country. When we arrived at school, I didn't know where to go, so I followed Barber.

Turning a corner in one hallway Barber stopped short, causing me to bump into him.

"Oh, jeez." Barber said.

"What?" I asked.

"I forgot which way we're supposed to go."

We ended up in the principal's office, asking directions. Mr. Mobley had golden hair and was smiling as we walked into his office. First thought that came to my mind was school principal was a post for which it was strange for me to see a man.

At my old school, St. Mary's Catholic in Cortland, where I had just moved from, all the teachers and old people who walked the halls looking important were nuns. We called them "Sisters." They were religious ladies who prayed a lot and never married. They wore long, black veils over their heads, white starched hoods around their faces, black dresses that went to the floor, and oversize rosary beads tied around their waists.

"What's your name, son?" Mr. Mobley asked.

"Jerome Mark Antil," I said above all the noise.

"Come along boys, let's find your classroom."

Mr. Mobley walked us through the busy first-day-of-school halls to our classroom just a few doors from his office. When he opened the door to the back of the room, I knew this was it, do or die. We were late and every kid in there was about to spend most

of the next decade with me.

"Mrs. Heffernan," he announced while holding the door open, "here's a special delivery for you on this first day of school."

Thirty-nine kids turned around in their seats and stared.

"I believe you know this lad, Mr. Barber. I would like to introduce you to Mr. Antil. Young Jeremiah Mark here is our new pupil. His family moved to the Delphi Falls from Cortland."

"Huh?!" I grunted at his mispronunciation of my name.

Mrs. Heffernan wore wire-rimmed spectacles. Her hair rolled around the top of her head like the snakes we make from clay we got at Christmas. Two pencils stuck out on the side of her hair like tenpenny nails.

"Everyone, say good morning to Jeremiah Mark," Mrs. Heffernan said.

"Good morning, Jeremiah Mark," the kids shouted.

I didn't say anything.

She raised her head almost backward, looking under the bottoms of her spectacles as she walked over and placed her hand on the back of my neck gently steering me to an empty desk.

"This will be your desk until we get settled, Jeremiah."

I lost sight of Barber somewhere in the crowded room. I wasn't anywhere near his desk. My hand could feel the initials carved in my desktop as I sat down behind a boy who turned around and grinned at me with two missing teeth. It was almost as if he knew that he would grow up to be mayor or something and was counting on my vote. He had enough curly hair for several people but seemed an agreeable sort.

Now at home we always called the bathroom a "bathroom." Sometimes Gourmet Mike called it a "John," and my aunts, Mary and Dorothy, referred to a bathroom as the "potty," but, all in all, it pretty much was a bathroom. That was clear. But for some strange reason, probably known only to a board of education and people in too many meetings, different upstate New York schools in the 1940s chose to call their bathrooms different names.

At St. Mary's Catholic in Cortland, a bathroom was called a *lavatory*—and the time I had the accident and peed while sitting in the sandbox in kindergarten, that was called a sandbox, not a

lavatory.

Maybe it was a Catholic school thing. Lavatories didn't have bathtubs in them, so perhaps it would be a lie to call them bathrooms.

Wouldn't you know? I was in Mrs. Heffernan's grade precisely two minutes when I had to go. Not being certain of the procedure in this new environment, I cautiously raised my arm and held it tall in the air, just as I would have at St. Mary's, to see if that would work.

"Yes, Jeremiah?"

Except for the mispronunciation of my name, so far, so good.

"Sister, may I go to the lavatory, please?"

With what appeared to be downright impudence, my blurt of an old school habit, "Sister," and the sound of that other word, *lavatory*, caused all motion and noise in the room to stop. Every kid turned their heads in my direction, frozen with mouths opened, wondering what language I was speaking. The mayor, in the desk in front of me, raised his arm, and without waiting to be called on, shouted, "Can I move to another desk, Mrs. Heffernan?"

I could hear Bases whisper, "I don't think he's American."

After the stunned silence obviously caused by me, an alien from another planet's language and the audacity of my calling Mrs. Heffernan "Sister," everyone began laughing while rumbling among themselves various secret messages, like, "Hurry to the cafeteria at lunch hour—fill a table so he can't sit with us."

Stirrings from the same group who, just minutes before, had yelled, "Good Morning, Jeremiah," like they meant it, was taking on a whole "Stations-of-the-Cross" crucifixion tone. I could feel the crowd turning on me.

Mrs. Heffernan gave me an understanding smile.

"You may be excused, Jeremiah."

"For what?" I asked.

"You may go."

"Oh, thank you, teacher," I said.

"You may go to the basement," she said.

"Huh? Where?"

"Jeremiah, go to the basement."

I got up from my desk, went out into the hall, leaving the snickering behind and started looking for stairs to the basement. While I looked, I remembered being told about my grandmother in Minnesota having a toilet outdoors behind their house they called an outhouse. Even Barber was kind enough to point out a few outhouses on the bus ride to school, but I never heard of a bathroom in the basement. I went down the only stairs I could find and saw three big doors at the bottom. One door opened to a dark, empty gymnasium, so I knew that wasn't it. The next was to a room filled with musical instruments, so that wasn't it, but I did like the looks of the big horn in the back of the room that I found out later was a tuba. I opened the last door and looked in to see a big furnace. I could see the warm light glowing from the side of it, so I assumed it had coal burning in it. City kids would know these things. For sure this was the basement because furnaces were in basements.

A man in coveralls with a push broom in his hand turned my way.

"Son, why aren't you in class?"

"Mister, I'm looking for the lavatory in the basement because I have to go to the bathroom, and Mrs. Heffernan told me to go to the basement."

Another man was with him. I have no idea what they said to each other, but the man in coveralls shook his head, and I had a sense he was laughing at me or the lavatory word again. My patience was pushed to the limit.

"Son, we call bathrooms 'basement' here.

"Huh?"

"People with outhouses—"

"What's an outhouse?" I asked.

"You never heard of no outhouse, son?"

"No."

"It's where a body goes when they ain't no plumbing in the house."

"Why do they go there?" I asked.

"To take care of business, just like you've got to now."

"Oh," I said. "when they go to the bathroom?"

"Yes."

"So why do they call an outhouse a basement?" I asked.

"Folks with outhouses have potty chairs in their cellars or basements, son."

"Why?"

"That's so they can use them in lightning storms or in winter blizzards when they can't get to 'em out back."

"Oh."

"Least I guess that's why we call bathrooms 'basements' here."

I still had to pee.

"Who's your teacher, son?"

I thought, *where am I, in Poland*?

It was the only foreign country that came to mind.

I repeated "Mrs. Heffernan," and he told me, pausing in midsentence, and turning to his coworker and articulating in a stage-aside mocking of King's English, "There's a *bawtharrrrooom* next door to Mr. Mobley's office." Then he asked if I knew where that was.

I went back up the stairs, down the long empty hall and made it to the "basement" just in a nick of time. Returning to my classroom, I paused outside the door and gave some thought as to how far it might be if I were to leave now and walk home—made my getaway—and I wondered if I could ever find my house in the woods, if I did. I pushed the door open. As I expected, heads turned and followed me around to my desk. I sat down. The mayor was still in front of me but cowering up against his desktop.

Mrs. Heffernan stopped reading to the class.

"Jeremiah, come here a moment, please."

For some strange reason, I almost felt like my always-in-trouble brother Dick—certain I was about to go on trial and must stand in the corner or be expelled from school. My mind raced—maybe I was in trouble for taking too long. I got up slowly and walked to the front of the room and stood by Mrs. Heffernan's desk.

I would have easily settled for any of that—a trial, standing in the corner, being expelled from school—for it was worse than anything. My new teacher, Mrs. Heffernan had

noticed, under her glasses, that my pants' fly was unbuttoned. All throughout the war pants never came with zippers, they all came with buttoned flies. America needed the metal that made zippers so we could build tanks and jeeps and airplanes and bullets. Mom told me that. Forgetting to button my fly was what I did regularly, it seemed. After putting the pencil back into her hair nest and looking away, she proceeded to point at my unbuttoned fly.

"I think you forgot something, Jeremiah."

"My name is Jerome, Mrs. Heffernan, not Jeremiah."

"I see, dear."

"It's Jerome," I mumbled as I groped each button in turn.

"Jerome it is," she said.

She continued to point while looking up at the ceiling, waiting for me to fasten each, with my back to the whole class. All the boys got buggy-eyed glad it wasn't them standing up here on display for this humiliation. The girls mostly put their hands over their mouths and giggled.

"Leave him alone, you guys!" a girl in the front row barked.

Her words did seem to break the ice—made me look almost human. On the way back to my seat I got a couple of invites to sit at tables at lunch hour. I glanced over at the girl in front who had spoken up for me. She sat at her desk with her hands clasped. Catching my eye, she pushed out her lower lip and puffed away a curl hanging over her eye and smiled.

When the lunch bell rang, the class was excused for lunch and we headed to the cafeteria. I found myself walking down the hall with a kid from the next desk row over. He wore big, thick glasses and had a pocket comb sticking out from his back pocket. He was Bobby Holbrook. I couldn't help watching his eyes when he lifted his paper lunch sack up close to his face, opened it and peeked in. He then twisted the top closed tight again.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Holbrook," Holbrook said.

"I'm Jerry," I said.

"I thought you told Mrs. Heffernan it was Jerome?"

"Call me Jerry."

The sack Holbrook carried looked wrinkled and worn, oil-stained —many trips from home to school and back. He

looked hungry, and I could sense his disappointment after peering in the sack.

"How many kids you got at your house?" Holbrook asked.

"Tons of aunts and uncles and cousins at holidays," I said. "But me and my brother Dick mostly."

"Only three, eh?" he asked.

"My brother Mike is going to college next week, so he doesn't count, I guess."

"We got eleven," Holbrook said.

"Eleven? Wow," I said.

"Plus there's Mom and Dad and two cousins living with us who lost their parents in the war. In France, I think."

"Your mom pack you lunch every day?" I asked.

"Yep."

"What'd she make ya today?"

"What do you mean?" Holbrook asked.

"What's in your sack?"

Holbrook stalled answering and kept walking.

"What'd she make?" I repeated.

"Oh, a sandwich and an apple," he said.

"Sandwich and apple?" I asked.

"I never get all that hungry at lunch."

I knew better. Any kid who lived through the war anywhere in the world would know better. The rumpled lunch sack and his having to peek in it and his big family were giveaways. My guess was Holbrook hadn't even had breakfast. Either that or the eleven or so kids at his house took turns eating a good lunch. American kids born in the late thirties and early 1940s could tell when other kids were rehearsed on what they would say to keep from being embarrassed or sad. We had keen sensitivity about these things. Like those not having enough to eat, or those losing a brother or a parent in the war. We pretty much all had one thing in common—we knew what it was like to live most of our lives with an entire world at war. We knew how to look after each other when the grownups couldn't always be around. That sense of responsibility plus five years of scrimping and sacrifice, of food rationing and sharing with other—we just knew.

"Sandwich? What kind of sandwich?" I asked. "I like

sandwiches better than almost anything."

Holbrook shifted his eyes around, hoping no one in the hall could hear him. "Ketchup," he said, under his breath.

I knew there was no such thing as a ketchup sandwich for a real lunch. Kids whose families on hard times sometimes got ketchup or honey or sugar sandwiches—just so they could hold a sandwich—to make them feel like everyone else. Dad told me poor kids in the south sometimes got molasses sandwiches to take to school.

"Ketchup, my favorite," I mumbled.

While we were walking, I dug into my right pocket, pulled out my lunch quarter—reached around under my left arm and poked it to the side of his ribs.

"Wanna trade?"

Holbrook looked down at the quarter and then over at me.

"What's your name?"

"Already told ya—Jerry."

Holbrook looked at the quarter again.

"For real," I said, looking straight into his eyes. "Trade."

He stared at me as we walked.

"I love ketchup," I said.

He gave me a kind of look that let me know he knew he could trust me. We made the trade—as we would do every day forward through all our school years together. He would have done the same for me.

It was then when Holbrook and I bonded and started laughing and talking like we were old friends. He told me his dad was a part-time brakeman for the railroad, and they lived on Berry Road. He said his dad was buying the house from a farmer for seven hundred dollars and they had no hot water, but they did have three small waterfalls and a creek behind it that their land touched. We found ourselves walking behind Barber down the hall to the cafeteria.

"Who's the girl who spoke up in class?" I asked. "The one in the front row."

"Mary Crane. She lives near me."

He pointed down the hall.

"That's her by the cafeteria door, looking at the bulletin

board. Maybe we can sit with her."

Mary caught Holbrook's eye and waited for us.

"Hi Jerome," Mary said.

"Call him Jerry," Holbrook said.

"I already know Holbrook," Mary said. "We ride on the same bus. You guys want to sit together?"

Barber joined us, and he flagged Bases and we found a table and talked all through lunch. Holbrook was enjoying his hot meal so much I could tell he hadn't had breakfast. While I was opening the paper sack I traded my lunch quarter for, Mary came up from behind, reached around me, and slid a small bottle of milk near my lunch sack for me to drink. She cupped her hand over her mouth and whispered in my ear, "I saw what you did."

Mary lived not too far from the Holbrooks, and she knew how many kids they had and how hard their father worked to put food on the table.

She walked around, sat down and smiled through some loose strands of her hair.

We all talked like we had known each other for the longest time, while most of the other kids had run out to the playground after eating. My new set of friends assured me that I would grow to like the country, in time.

Mary agreed.

"We moved here this summer from Manlius," Mary said.

"You like it now?" I asked.

"You'll get used to it soon enough," Mary said.

"Where'd you live during the war?" I asked.

"I had to live with my grandmother, in Syracuse, after Dad went off to war when I was three."

"Is Syracuse nice?" I asked.

"The city was scary."

"Was it?"

"When my daddy came back home wearing a uniform after the war, I cried and hid under the bed."

"Why'd you cry?"

"I didn't even recognize him. He was gone three years."

"Oh."

"Now I deliver newspapers early in the morning to earn extra money."

"Where?"

"On my road."

"You're not afraid anymore?"

"No way. My dad drives me around my whole route before he goes to work. He loves driving his new Ford. He'll drive me anywhere I need to go."

"Money for college?" I asked.

"Just money," Mary said. "For things we may need. Maybe for college, too."

"What's your dad do?" I asked.

"He's a blacksmith."

"That's neat—a blacksmith for horses?"

"He works on cars mostly. He worked on army tanks in the war."

"Big army tanks like General Patton tanks?"

"I guess. He can fix almost anything that needs fixing. What's your dad do?"

"He works in a bakery."

Barber added, "Jerry, there's a boy, Randy, whose dad can't tell him what he did in the war because of the secrets—"

"For real?" I asked.

"You can ride with him on his milk truck, if you want."

"Milk truck? He's like a milk man?"

"No, this is a big milk truck. His dad hauls milk cans from farms to the dairy. Randy rides with him on Saturdays and Sundays if you ever want to go—let me know."

Lunch in the cafeteria this day made it a good day.

Finally, the bell rang and school let out. For the whole first week our class had to line up and walk to the buses together. Mr. Skelton was still sitting on the bus. This was all so new to me. I wondered if he sat there all day, waiting for us, or if he got to go home or go for a walk during the day.

The ride home was entertaining, because I got to sit with Barber again and learn about everything on the other side of the road. I saw that he lived on a big farm with barns with silos and good stuff like animals and tractors and trucks and machines. I saw Linda Oats get off the bus on the corner of our road. What could have been better than having the prettiest girl on the bus live on the very same road I lived on?

The bus stopped at our house, and Dick and I got off. We stood a
minute, looked around, taking it all in. This was our first walk from a school bus up our long dirt driveway to the house. We studied everything around us in both fear and wonderment.

"Look at that up there," Dick said.

"Up where?" I asked.

"That big rock, it's sticking out from that cliff up there near the top. It's huge for a rock."

"It's white," I said. "I've never seen a white rock before."

"The white rock," Dick said as we walked toward the house.

The tall trees that towered in the woods on the top of shale and rock cliffs, the creek trickling down next to the cliff behind the small barn and barn garage that stood side by side. The house that once was an old public park—Delphi Falls Park—and square dance pavilion was now our house. It was all still new to us, and still intimidating.

"I'm going to check out the barn and see if that old popsicle cart is

worth fixing," Dick said.

He saw a popsicle tricycle-cart at the used bicycle shop in Cortland. It had been backed into by a milk delivery truck and smashed against a brick wall. He traded his Log Cabin Syrup coin bank can filled with Indian Head pennies for it and talked Mr. Rowe into hauling it up with the moving boxes.

"Popsicle cart? You mean you got a pedal cart to sell popsicles with?" "Yeah—dented-up pretty bad, though."

The minute I heard him say he wondered if it could be fixed, I had an idea, but I didn't say anything. The girl at school, Mary—her dad was a blacksmith. I was about to figure a way to give Dick's popsicle cart to Mary for her dad to fix so she could make extra money selling popsicles. I thought about her buying me milk at lunch with her own money. I knew she was going to be a friend. Dick owed me for the black eye I fibbed about for him. I just had to figure how to make his popsicle cart disappear and show up at Mary's without Dick having a brain hemorrhage, but I had no time to think about it. I was still recounting in my mind the Superman radio episode from the night before, when he

flew two hundred miles in two seconds and saved the family from the high-speed, bone-crushing oncoming train. Today, after a first day at a new school, me, disguised as Superman, was going to go swimming out back under the monster falls, where my dad said there was a good swimming hole. I was getting undressed when I saw Dick through my window walking from the swings to the barn garage. I knew Dad was at work, and I knew Mom wasn't at home, so I thought—why not?

Thinking was something I would always try to do regardless of how much trouble I seemed to get into. A boy would think as a precaution, in case someone asked, "What were you thinking?"

But right then I had more important things on my mind. Superman, disguised as me, Jerry, was going to check out the waterfalls for the first time, and—I thought—if I was going to the falls as Superman, I was faster than a speeding bullet, and if I was faster than a speeding bullet, no one could see me—and if no one could see me—and nobody was home anyway, I didn't have to wear anything at all. No swimsuit. Nada. Nothing. Naked as a jaybird.

It all made perfectly good sense to me.

Out through the living room's back door I ran—like a flash—truly faster than a speeding bullet. I was a sonic streaking blur, all the way from my room, through the house and the entire distance to the waterfall. It was so cool—my Superman speed—my feet barely touching the ground.

Under the waterfalls I could hardly hear myself think, with the water crashing down more than seventy feet into a swimming hole below. On the tall shale cliff by the creek, I found stone fossils from prehistoric times. In the creek, I could see minnows and tiny crawfish going under rocks. I would watch the water start at the top of the falls and keep an eye on it all the way down until it splashed in the water below.

When it was time to go back to the house, I waded across the creek—very carefully, so as not to slip or stub my toes on rocks—and as I got to the other side, I knew my Superman powers would take over again, so I could get back to my bedroom unseen.

Off I shot, like a rocket—the house instantly appearing

closer and closer—and I saw with my x-ray vision that the back door to the living room was wide open.

Funny, I didn't remember leaving that door opened.

Oh well, not to worry. I was a bullet speeding through the air, and I got closer and the closer I got, the more I convinced myself I could make
the living room with one big single leap, no steps, and off I went—up, up, and away!

I sailed through the air, through the open doorway and landed on both bare feet perfectly, coming to a sudden stop, balancing myself upright just a few feet inside the door, on the living room rug.

"Why hello, Jerome," Mrs. Heffernan said, looking over her spectacles this time.

"Huh?!"

"Your mother was nice enough to invite me over for a visit and a cup of tea."

I stood there frozen—stark butt-naked, looking stupid.

"Aren't you chilly, dear?" Mom asked.

Her tea was spilling from her cup, onto the coffee table.

Mrs. Heffernan handed her a napkin.

I didn't say a word. I actually think I went blind for a moment. I turned around and walked through the living room, down the hall, and into my room, where I collapsed forward on my bed.

This was only my first day at school, in the country.

I covered my head with my pillow, my mind going a complete blank, again.

Lesson one—it's a basement, not a lavatory. Lesson two—button my fly. Lesson three—Mrs. Heffernan is a Mrs.—not Sister. Lesson four—Superman wears swim trunks, and nobody told me.

How was a boy to know that, listening to him on the radio?

CHAPTER TWO
HAVE NO FEARS, ADVENTURE NEARS

I was telling my dad about Holbrook's ketchup sandwich; how big and poor his family was and how it reminded me of the war again just as though it was still going on. I told him how Mary Crane cried and hid under her bed when her dad came home from the war in uniform and how he now drove her early in the morning before he went to work so she could deliver newspapers on their road to earn extra money. I told him about the boy, Randy, whose dad couldn't talk about the war because of the top-secret things he worked on. With the dashboard lights reflecting on his eyes I could tell Dad understood everything I was feeling.

That evening, as I knelt on new linoleum, leaned on my new (to me) bed, it seemed fitting to make my reflections the only way I knew how—my bedtime prayers. The family seemed settled into a new routine, a new culture, but my memories of Cortland kept churning up for some reason. The painful part was I wasn't sure why.

"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

I had become used to the war, witnessing its five-year entirety from the year of my birth. I still wasn't used to the "country" I knew little about; the edge of a steep hill next to a house I'd never seen before late this summer; the dark woods that had sixty-foot trees at the bottom of it that looked like three- hundred-foot trees at the top of the hill; the seventy-foot waterfall behind our house thundering constantly, like it was alive and wanted to bust free from the rock and boulders it plummeted over all day and night, and the creek by the cliff on the other side of a one-story dance pavilion that was converted into a house I still could get lost in.

I liked the kids I was meeting—Holbrook and the others, Barber, Mary, and Bases. I liked Mr. Pitts's farm, where I went and got eggs every week, and farmer Parker's, where I'd watch the cows come home, but my thoughts were clouded with a

"homesickness" that would come over me from time to time, thinking I was missing a part of me because of our move. I missed the Cortland part of me that saw the beginning, middle, and end of the war that affected every family, every neighbor—and brought us all together. I still had nightmares about the time I was out in the back yard and the sky darkened with low-flying bombers, bush hopping their way to England so they could bomb Hitler. I could remember watching Mom weep while we listened to President Roosevelt's funeral on the Zenith radio. I was confused by the new empty, detached feeling I had from time to time.

Suddenly, in the dark—a hand touched my shoulder.

"Psssssst—Jerry—psssssst!"

"Huh?"

"Want to go fishing, son?"

It was my dad, waking me up to go fishing with him. He'd never taken me fishing alone when we lived in the city. The whole family would go together to Little York Lake on Sundays to picnic and fish, and we'd listen to Walter Winchell's radio broadcast or to the "Stop the Music" radio show on the way home. None of the lights were on in the house, and no one was awake, so I knew this would mean I'd get to ride with Dad in the car, which was great, because he knew how to have one big adventure after another. He had his work suit and tie on, which I didn't understand. I sat right up, got dressed, and walked through the dark to the car. So we wouldn't wake anyone, he started the car with the lights off, backed around, and drove down the driveway toward the gate. He turned them on when we were on the road.

See what I mean? How many people could have done that without backing into the swings or swiping the side of the barn garage or dumping the car into the creek? Just my dad! That alone was an adventure, and we weren't even out of our driveway yet.

"Where're we going, Dad?"

I only asked because of his dress clothes, and wasn't sure if it was night or morning, but it was fun to be up this late or this early—whichever it was—with my dad, and knowing inside every house we drove by, everyone was asleep and missing out on everything.

"How's school, son?"

"It's okay."

"How were your first few days?"

"Mr. Mobley thinks my name is Jeremiah Mark."

Dad smiled. "I'm impressed. Not even a week and you already have two names, just like Superman and Clark Kent."

I sat up a little taller.

"We're going to Little York Lake and catch some sunfish or perch—but first, we'll go to Bucky's Diner in Cortland and get some breakfast. Later I have to make some stops at grocery stores in Auburn, Seneca Falls, and Fayetteville before we go home. I thought you'd like the ride."

Holy cow! I loved Bucky's Diner because it was open all night and Dad and Bucky were good friends. Bucky always had a big white apron wrapped around him that almost reached the floor like a dress, and a white string tied around his waist to hold it up. He wore a paper hat that looked like an army hat, and it said "New York State Fair" on it.

Dad worked at his and Mr. Durkee's bakery in Homer, which was right next to Cortland where we used to live, and he'd always stop at grocery stores to see if the bread was straight on the shelves, for the customers to see it—and wait just a minute—

"Cortland?" I asked.

It dawned on me what he just said. I hadn't been in Cortland since we moved to the country. I had forgotten how far we drove to Delphi Falls before that Labor Day. It seemed like hours.

"Is Cortland far away?"

"Thirty-five, maybe forty minutes, son."

"Is that all, Dad? For real?"

"Just about as long as it takes to listen to your Superman radio program, Jerry me boy. I had a feeling you'd like to see Cortland again."

"I thought we moved to China, like a million miles away, and it was close by all the time?"

It wasn't long before we were driving past Shea's corner store, the school, and heading out through the other side of the village.

"Where's this road go, Dad?"

"It goes to Tully, and then we'll go south to Homer on 11. Pretend you're on a steamship freighter, Jerry me boy, sailing from one port adventure to the next. You are exploring the world, protecting it from evildoers and enemies of mankind."

"Like Hitler and Mussolini," I mumbled.

Dad grinned.

Dad was great. While he was encouraging me to become the Superman we both suspected was inside me, I saw in the distance a country road sign leaning to the left. I kept my eyes on it, trying to make it out.

When I could read it I shouted, "Berry Road. Dad, that's Berry Road. That's where Holbrook lives."

Slowing the car down, Dad said, "Well, let's go have a look."

"For real, Dad?"

"It can't be that long of a road. We'll drive it up and back. What clues do you have about his house, Jerry?"

I was amazed. Dad turned on Berry Road just as easy as he made it around the swings and the barn at home. He didn't even have to think about it. He was great!

"His house is next to a creek. That's all I know."

"That's a good clue, son, maybe all we need. Where there's a creek, there should be a bridge. Keep a look out for a small bridge, just like the one by our house."

A couple of miles up, we drove over a bluff where there was a curve in the road.

"There's a bridge, Dad. There's a bridge."

It was a short concrete bridge, two or three feet high, the width of the creek on both sides of the road.

"That white house there by the maple tree could be Holbrook's," Dad said. "We'll turn around up here and head to Cortland, but maybe now you know. Ask him on Monday. Ask him if they have a white, two-story house with blue shingles."

We could see a car up ahead with its interior lights on, driving slowly, near the side of the road, almost like it had a flat tire. I could see someone in the back seat. Then I saw an arm flip out the rear window and a rolled-up newspaper flew high before landing on a lawn.

"Up ahead, is that a Ford?" I asked.

"It is a Ford, why?"

"Can we get close? I wanna see who that is. They are delivering newspapers. It might be Mary and her dad."

Another rolled-up newspaper burst from the arm leaning out the open rear window, higher than the last one, and it landed in the middle of another lawn.

"If that's Mary, she has a good arm," Dad said. "She'd be a dandy outfielder."

Dad pulled next to the Ford. I rolled down my window.

"That's her. That's Mary. That's her for sure in the back seat, delivering newspapers."

Dad tooted the horn a short friendly toot and waved at Mr. Crane, who smiled and waved back. I waved at Mary. She caught my eye and waved with a grin as Dad slowed down, pulled into a driveway, and backed around so we could get on our way again.

"Her dad drives her every morning."

"I remember you telling me. Nice girl."

What an adventure we were having, and it wasn't even daylight.

In Cortland, we drove to the side of Bucky's Diner and parked. I felt like I had traveled around the world. I would have never dreamed I would see it again since we moved.

When we walked in, I sat on my favorite counter stool like I always had when we went there before. I made my compulsory two or three spins around on it, pushing off from the counter every time I circled around. Bucky was in his apron and hat, just as I remembered him. Then, like always when we went to Bucky's, Dad took a shiny quarter out of his pocket and with his thumb flipped it way up in the air, so it blurred it spun so fast through the air, high enough nearly to touch the ceiling.

"Call it, Bucky!" he shouted, not taking his eyes off the flying quarter on its descent.

The game they played was if Bucky called heads or tails, and if the coin landed the way Bucky called it, Dad would give him the quarter for his coffee. Win or lose, Bucky would put both his hands on the counter, jump his legs up sideways, and click his heels together in the air. If Bucky didn't call it right, Dad's coffee

was free. It was fun, and everyone in the diner would gather around and watch. I knew coffee was a dime, and one time I asked Dad if he felt bad losing a quarter if he lost. He said no, he did it so that if Bucky lost, he could make up for the free coffee the next time by winning a quarter. Dad was nice like that.

"We need two egg and bacon sandwiches on white, wrapped in wax paper, if you can, Bucky," Dad said.

"Sounds like you're going fishing," Bucky said.

"Jerry and I plan to go empty the sunfish and perch out of Little York Lake before the sun comes up. We want to catch them napping."

"How 'bout I wrap a piece of fresh apple pie to keep the boy awake?" Bucky asked.

Dad winked at him like that would be nice, and after he took the last sip from his coffee, Bucky handed him a paper sack and we went out to the car. It was still dark outside.

I was getting pretty good about putting a worm on a hook so it would stay, in the daylight, but it was way too dark, and way too early in the morning to see what I was doing. I would take a worm out of the coffee tin and hand it to Dad. He hooked the worms for me. We sat on the end of the wooden dock with our legs hanging over for about an hour. I caught three sunfish. Dad caught one bullhead.

Dad lifted the stringer out of the water with four fish dangling on it.

"What do you say we put these fish back in the lake to grow a bit more?" he asked. "We know just where they live, so we will catch them again when they're bigger and can make a nice meal."

Made perfect sense to me and after all, just going fishing alone with my dad was great! Before we ate our sandwiches, he held me by my legs and the back of my belt so I could reach down into the lake and rinse the worm smell off my hands good. He rinsed his, too, to get the worm guts and smell off.

We took the poles and everything back to the car just as the sun was starting to come out. Dad drove into Homer and around the back of the bakery, where everyone was working and hurrying about, walking up and down the stairs, and bakery delivery trucks parked everywhere were being loaded up with cartons of warm bread before the drivers took them out. It was then I learned why Dad wore his work suit and tie all the time—because bakers had to deliver bread all over, and since they wanted to deliver it fresh to the stores, the bakery had to run twenty-four hours a day. Everyone in the bakery would ask which boy I was (they could never keep us straight), and they would pat me on the head and tell me how much I had grown. It was nice to see nobody had forgotten us just because we'd moved. Dad went inside the bakery office, poured a cup of coffee for himself, and made a hot chocolate to go with my piece of apple pie.

"Let me do some business," he said, "and then we'll go."

I needed time to eat my pie, so I was okay with that—and besides, the sun was barely just coming out and I had had three adventures with my dad already.

After his business, we went down the back stairs to the car. He told me to crawl into the back seat and get some sleep because he was going to drive to Auburn and then to Seneca Falls to look at grocery stores before we went home. I could lie down in the back seat and fit perfectly. Dad turned the radio on, and I heard the music or the talking as he turned the dial for the best reception from town to town.

When I woke the sun was bright, and the car wasn't moving. I sat up, rubbed my eyes, trying to remember what I was doing in the back seat of the car, and saw we were parked in front of a grocery store somewhere in the country. There were no houses or farms anywhere around. I opened the door, got out, and went inside. I walked around one aisle by the vegetables but didn't see my dad. I turned a corner in the store by a pile of acorn squash—and still no dad. A comic book stand and a Superman comic caught my eye. I hadn't seen it before, so I paged through it a little while.

After I was done, I set the comic book back on the rack,

walked around the store, looking for Dad, and when I couldn't find him, I decided to go back to the car and wait there. He was probably doing business. I found the front door and walked outside.

The car was gone.

This can't be good, I thought, as I seemed to think more and more in those days since our move to the country.

I rushed back into the store and to the front counter. The man behind the counter was putting cartons of cigarettes on a shelf behind him and he had his glasses pushed up over his forehead, on the top of his head.

"Where's my dad?"

"Who are you, son?"

"I'm Jerry. Where's my daddy—Mike?"

The man smiled, told me right off he knew Big Mike, and started to talk to me. I told him I'd been asleep in the back seat and had come into the store to find him, and when I went back out, he was gone.

"Don't worry, little guy," the man chuckled. "Your dad will see he lost his boy as soon as he looks in the back seat, and he will turn that car around on a dime and come back right away, in a big hurry—I promise."

Well, this made me feel better, but I did think about crying.

What if he forgot he brought me this morning to the middle of nowhere, and just drove to all those places he was going to and never remembered me, and then I was here forever? It was a regular occurrence when either Mom or Dad, sitting at the supper table, looking at one of us, straight in the eye, would pause, in midsentence, and have to gather their thoughts—to recollect what our names were. One time Dad looked at me as if he was thinking, "I know your name. I remember driving you home from the hospital." I would have nightmares about being left in a store and my parents not remembering my name until a letter came, addressed to me, from the Army draft board.

The man came outside with me, handed me an orange popsicle, sat on the stoop, and pulled his glasses down so he could help me take the frozen wrapper off.

"I'll wait here with you, Jerry, because I just know your

dad will be along any minute now."

It took a lot to keep from crying, but the popsicle helped, and the man sitting there with me helped, too. I didn't feel all alone.

I'd have been okay being dumped in Cortland where I knew things, but this was the wilderness.

Off in the distance we could begin to see dust billowing up in the air from the road.

"Well, lookee at what we have here," the man said with a smile. "It sure 'nuff looks like Big Mike heading our way."

I could see a tiny light-green car coming this way from down the road.

"Dad's Oldsmobile is light green," I said.

"Please, God, let that be my dad," I said to myself. "I'll clean my room and do all the things I'm always supposed to do."

The light-green car got bigger and soon a long arm stretched out its window, straight up in the air, and waved at us as the car got closer, slowed down, and turned into the store's parking area. It sure was my dad—and that's when I started to cry. Not because I was sad or scared, but because I was happy. Happy to see that Dad didn't forget me.

He got out of the car, walked around and rubbed my head, laughing a big laugh.

"Thank Mr. Morgan for watching you, Jerry me boy. I discovered you weren't in the back seat when I wanted you to wake up and sing a song with me. "*Put another nickel in … in the nickelodeon … all I want is loving you and music—music—music—"*

That was one of my dad's favorite songs, which Theresa Brewer sang on the radio. We sang it together loud so we could hear it because we had the car windows open.

This time I sat in the front seat, wondering what the next Jeremiah Mark adventure would be.