

# **Billy**

**Stories of my childhood**





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*For my family*





## Foreword

As the careful reader of this memoir will notice, my father began expressing himself in his inimitable, outspoken manner very early in life, partly on account of his genetic make-up, and partly out of an early acquired urge to thrive – or at least to have his voice be heard – in his challenging familial constellation.

When he began working on his ‘stories’ in the mid-1990s, he was hoping to give a boy the fatherly attention that he had so sorely missed since his father died young. The first stories were those he had told on numerous occasions, including family reunions, long car rides and visits to our elementary classrooms. Having written sermons for 35 years, his natural inclination was to judge his childhood antics with the tone of a judgmental preacher. After working for twelve years on these stories, he found the voice of the boy he once was and let him tell the stories.

My work on the manuscript was aided greatly by my sister Susan, my step-brother Ken and Uncle J.T., all of whom read the manuscript and added their comments. When we presented the first bound edition to him in August 2007 at a ‘small’ (only 35 people) family gathering at my sister Sarah’s house in Richmond, he wasn’t sure what the book was. Dementia had taken away his memory of having written the memoirs. Now that he can’t always remember us, nor much of what is in the book, at least we are glad we have the book to keep him here with us.

I hope these stories – and thus his gift of storytelling – enjoy the large audience they deserve.

Jim Martin  
Stuttgart, September 2008

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## At home with Daddy

*Stokesland, Virginia, June 1934*

My daddy stays in bed all day long, but sometimes he gets up and takes me for a walk down the road to Mr. Rice's. I like to walk with Daddy because he goes real slow, and I can keep up with him.

We walk around the yard and look at the apple trees and the peach trees, and Daddy says the old birds get to eat more off our trees than we do. I like to feed the birds.

Sometimes Daddy takes a pee behind the garage when we get back. I never have to – but Daddy makes me try anyway.

Daddy can drive a car, but I didn't know he could because we've never had one. Mama took us to church yesterday because it's Sunday, and when we got home two ladies knocked on our front door. They asked Daddy to please get their car out of the ditch in front of our house. So Daddy walked real slow down the hill because he's sick, and he got in their car and drove it right out of the ditch.

One day Daddy showed me a big pile of magnets that can pick up nails out behind the garage that he used to use to fix cars in. I think Daddy knows a lot about cars because Mama says he made one out of junk one time. I'm going to help Daddy work on cars when I grow up.

Our garage is made out of wood everywhere except the roof, and our house is, too. But our house is yellow. Our well house is made out of bricks and our barns are all made out of wood. And they've all got black tar roofs, and we chew it sometimes in the summer when it's soft. But our well-house roof is green.

The Salvation Army Man comes to see Daddy every single Friday, and he brings us a *War Cry* Magazine, and Daddy likes to tell him about cars. But he doesn't sit long because Daddy won't talk

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about salvation and hell, and the Salvation Army Man never has had a car. So he drinks another dipper of water and walks down to see Mrs. Rice's mama.

He's the only person who comes to see Daddy, and I really like him. I think I'm going to be a Salvation Army Man when I grow up if I don't have to walk everywhere. Mama says people are afraid of catching the T.B. from Daddy, but the Salvation Army Man's not afraid of Daddy, and I'm not either.

The day after Sunday Mr. Patterson came to see us in his truck-you-can-take-the-sides-off- and brought my little sister Deanie some ice cream. Doctor Richardson gave Deanie to Mama one night after he found her in our vegetable garden in a head of cabbage. Mr. Patterson likes Daddy like the Salvation Army Man does, and sometimes he brings everybody a banana. Mama likes bananas and Deanie likes Mr. Patterson. She smiles at him when he tickles her chin. Everybody likes Mr. Patterson because he brings us good stuff to eat.

Last summer Mr. Patterson took Bessie away in his truck and kept her for a week, and we didn't have any milk except for what the Rices let us have. Mama lets the Rices borrow things at our back door when Herbert comes up and knocks and says, "Mama Rice says can she borrow a cup of coffee?" I don't know why they're always out of stuff to eat because a lot of Rices live there, and some of them go to work, and Mr. Rice farms his land. But Daddy says it's not good land, and more of the Rice's ought to get up and go to work at the cotton mill so they can stop begging. Most of the time they forget to bring the coffee and sugar back, and that makes Daddy mad, and he coughs a lot. Mama never gets mad at anybody.

My big brother is named J.T. Herbert is his buddy, so Herbert doesn't play with me much. He eats cornflakes with buttermilk when they're out of real milk because he's too lazy to walk up to our house and borrow some, Daddy says. I don't have to eat cornflakes with buttermilk because we've always got milk in the icebox unless Mr. Patterson has hauled Bessie away again. Mama says when he takes Bessie to see his bull we get a calf, and then Bessie gives milk

again. But the baby calf drinks most of it after Mama pours the cream off to make butter with.

Then somebody comes to see Daddy and buys the baby calf, and sometimes I cry when they take her away because Daddy says the calves are mine. But now we've got lots of milk again, and Mama gave some to the Rices, and they didn't have to come to the back door and borrow it. Mama says it's Christian to help people who don't have as much as we do.

### **Cold enough to kill a hog**

Old Bessie doesn't have her horns anymore because Daddy paid black George Johnson a half-dollar to saw them off with a hacksaw after she horned J.T. when he tried to make her mind when we were grazing her up at Aint Maude's pasture. I don't like to graze her any more than I did Bossy, our old cow. One day Daddy sold old Bossy to Mr. Patterson, and he turned her into beef, and that's how I learned beef comes from cows. I already knew pork comes from pigs.

Mr. Patterson and black John Roberts and John Roberts's brother tied a rope around Bossy's neck and led her up to the sandy lot by the railroad track near Aint Polly's house. They put a rope around her neck and tied her between two trees. Mr. Patterson told me to watch because I've got to know how to get beef from a cow when I grow up.

Then John Roberts took his axe and hit Bossy between the eyes, but she didn't fall down. So he kept hitting her till she fell down on her knees, and then his brother ran up and cut her throat with his long knife, and they skinned her and cut her up. Mr. Patterson gave John Roberts Bossy's insides to take home because he likes hearts and kidneys and things we don't like, and Mama got a lot of beef for us to eat for a while.

That's kind of the way you kill hogs, only they aren't as tame as cows so they won't let you tie them up and hit them in the head like that. Hogs will let you feed them rotten apples and slop and buttermilk and ship-stuff from Farmer's Supply. But you better not let them eat out of your hand like black Tom Jersey did because he was feeding one and that sorry old pig bit his finger off and ate it.

When our pigs are little, we play like they're horses and ride them around the pig-pen, but when they get bigger they're liable to dump you in the wet doo-doo – and they'll bite you if you don't run away. But they don't mind much what you do if you bring them some coal scraps from the pile in back of the garage. The guys at

Sunday school don't believe our pigs eat little pieces of black coal like it's candy, but they do and it sounds like Sanford chomping hard candy on Christmas morning.

Granddaddy Martin and Uncle George and Uncle John come over to our house when it's hog-killing time, and Mama's always glad to see them because hog killing is a lot of work. Daddy says Uncle John doesn't like to work, but he comes on over and drives Granddaddy in his Model A Ford Coupe and helps a little.

Daddy says you've got to wait till it gets real cold to kill hogs – like it was when J.T. got me to lick the pump handle one time, but I don't do that anymore 'cause Virginia had to soak my tongue off with hot water, or else she said I'd have pulled the skin off.

Daddy says it's cold enough for hog killing when the chickens' water freezes solid, and you can see your breath out the back door, and there's enough frost on the grass to look like it snowed last night. So when the weather is right, the men fill up Mama's big black iron kettle she boils our clothes in and they build a fire under it, and it gets steamy everywhere because the air is so cold, J.T. says. Then they drag in Uncle George's scalding-pot that looks just like a flatboat down at the Dan River, and they build a fire under it. And when it's steaming like a house-on-fire, they drag the dead pigs through it till their hair falls off.

One time Sanford and Hersel Wade hauled the scalding-pot in the back of Hersel's Chevy pick-up truck to Mrs. Pugh's pond and poled it all around, and he says it works just like a flatboat. But I wouldn't go anywhere near Mrs. Pugh's house because she makes blood-pies and eats them when it's hog-killing time, Sanford told me. And that's why me and J.T. go see Grandma the long way instead of the short-cut across her farm sometimes.

This year Granddaddy and the men had to do a lot more work to slaughter our old sow that weighed close to 600 pounds, Uncle George guessed. Daddy can't do any hard work or he'll cough a lot, but he shoots this old pig between her eyes with his .22 long-rifle. And she's supposed to fall down on her knees ... but she doesn't fall down. She just stands there with a little red dot between her eyes. So Uncle George jumps in the pen to cut her throat, and old pig is mad for being shot in the head, so she runs away and bumps

the plank fence and busts it down and takes off running.

Everybody takes off after her except for Daddy, and she gallops across the road toward the big barn and right through the Pugh's back yard and right smack-dab into the side of Harvey Winn's old truck that's been stuck in a ditch in front of their house as long as I can remember. And black George Taylor yells, "Shoo-pig," and runs her in a fence corner and jumps on her back and cuts her throat. And I'm sitting on Daddy's lap, and he says, "I guess that's all the trouble she had to give."

So the men tie her hind legs together and hitch her to Uncle George's truck and drag her over to the fire and pull her through the scalding pot. And Mama and Mrs. Moore and Aint Maggie scrape the rest of her hair off with Atlas jar tops so she'll be fit to eat. And the men haul her up in the air to a tree limb and cut her up and everybody gets some pork. Mama and Daddy get the best parts.

And after everybody goes home, Mama cooks the fat meat in the black pot and makes us cracklings. When they're dried-out they're as good as popcorn. And after that she makes us stand aside, and she dumps in a box of lye – which we're not allowed to ever touch because it'll put your eyes out – and it cooks until after dinner. And when the time comes you can see Mama's soap floating on top, which she uses to boil our clothes in every Monday morning.

I like hog-killing time because a lot of people eat with us, and we get pork-meat, and Aint Maggie brings pies. But most of the time we eat chicken, except when Mr. Patterson brings us beef or salt-fish, which makes me thirsty – but it's awful good.

### Rubber treads and all

Mr. Wrenn lives across the road from us. He raised a crop of tobacco this year because he's got a lot of land he doesn't know what to do with, Daddy says. And when it comes time to bring the tobacco in, he gets me and J.T. to help out, and he's paying us for it. Uncle Mose brings his horse and a tobacco sled, and he picks the tobacco because we don't know how to. And he hauls it up to Mr. Wrenn's front porch where it's shady, and me and J.T. stand there and hand three leaves at a time to Aint Caroline – and she ties them to a tobacco stick. We didn't know how long we would get to help out, but next day Mr. Wrenn says that's all he's going to do in tobacco – and he pays us two dimes apiece.

Every single Sunday morning we go to Sunday school and preaching, and every single Sunday night we go to Baptist Young People's Union and to preaching. Mama says it does your soul good to go to church. We call the B.Y.P.U. 'button-your-pants-up.' The first time I remember church I'm lying down with my head in Mama's lap, and I go to sleep while they're still singing.

Daddy doesn't go to church now because people are afraid of catching his T.B., Mama says. So she takes us, and we all sit in one pew, and we have to scrunch up to fit in, but Mama says she can keep an eye on us better this way. I get awful tired some Sundays because they sing so much, and I don't know the words, but Virginia says I'll like to go to church when I learn the words.

There's a place up front with a red curtain Mama says is velvet, and it's hanging on a pretty brass rod, and people stand behind it and sing by themselves. They're called the choir. Anybody who wants to be in the choir and get looked at can walk right up and sit behind the curtain before church starts. I might sing in the choir when I get bigger and learn the words.

When Preacher Houghton preaches, he starts out real low like he's telling us a secret, and then he talks loud and shakes his finger and points up to heaven. I don't know what he's yelling about.

Mama used to let me go to sleep with my head on her lap, but now Deanie is the baby, and she gets Mama's lap. I have to stay awake because I'm seven. I think preaching is nice even if Sanford won't go any more. Mostly it's good if I get to take a nap with all the singing ... and Preacher Houghton doesn't yell too loud and wake me up.

The best time of all in church is the Sunday before Christmas when everybody younger than Lillian goes up front while the piano lady plays Christmas carols, and Mr. McCubbins hands us a brown bag with an apple and an orange and a tangerine and some nuts and some hard Christmas candy! But I like tangerines better than oranges because they're sweeter, and they're easier to get the peel off. And I get to keep everything in my bag because everybody gets one, and J.T.'s not allowed to get me to give him a single thing, Mama told him.

When Mr. McCubbins goes to sleep during preaching, everybody acts like he's not even sleeping. But when he gets to snoring too loud, Preacher Houghton nods to one of the Deacons, and the Deacon comes up and puts his hand over Mr. McCubbins' mouth until he lets out a big "SNORT!" and wakes up. And everybody acts like he hasn't done it at all, and Preacher Houghton goes back to preaching.

When we have a funeral or somebody is going to get baptized, the Colored people come and sit on the back pew on the left side. One time I ask Mama why they're sitting all the way in the back, and she puts her finger over her mouth and says, "Shhhh! I don't know, Son." And then she looks around everywhere.

When the Sears, Roebuck catalog comes to our mailbox, whoever gets the mail and brings it home gets to look at the Christmas toys first. I've been getting the mail every day, and the day the catalog comes I'm there first. I sit up on the steps in front of Tom Taylor's house and look at the toys for this year. They've still got the little tin tractors you wind up like last year. This is the best toy I've ever wanted since Mama says I'm too young to have a BB-gun.

After supper we're all looking at the catalog, and I let everybody know I want the wind-up tractor with rubber treads and a driver



sitting up front. Everybody sees what it costs, and Mama gives us a dollar apiece to buy everybody's presents with. And Lillian says, "Billy, if I give you a tractor, everybody else will have to go without a present. That costs 79 cents!"

And that about settles that! So I figure I'll just have to save my bottle-money this year and buy myself one next Christmas. I figure I can have that much in my pocket by next Christmas if I don't waste it on drinks and chewing gum and all-day suckers like I usually do.

So we all go shopping before Christmas comes, and Mama bought some Christmas wrapping paper, and I buy everybody a present, and I get Mama three whole packs of hairpins for 3 cents.

The Sunday before Christmas comes, and Mr. McCubbins gives everybody a brown bag with an orange and stuff in it like always. It's three days before Christmas, and I can't wait. The morning paper J.T. delivers has got a little block on the front page telling everybody how many days before Christmas gets here.

Everybody is awake by sun-up, and the Christmas tree is packed with presents all around its feet because everybody gives everybody a present every year. And we don't have to wait to eat anything like Doug and Edwin and Teddy have to. We get to find our presents and open them right away.

I open most of mine but don't find a present from Mama. And then near the bottom of the pile I see her handwriting on a package, and it's a pretty big package, like a loaf of bread. And I pick it up and rattle it like we do every present, but nothing rattles. I rip off the paper because I can't stand to wait any longer.

And there's a box inside, and I can't believe the picture on the box! There's a little man sitting on a tractor with rubber treads. It's the tractor! I didn't know Mama could afford it. I don't know what to do, so I start crying. Then Mama works her way through the trash around the tree and pats my head and sings, "Merry Christmas from Santa, Billy-boy, Billy-boy!"

## Enough is enough

Mama says we ought to not complain, “We should be thankful we’ve got something to eat every day because some people in this Depression don’t have much.”

So I’m thankful, but I sure could stand a lot more sweet things – like pies and cakes and fudge – ’specially fudge! Mama showed the girls how to make it when they were little, and now they make it a whole lot, and it’s like having a party in the kitchen. Mama’s kitchen is the biggest room in the house because it was two rooms one time, and everybody stays here after supper to study because there’s a fire in the stove, and sometimes we get to listen to Daddy’s radio with “Amos and Andy.”

Now, making fudge takes boiling water and sugar and cocoa, and after you’ve cooked it enough you drop some in a glass of cold water until it makes little chocolate balls in the bottom – and that means it’s ready to eat! But first Virginia pours it out on wax paper on the kitchen-safe shelf which is cold, and that helps it get hard. Lots of times we use the shelf to draw pictures on with our pencils, and that’s the most fun place we’ve got to draw on. We always eat lots and lots of fudge! And sometimes I eat too much and I don’t feel good, and then I don’t want any more at all!

That’s like the time one Friday Mama goes to the A & P with Mr. and Mrs. Winn and brings home a coconut that’s still in the shell. And it’s got fuzzy hair all over, and it’s got three eyes on one end. It’s the first whole coconut we’ve ever had, and Mama lets me help her fix it. I punch out the eyes with the ice pick and white juice runs out into the bowl. And Mama’s going to use it to make the cake juicy, but she gives me a sip and it’s sort of sweet – but it doesn’t really taste good.

And me and J.T. grate the coconut hunks and Mama smears it all over the cake, and she pours the milk over it, and it smells like the best thing I’ve ever smelled. After supper everybody gets a big piece, and after I’ve had another piece I ask for more and Mama

says, “Yes, you may, but don’t eat too much. This cake is mighty rich for little boys.”

So I eat another big slice, and I’m dying for some more, so I eat another half a piece. And I’m sitting next to the stove, and it’s got a red-hot belly, and I’m feeling OK till I start hiccupping. And I can’t stop – and my stomach starts hurting like the dickens – and right there I throw everything up I ate for supper – right out on Mama’s kitchen floor.

And J.T. yells at me, “Mama told you not to eat too much, dummy!”

Which doesn’t help me one tiny bit. And I finally stop throwing up, and Mama sends J.T. to get the old baby-bed out of the attic behind Sanford’s room, and I have to sleep in it until I get to feeling good again.

Well, boy! I don’t ever want to hear “coconut cake” again – any time! So J.T. and Lillian keep teasing me, “You want another piece of coconut cake, Billy? You can have mine, Billy-boy, in the baby-bed!” And they slurp and make like it’s so good, like they’re eating some, and that makes me feel like I’ve got to throw up again.

So, I don’t think I’ll ever eat another piece of coconut cake as long as I live! But Mama says I’ll get over it – and she’s always right about things like that – but I know I wouldn’t eat a piece right now even if she told me to.

Mama says me and J.T. just can’t get enough sweet things and she’s right. Right before we went to sleep last night J.T. told me Marvin’s found a way to get the sugar out of his mama’s sugar-bag in their kitchen. And when I try to get him to tell me how, he won’t. He says he’ll show me when the time comes – but it’s his secret now.

So a couple of days later the Farmer’s Supply brings us a bag of flour and a bag of corn meal and all the ship-stuff for the hogs. And Frank the driver brings in a bag of sugar so big we couldn’t carry if we had to, and he sets it on the shelf closest to the floor in the hall closet under the steps that go upstairs. And when he’s gone J.T. squats down on the floor and pulls the corner of the sugar bag over and starts sucking on it like a baby pig sucks his mama.

“Is it any good, J.T.?” I ask. “Is it any good like that – huh?”

“Yeah, it’s good – now wait till I’m through!”

“OK. But come on now! Hurry up! Mama’s liable to come in if you don’t hurry up!”

“Awright, here, take it! Just plyke you’re little like Deanie is, and you’re sucking on a bottle – like I did.”

So I slip over and crunch down and grab the bag and start sucking the corner, and it’s all wet from J.T. – and good golly! It almost tastes like cotton candy at the Danville State Fair!

“Gosh, J.T.! That’s good stuff! That’s really good stuff – but you know Mama’s gonna find out!”

“Naw, she won’t never know a thing! Marvin says when you finish, the bag will just dry off like you ain’t even been here.”

And next day he’s right – it’s just dry as ever down at the corner. And boy! That sugar bag is as good a treat as any candy you’d have to buy from Strader’s Store – or even Woolworth’s – and it’s free!

After supper the other night Virginia yells, “Wash ’em and dry ’em!” and Alma yells, “Get ’em up and set ’em up!” So Lillian’s got to clean up the rest of the kitchen, and the pots and pans because she’s the last one to pick. And right when they’ve finished, an old black Buick sedan stops out beside the house jam-packed with kids and grown-ups. And the mama gets out and comes up real slow to our back door, “Ma’am, I hate to ask for this, but my children are hungry. Do you have anything left over you could give me to feed my family tonight?”

And Mama goes in the kitchen and fills a quart Mason jar full of beans and hands it to her, and the lady starts crying on the way back to her car. So I run out back to the chicken yard and watch her, and she keeps crying, and they drive down the hill to the field across from Hersel Wade’s front yard. And the daddy parks his old Buick sedan, and everybody eats the beans for supper, and they pitch two tents to go to sleep in.

And when we get around the radio later, Mama’s said, “That poor woman made me realize that even if we don’t have a lot, we’ve got a home, and we’re better off than a lot of poor people right now.” And every time I think about that mama and her family having to live in a car and an old tent, I wanna cry.

### **Too big for your boots**

The other day Lillian runs in the front door crying that some girls at school were teasing her about her new dress Mama made on her sewing machine in the kitchen. And she yells and everybody in the house can hear her, “I’m not gonna ever go back to that school even if I hafta die to stay away!”

And by the time Mama gets home Lillian is all cried out. But when she starts telling Mama everything, she gets to crying again, and Mama sits down to rest a little while Lillian cries.

“Now, Lillian, honey, you’ve just got to wear that dress! Your Daddy and I think it’s a beautiful dress, and I got the pattern from your Grandma – she used it herself to make a dress for your Aint Nellie. And your Aint Nellie wears only the prettiest dresses, honey!”

But Lillian is wailing like a sick dog, “I’m not gonna ever go back to that school again if I have to wear this feed bag!”

“Why honey, that’s not a feed bag. That’s a pretty dress. Just the material would cost your Daddy more than a dollar if I had to buy it at Belk-Leggett’s. Honey, I think it’s a pretty little dress.”

“Well, Mama, a girl on the bus says it’s made out of a feed bag that comes from Farmer’s Supply because her Daddy’s got a bag like my dress in his barn. And she saw it there, and she told everybody on the bus, and Janice Smith called me ‘feed bag.’”

“Why honey, we just don’t have the money to buy store-bought things. You know that. I’m sorry, but we just can’t buy you something else to wear right now.”

“Well, if I have to wear this feed-bag, I won’t ever take my coat off again!”

And Mama’s real quiet, “Honey, you’ve got to stop that yelling or your Daddy will hear you and he’ll get upset and get to coughing.”

And that’s not all either, because the girls don’t like to wear long

knee socks to school that Daddy orders from Sears, Roebuck. So Alma takes hers off on the way to the bus stop and stuffs them in her coat pockets and nobody knows she ever had them on. Alma has got a boyfriend, and she thinks she's got to look like all the girls do that don't have a sick daddy, Mama says.

One time Alma gets mad and runs away to Aint Polly's for a month, until one day Daddy tells me and J.T. to run up and tell Aint Polly to send Alma home because Mama needs her around the house. And I figure for sure Daddy will give her a good switching when she gets home, but he doesn't say a word to her until next day when we've gone to school.

After supper one night Daddy rings his bed-bell that hangs on a shoestring over his head, and I run in to see what he wants, and he says to get J.T. because it's time to measure us for winter boots. So Mama brings in a new brown paper bag she saved from Kroger's that she got when she went with Mr. and Mrs. Winn – and Daddy climbs out of bed and sits on his stool.

Mama cuts her bag open and spreads it on the floor, and I put my foot out and Daddy makes a drawing around it with his pencil, and he acts like he misses one time and tickles my toes, but I try not to pull my foot away.

And when he makes a drawing of J.T.'s foot, he starts coughing because he's not supposed to get up except to sit on the slop-jar under his bed. But he gets up anyway sometimes, and it always makes him cough and spit up in his little brown paper cup with wax on it that he can throw away. So Mama helps him get back in bed, and J.T. tries to help, but Daddy won't let us help him because he's afraid we'll catch it from him.

Next day he makes up a letter with our foot-drawings in it, and Sanford takes it up to our mailbox on the highway with three pennies and mails it to Sears, Roebuck. So now before it gets cold we'll have new boots.

We don't have to wear shoes to school from the end of April until school is out, and Daddy says we don't have to wear them to church like everybody big does – and we go barefooted until it's too cold to stand it in October. The first day we can go barefooted comes one Sunday after preaching – and we've been begging Daddy

for a long time, and he finally says, “OK, go ahead, take ’em off!”

Boy! I reckon going out that first Sunday barefooted and walking on the grass and going down to the garden that George Johnson just plowed up and walking in the dirt is about as much fun as I know of – because it feels good – and because it means we’re getting out of school in two or three weeks!

My boots almost reach up to my knees, and Mama gets us corduroy knickers and long stockings from Sears, Roebuck for winter-time. And we poke the bottom of our pants in our boots and our feet don’t ever get cold – except when I can’t hold it, and I pee in bed and my long-handles get wet. And I have to wear them to school, and I about freeze to death until I get to stand next to the radiator in my classroom. But after I stand up there about ten minutes, my high boots and pants make it pretty hot just to stay there.

Of course I wear J.T.’s hand-me-down everythings except for boots, because Daddy says it’s alright to wear hand-me-down clothes, but every boy has got to have his own boots in the winter time. And he says Mama is the best mama he knows of when it comes to making do with what you’ve got instead of wanting to have more. And I could do that too, because I wouldn’t mind wearing J.T.’s old boots like I do his old clothes if I had to – especially if the sole on one of my boots is flapping around everywhere.

But it’s real special when our boots come in the big box, and Mr. Sawyer who delivers the mail for all of Route 4, Danville, Virginia, leaves the box at Strader’s Store because nobody’s got a mailbox big enough for that except Tom Gilley a way up the road. And we unpack it and Mama saves the string and the paper, and she gives us the box, and we get to run around in our new boots for the first time. Golly! New boots make you walk whether you want to or not every time you take a step.

Sometimes our feet grow faster than Daddy expects them to, so I have to tuck my toes in for the last part of the winter, and when Mama sees me walking funny she says, “Billy, I think you’re getting too big for your boots.” And we laugh because that’s a good joke.

### Cruel truths

Daddy used to make a whole lot of things around the house. One time he hooked the butter churn up to a motor, but he doesn't feel like making things right now. So he bought Mama a second-hand electric washing machine since there are so many children in the house to wash for. The washing machine has got a wringer to squeeze the water out, so Mama doesn't have to do it with her hands anymore.

But one Saturday she boils our clothes in the black pot, and the girls haul them in on the back porch and put them in the washing machine. Mama turns on the wringer, and she's feeding the clothes in, and by accident the wringer catches hold of her hand and pulls her arm inside up to her elbow before Virginia can cut it off. And her arm hurts all over, and it's black-and-blue and all swollen, and she has to wear it in a sling made out of Deanie's old diaper. And she can't do much around the house to help, and it makes me feel bad because her arm hurts all the time.

Last Sunday after church me and J.T. went over to the parking lot to shoot marbles for keeps with the McCubbins boys. We've got the best place to shoot anywhere around because the grass has died off where they park the cars on Sunday. I'm shooting pretty good, and we win a handful and head off home, and J.T. whispers, "Don't you say a word about this to Mama because we're gambling on Sunday, and that's a worse sin than gambling any other day of the week."

When we get home Daddy is sitting in the rocking chair on the porch. He doesn't usually sit there, and when we come up he says, "J.T., you and Billy go change out of your Sunday clothes and put on your overalls."

Well, something special is about to happen for Daddy to be out on the porch and for him to send us in to change clothes instead of Mama, so we run upstairs and hurry up for sure. And when we get



back, Daddy has got a big twist of tobacco from Mr. Wrenn's crop. And he cuts it up in two plugs and hands us a piece, and he says, "You boys are about the age where you're thinking about chewing tobacco like Hersel and B.J. Rice do, so I'm going to teach you how to do it right, and I've got some honey to dip it in so it'll taste good."

And he cuts off a piece and dips it in the honey for J.T., and he dips me one, and he says, "Now boys, if you want to chew tobacco right, you slip your wad over in your jaw and let it sit there while you chew on the edge."

So I chew right fast and pretty soon I've finished all the honey, and the old tobacco doesn't taste good anymore, so Daddy pours a spoonful on my plug and makes it taste good again. And J.T. gets another spoonful, and I'm swallowing everything that comes up in my mouth, and it tastes like one of Mama's jelly biscuits. And then, boy! Right then I don't feel good at all down in my belly! I look over at J.T. and he's hanging over the porch rail throwing his guts up all over Mama's petunias.

When I see that, I head for the rail! But I don't make it, and I throw up all over the swing and all over Mama! Now I'm woozy and can't stand up, so I plop down on the steps, and my stomach keeps throwing up – but there isn't a single thing inside to throw up. It hurts like the dickens! So Mama helps us climb upstairs and puts us in bed, and we sleep all our Sunday away.

When we come downstairs for some biscuits and milk at supper, Daddy says, "Boys, I'm sorry to trick you like that, but that's the only way I know to keep you from ever chewing tobacco and ruining your health. That tobacco will rot your teeth out."

We got a hundred biddies from Montgomery Ward in the mail yesterday, and all they do is "Peep-peep-peep!" all the time. So Daddy gets us to take them out to the little barn where we're going to raise them up to be hens. A hundred biddies make a lot of noise even if they're little to start with, but some of them are quiet and sick and they're lying down on their sides. So Daddy pinches their heads off because they won't live to be good for anything, he says. And he says it's too hard to tell if a bidy is a boy or a girl now, but

he'll know by the time they're frying-size and their combs come out. Then we'll eat the boy biddies.

Last year Daddy gave me a little bidy for my own that had a crooked leg, and I fed it and it started growing, and then it couldn't keep up with the rest. So it got weak and couldn't stand up hardly, so Daddy pinched its head off and I cried. So he let me pick another one out, and I can tell he's mine because I tied a ribbon out of Mama's sewing basket around his leg. We raise Rhode Island Reds and Domineckers mostly, but I can't tell what they are when they first get here in the mail.

Somebody gave Daddy a banty-rooster and three hens one time, and they had babies. And we raised them in our chicken-yard, and they laid little bitty eggs half as big as a Rhode Island Red egg. They sure were pretty, and they had red feathers and black ones and a lot of them turn different colors when you look at them in the sun. But they were too little to get much meat from, and they were tough to chew when they got old, and we just had to feed them for nothing. So Daddy gave them to George Johnson so he wouldn't have to shoot blackbirds to eat for a while. And he yelled, "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!" all the time he was running around trying to catch the banties.

### Earning two cents

Up at Strader's Store you can get a string of candy dots two feet long for a penny, and you can get a bubble-gum baloney as big as Daddy's finger for a penny, and you can get two really big suckers with chocolate in the middle for a penny wrapped up in paper. But most of the time I don't have any money to buy sweet things with unless I find bottles up on the highway. J.T. got a nickel yesterday for carrying Mr. Wrenn's wood in for his fireplace, and I wanted to help, but Mr. Wrenn says I'm not big enough to carry firewood and get paid.

So J.T. goes up to Strader's and gets three chewing-gum baloneys, and he's chewing some of it before supper – but he's not supposed to, so he sticks it under the table. And when we go to bed he gets a new piece and I'm about to die for some and he can tell. Well, he's over on his side of the room reading a funny book he traded Herbert for today. But he won't let me read with him because I've got catarrh and I'll breathe on him, and he gets mad when I've got it because I wake him up at night.

But I know if I keep it up and he can't read, he'll give me a little piece, so I keep begging. And all at once he stops reading, and he doesn't yell at me, he just says, "Listen, Billy, I'll make you a deal. You want some baloney-gum? You want some I haven't even chewed on, yet?"

"Yeah, J.T., yeah!"

"Awright, here it is! If you get up all the water for the girls for two weeks, I'll give you half a baloney, brand new, right now!"

"Aw man! You're crazy! That's more than I've ever paid for anything! I wouldn't do that for a gallon of chewing gum – no way – you're crazy!"

"Oh, awright then...get up the eggs and bring in the water for a week, and it's a brand-new piece nobody's chewed, ever!"

"Naw, you're crazy as a bed-bug! I wouldn't be your slave for any kind of bubble gum – not even for one day. You think I'm

crazy?” And he gets quiet like he’s thinking hard, and then I start to go to sleep.

“Well, here’s my last offer, my final offer! And you don’t hafta do a thing! You let me wrap this bubble gum I’m chewing on all round your head – and I’ll give you half a new piece!”

“That’s all? You’re gonna wrap it round my head, and I get half a new piece you haven’t ever chewed on?”

“Yep! That’s what I mean! And that’s a bargain if I’ve ever seen one – that’s a bargain!”

“OK. Sure! I’ll do that! Sure, for half a piece – even divided down the middle – a full half?”

“Yep!”

And he takes everything in his mouth which is about two whole baloneys, and he starts plying he’s a magician, and he pulls it out in little strings, and he stands up and wraps the strings all around my head, my neck and up on my ears. And he takes some more and wraps it all over my hair, and he’s laughing because I look like a mummy, which is a dead person from Egypt he studied about in science.

And now I start to not like for him to laugh at me, and I try to pull it out of my hair, but it won’t come an inch, and I’m sticky all over, and I can’t go to bed! And I can’t stay awake all night! And I don’t know what to do, so I run in Mama’s room and tell her something is wrong. She’s been asleep for a while because she has to get up before dawn every day.

And when she sees it, she says, “Billy, I’m really put out with you for letting J.T. do this to you! You ought to have more sense than to let him treat you this way. Why did you let him do this to you?”

“Cause, Mama, ’cause! I didn’t know he’d do all of this! I didn’t know! And he owes me half a baloney, too! And he’s gotta pay up!”

“Well, I should whip you both for this. It’s going to ruin my sleep! I’m just put out with both of you! You’re just as much to blame as he is. You’re not a baby any more, Billy. You know better than that!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

So Mama makes him go down to the kitchen and get the kerosene jug while she tears an old sheet up in little pieces. And Alma’s

awake now, and she comes in and helps, and they work on that darn old chewing gum for a long time, because they have to cut off most of it. But Alma's real good at cutting hair, and it almost looks like our summer haircuts she gives us. And it's way past midnight when I get back in bed, and J.T.'s already gone to sleep before Mama and Alma have finished. And boy! I hope Mama beats him with a two-by-four when she gets home tomorrow.

Daddy used to cut Sanford's and J.T.'s hair when he felt better, but now Alma cuts ours all the time. I never have had Daddy cut mine because he's been sick in bed since I was almost born. Sometimes Sanford goes up to Eustace Strader's Barbershop next to his store and pays him ten cents to cut his hair because he says he's too old for Alma to do it. But sometimes he doesn't have the dime, so Mama cuts it. I don't know why anybody would ever waste money on a haircut.

I woke up today and I'm trying to eat my cornflakes. I like them with a lot of milk and sugar – and sure as I crunch down, one of my teeth starts to hurt like crazy. So I go in Daddy's room and tell him about it because Mama's at work. And he sends me in for the tooth-pullers that are always in Mama's drawer in the kitchen cabinet. And he catches hold of my tooth and twists it sideways and yanks on it, and it comes right out! And it doesn't hurt like I was afraid it would, and Daddy doesn't even have to get out of bed for the whole thing.

Lillian and Virginia yell and cry when he pulls their teeth, but I think they're just sissies to fuss over it because it doesn't hurt one bit. And Daddy gives me two pennies that I can spend any time I want to, and I don't have to give J.T. part of anything I buy with it.

I'm going to tell Daddy when I have a loose tooth from now on because I usually play with it with my tongue a couple of days before I tell anybody, and sometimes it falls out while I'm asleep, and Mama says I must have swallowed it because I can't find it in the morning. But I'd rather not play with it at all and let Daddy pull it and get two cents!

### Gettin' mad

Mama works in the Dan River Cotton Mill, but Daddy doesn't want her to, but she says she's got to make ends meet. She makes \$13 a week. But Daddy says she needs to be home to take care of Deanie and me – and we'll get by without her working. I don't like when they fuss because Daddy starts coughing which is real bad for his T.B. because he might break something in his chest, Virginia says. But Mama never gets upset, and she never yells at Daddy or anybody else. But if you make a commotion at the table, she'll reach across and whop you up side the head – and you'll quit the fuss.

The first morning Mama goes to work, Daddy gets upset when June Gilley comes by to give her a ride so she won't have to take the mill bus and can save a nickel. And he puts his foot down and says she can't go, and Mama starts crying, and he coughs a lot, and June Gilley stands out on the front walk and waits. And Daddy stands in the front door and won't let Mama out of the house. So Mama runs into the front parlor and climbs out the window and jumps down on the ground which is real far down and runs to June Gilley's car and goes to work.

Daddy is awful quiet all day long even when the Salvation Army man comes by. He doesn't want to talk to anybody, so I tell the Salvation Army man Daddy is sleeping, which isn't a very big story because he's had his eyes closed most of the day. And he coughs a lot and spits in his paper-cup-he-can-throw-away.

About a week afterwards I hear Daddy fussing at Mama again for going to work, and he says she's disobeying him, and Mama is real quiet. And when he quits coughing, she tells him we've got to have somebody come take care of Deanie and me. So she gets Mrs. Motsinger, who is white and helps people at home. Now Mrs. Motsinger comes over every day and helps with the house cleaning, and she takes good care of Deanie and Daddy and me.

But yesterday Daddy comes into the kitchen where Mrs. Motsinger is feeding Deanie, and he sees her take a spoon of milk and put it on her tongue until it's warm enough and then she feeds it to Deanie. And that makes Daddy real cross with her, and he makes her go away and not help us any more. But I liked Mrs. Motsinger because she gives me jelly-biscuits every morning when she comes to us.

When Mama gets home and finds out Mrs. Motsinger won't be coming back, she tells me and J.T. to run over to Aint Minnie's house, which is on the other side of the Wade's house up in Colored-Town, and ask her if she's got anybody there can help take care of Deanie and me. So Aint Minnie sends over her youngest girl named Eulilie to take care of us because Eulilie doesn't like to go to school. And Daddy's happy with Eulilie, and he says she does a good job with Deanie and me – but she has to take care of Daddy too when he has a coughing spell.

Black John Roberts told me Eulilie got her name when the birthing woman found her in the cabbage patch and brought her in to Aint Minnie. Her daddy looked at her and said, "You a Lily," and she's been Eulilie ever since.

J.T.'s teacher teaches them science every week, and they learned about airplanes flying all over the sky last week, but we don't hardly ever see one flying over Stokesland. Yesterday we were playing cars in the front yard, and we heard one up in the sky, and I looked all over and I found it first, which I almost never get to do.

But J.T. said he already knew where it was before I found it. He said it wasn't really up there right over our heads where I thought it was because his teacher said it was really about over Leaksville when it looks like it's over your head. That has something to do with the earth being round, I think.

But I think it was still over my head because I looked straight up when I heard it, and there it was. I don't think I'll like science one bit when I get to fifth grade.

The Luhoff's have got two big dogs we're all afraid of because they've got red eyes and black tongues, and Pug says if they bite

Billy

you, you'll go mad and foam at the mouth. One time a stray bit Voss Burnett, and he said it was foaming at the mouth, so they killed it and cut its head off and sent it to the state capitol to be tested for rabies, which will make you go mad yourself.



### Cut off the head first

We went down to Red Horse Saturday to go fishing, but Mama used to be afraid to death for us to fish there until she told Alma to go with us and see if we could drown in it. Mama's favorite cousin drowned when he fell out of a rowboat when he was sixteen, and she's been scared ever since. So she doesn't want us anywhere near the water, but we slip off and go anyway pretty much when we want to because it's not dangerous anywhere in the creek from the Rice's house to Red Horse.

But Alma goes down there with us once, and we show her how deep it is, and we put a stick down in the deepest part and show her. And when we get home she tells Mama, "It's not dangerous for them to fish in Red Horse." And Mama gets a little cross with Alma,

"Of course it's not dangerous for those boys to fish in, but is it dangerous for them to swim in that place? I'm deathly afraid of deep water."

"No, Mama, it's not deep enough for them to drown in, I promise." I'm real happy Alma found that out because fishing is my favorite thing – after hunting with my slingshot.

You've got to know what you're doing when you go fishing. The first thing is run down behind the cow-barn where the worms live and turn over a few shovelfuls of wet doo-doo and pull the worms out. When they stick their heads out, you grab them and stick them in a tin can. And you better stick some dirt in if you want them to live very long – but you can't pour water in because they'll melt in water, Sanford says.

And you get a straight pin from Mama's sewing box and bend it over like a fishhook looks and undo some string off a feedbag and tie it around the top of the fishhook. And find a cork stopper and cut it in slices sideways to take the string. And cut a long tree sprout off the creek bank for your pole. J.T. always cuts his own because

he knows more about picking poles than I ever will, he said. But you can bet he's always happy to use my worms – so he must not know as much about worms as I do.

So Saturday we get everything ready and start fishing where the creek gets about knee-deep – right below Rice's cornfield – and right off I catch a pretty good sucker about as long as my finger. They're really biting, and by the time we get to Red Horse, we've got a #2 tomato can half-full of fish. And J.T. comes up with a good idea, "Billy, you know what? We can eat these darn fish if we wanna – if we cook 'em. You wanna?"

Well, that sounds good to me, especially since he asked me what I think – which he doesn't do a whole lot – so I jump up and grab the can, "Sure, let's eat 'em, J.T.!" And he's always got matches in his front pocket, except he used to keep them in his hind-pocket until one day he slid down the big-barn roof and the matches got too hot and caught on fire – and he got his hind-end burned bad.

So he starts a good fire on the big rock we dive off of. We can't paddle but three or four times before we hit the other side, and sometimes I start sinking and my hands hit bottom in the middle – but that's still swimming just the same. Anyway, I take the knife Sanford gave me after he found a brand-new one and I cut a couple of sharp sticks like we have at our church weenie-roasts. At the last roast I had two marshmallows burning on my stick, and I'm blowing them out, and Helen Basic turns around and bumps my arm and those darn marshmallows hit my mouth and burn the dickens out of me.

So we stick the fish on our sticks like hotdogs and let them cook until they're good and done, and then we eat nearly a half-can of them. Sometimes we bring vegetables and make stew over the fire, which I like a lot, but it's better when you bring some salt.

And just when we're stripped down and ready to jump in, my stomach starts acting up real bad – like the time I ate too much coconut cake. And J.T. starts hurting real bad too, and both of us puke our guts out, and we get rid of everything right out on the big rock. And it's really tough making it back to the house, and we have to rest twice and wash our face in the creek.

We don't feel like eating the supper the girls fixed, and Mama tries to get us to eat a little something, but we can't, so she fixes us half a bowl of cornflakes and milk, and I get most of it down, and then I just have to crawl up the steps and fall on the bed and go to sleep.

And next day we tell Mama about up-chucking and feeling so bad, and she says we've got to clean the fish and cut their heads off before we eat them – and next time clean the guts out, too, she says. But golly! If we do all that stuff, we won't have enough fish left to eat!

Mama and Sanford are the only ones in our family who can kill a chicken since Daddy got sick, and sometimes Sanford gets mean and won't do it, so Mama has to cut its head off herself. Hersel says he likes to wring the chicken's neck, and Sanford does, too, but Mama makes him cut it off because it's kinder that way – but I don't think it would matter to the chicken anyway.

Hersel just takes hold of the chicken's head and starts slinging him around and around until he stops kicking and flapping his wings, and then he throws him in the weeds and watches until his eyes turn white – which he says means he's dead.

But Mama says it's quicker to cut his head off and not have to sling him around and all. So when she wants chicken for supper she catches a frying-size pullet and tucks his head under his wing so he won't know where he's going. And she takes him out to the chopping block we use for splitting kindling on, and she grabs his legs and lays his head on the block. And if he raises his head up she waits until he's quiet; and then she chops it off with one 'Whack!' and throws him out in the tall grass so he can flop around until he's all dead – and then the girls fix him for frying.

One time I went over to pick up the one Mama just cut his head off of, and he wasn't finished kicking, and he flopped straight at me and got his bloody stuff all over my overalls.

## Shooting a bird

I guess I'm the best slingshot-shooter in Stokesland because when we shoot at tin cans I usually beat everybody – and that's mainly because J.T. stopped practicing when he bought a BB-gun with his paper-route money. So he couldn't hit the side of the big barn with a slingshot right now. But what I really want bad is my own BB-gun, which I can't afford. They cost \$1.49 in the Sears, Roebuck catalog and \$1.69 at Woolworth's Five-and-Dime for a Daisy Red Ryder single-shot, and it's over \$2.00 for a repeater. I don't have a job yet, but Mama says I'll get one some day, and I can buy what I want to then.

Right now I hunt with my slingshot, and I go after every bird I hear no matter how early it is in the morning if the sun's up and it's light outside – and I just found the best rocks anywhere in Stokesland to shoot with. Yesterday morning I'm headed over to the church with my slingshot, and there's a big truck in the other-Martin's driveway dumping a pile of rocks on the ground.

See, there's another Martin family that lives real close to us across from the church, and they're not any kin to us even if they've got a Billy Martin of their own who's a lot older than me. And he's out in the yard spreading the rocks with a rake, and he says these are river rocks from off the Dan River. And they bought a ton of them for their driveway, and I ask him if I can have a few and he says OK.

So now I get a pocket-full almost every time I go over by the church or to Tin Cup Alley to take Alma her mail. These old river-rocks are almost as good as a marble is, but they'll never be as good as a steely which we find on the floor of Daddy's garage sometimes.

The first slingshot I ever made I didn't know anything about round rocks or steelies or anything, and George Taylor who helps Daddy around the place showed me how to make it because Daddy doesn't feel like doing things like that anymore. Mr. Taylor can't

read or write, and he works now and then for a half-dollar a day and a glass of wine that Mr. Wade makes from our grapes out behind the well house. And he shares it with us, but nobody drinks it in our family – but Mr. Taylor and Black John Roberts like a glass-full every time they come to help us.

So one day Mr. Taylor brings an old shoe-tongue and some inner-tube rubber, and we go hunt for some prongs in the dogwood tree in the side yard. Now dogwoods grow good prongs, but I've found out now that a hickory tree is better to look in because you can find a fork that looks like a U instead of a V sometimes.

So Mr. Taylor cuts the inner tube in long strips and wraps them around the top of the forks and ties them with some string off our feed sack – like we get to go fishing. And he ties the other end through some holes in the shoe tongue, and I run find some rocks, and I'm all set to go bird hunting. But Mr. Taylor's got to go do some work for Daddy, so I thank him for helping me like Mama says we should.

I head over to the churchyard, and I shoot at every tree I see if I have a rock handy. And I sneak up behind the Pugh's house and the Lewis's and the Mobley's on the way, and there's not a single bird in sight. And it looks like they're hiding from me because I've got a new slingshot. But then a couple of big blackbirds light in the top of the hickory tree where we get nuts in the fall, and I get a shot off at them – but I miss so bad they don't even fly away. Of course, I don't mind missing because I'm just practicing – and J.T.'s not here to laugh at me, but I don't find a single one close enough to have a good shot at.

The next morning I'm back at the picnic-table, and I see a little gray bird with a sharp cone like a crown sitting on top of his head, and he's up in the very top of the tallest cedar. And boy! He's closer than any bird I've seen since I got my slingshot, and I get all nervous because I can shoot a rock that far now – and I've got a good chance of hitting him. So I sneak up close as I can and put a little flat rock in the tongue and pull back far as I can and let go at that little gray bird in the cedar tree.

And it shoots too far out to the right, and I figure I've missed by a mile – and then that flat rock starts to curve a little bit. And it

curves closer and closer to the little gray bird – and I can't believe it – that flat rock hits him right in the side of his head!

“I just hit a bird!”

And I run over to where it fell on the ground – and it's real little, and it's lying in the grass, and its head is lying a couple of feet away from its body – that flat rock just sawed his little head off. I didn't really think I could hit him! I didn't want to kill him – I didn't want him to die at all – I just meant to scare him! I never even thought I could hit a bird! I just wanted to shoot at him! And I cut his head right off with that old flat rock. And then I can't help it but I start crying. And I pick the little bird up and take him home. And Mama's cat won't eat him, and that makes me feel worse 'cause he's wasted.

## Burning down the barn

Up until a while ago we had two barns and a hen house and a pigpen, which are all made out of wood, and they've got black tarpaper roofs. But we don't have a big barn anymore because of something real bad that Tootie Wade did.

See, Tootie's younger than me, but J.T. lets him tag along because he laughs when J.T. says dumb things about me, and he likes to show off in front of J.T. One day this summer they're down at the big barn across the road from the house, and Tootie's got some wood matches in his pocket, and he wants to make a fire out of some straw we use to bed the cow down.

And J.T. says, "Tootie, you better not strike any matches around this straw!"

But Tootie doesn't listen, and he lights a match and sets a clump of straw on fire, and J.T. has to stomp it out. And then Tootie sets another clump on fire, and J.T. has to stomp that out, too. And then Tootie sets a real big clump and it gets too hot, and he drops it on the floor, and J.T. tries to stomp it out but he can't – and he tries to beat it out with a feed bag but he can't do it!

So he runs up to the house, and Tootie runs home, and he yells for Sanford that the barn is on fire! And Sanford pumps water on some feed bags and runs down to the barn and tries to put it out, but he can't! And all the time Daddy's in his sick-bed, and he hears people running down the hill from up the Busics' way, and they're running up from the Rice's way – and everybody is yelling about the fire!

And Daddy pulls himself up and looks out his window and the barn is all on fire, and a big black ball of smoke is running all over the sky. And he turns on his calling-buzzer to get somebody to come to him, and nobody comes because everybody is down at the barn trying to put the fire out and save the animals. And Sanford leads our old cow out of her end of the barn, and he has to wrap his shirt around her head so she can't see what's going on so she'll walk

through the smoke.

And Mr. Pugh and Herman Winn break down the fence around the hog pen, and Hersel beats the big old sow with a stick so she'll run away. And somebody shoos the chickens outside, and some people are running after the animals – but some people are just jumping up and down and screaming.

Like Mrs. Cantrell, who's sick real often and nervous and thin. And she comes running across from her house, and she's crying and yelling, "Oh my God! Oh Jesus my Savior! The world is coming to an end! The fires of hell are here. Please, somebody pray with me!" And she falls out in a faint on the ground!

And Mr. Cantrell, who might have T.B. because he hoops and coughs for ten minutes hanging over the back-porch rail every morning after he gets out of bed and drinks a cup of coffee and smokes a couple of cigarettes, tries to help save the animals, but he gets a coughing fit and has to go home and lie down.

But everybody helps get the animals loose, and they don't die in the fire, but they run away all over the place, and the men have to round them up and put them in the small barn up behind the house.

Next day Daddy has to call The Farmer's Supply to bring us some more feed which costs him a lot of money he says we don't have to spare. And the barn burning down is the scariest thing that's ever happened in my life, and it makes me real afraid of fire. Mama says she's so hacked she doesn't know what to do because Mr. Wade never spoke a word to Daddy about being sorry that Tootie burned the barn down.



## Your Daddy's dead

Uncle George takes Daddy up to the Hilltop Sanatorium to live a while after the barn burned down because he's sicker, and he has to get fresh air from the mountains to get better. He had to live up there one time before when I was real little but I don't remember it. J.T. says the first time he went up he came home feeling better, and he went back to work for a while. But he got sick again because he had to do the work Uncle John and Uncle George were supposed to help him with at the shop. That's what Alma told J.T., and I guess that's why Daddy says Uncle John is lazy.

One Sunday Mr. Patterson takes all of us he can pack in his truck up to the sanitarium, but I'm not allowed to hug Daddy because I might catch it, the nurse says. So I whisper to him, "I'm real happy to see you, Daddy." And he rubs my head so hard it hurts, but it makes me feel better. He's in a nice room with a bunch of other men who've got the T.B., too, and he told me some of them will be able to go home for good real soon.

But Daddy doesn't get any better no matter how long he stays in the sanitarium, and no matter how hard I pray for him every single night. When he got sick the first time, Mama taught us how to pray for him, and I do it every single night if I don't fall asleep first.

"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. Help Daddy get well. Help the sick, poor, blind and all that need help. Amen."

One day when Mama comes back from seeing Daddy she takes us in the kitchen and sits us down, and she says Daddy is not ever going to be able to come home again because he's not going to ever get well. And she looks real sad, and her eyes are all red and wet, and we start crying, too – and she tries to hug all of us at the same time.

So she goes to see Daddy as often as she can when somebody will take her on Sunday, and she always looks sadder when she

comes home because he's getting worse off every day. And one day after dinner the sanitarium calls Uncle Howard's store to tell Uncle George to come up there, and he goes and he takes Granddaddy Martin and Uncle John. And they come to our house when they get back, and me and J.T. and Lillian are sitting out front on the steps waiting for them.

When he gets out of his car, Uncle George looks real funny. His face is all red, and he comes up the walk real slow, then he looks at us and says, "Your Daddy's dead."

Well, I don't know what to do, so I cry with everybody else. Then I run upstairs and cry by myself because my Daddy is dead! And I pray to God to give us a miracle like Aint Maude told us about in the Bible, where there were people that had been cured of being sick and some had come back to life, which is called a miracle. I remember one time when J.T. and Lillian were talking about Columbus discovering America, and I thought they were saying Columbus discovered a miracle!

So until Mama calls me for supper I pray for God to give me a miracle like he gave Columbus and bring Daddy back to life!

Daddy's laying in his coffin in the front room, and he looks like he's just sleeping, and he doesn't look sick anymore, and he's got a suit on for the first time I ever saw him dressed up. People come to see us for two days and bring us real good stuff to eat, and all the women kiss us and hug us too much. All of Mama and Daddy's brothers and sisters come and bring us more good things to eat than I've ever seen before.

Grandma and Grandpa Sook 'n' Polly and Grandma and Grandpa Robert 'n' Nellie come and bring us some clothes to wear that our cousins can't wear any more. Our kitchen table is full of the sweetest things I've ever seen – even at Christmas time – even at family reunions in Leaksville! There is beef and a whole lot of chicken and pots of green beans, but I don't eat as much as I want to because I don't feel very hungry. Everybody is real sad except for some of the men, so they go out back and tell jokes and laugh at Hersel.

I can't get happy again no matter what anybody says to me – but

they try to make me feel better, and they hug me, and they say Daddy's in heaven with God – but I'd rather have him here than I would in heaven.

Aint Mildred on Mama's side comes with Uncle Oscar, and everybody is in the parlor with Daddy, and she tiptoes in and looks at him in his casket like everybody else does. And then she just stands there, and she starts shaking, and all at once she starts screaming, "Oh Jesse! Oh Jesse!" and she falls down and faints on the floor right while I'm looking at Daddy. And the uncles pick her up and carry her upstairs to rest, and I hear some of the grown-ups whispering, and one lady says Aint Mildred acts that way to get attention. I'm going on eight years old now.

### Leftover mess

A long time ago before Daddy died and he was getting better, Grandpa Sook 'n' Polly and Mama's brothers came and built Daddy a room on the side of the house with a whole lot of windows for sunshine and good air like he had at the sanitarium – but it didn't make him much better. So after Daddy's gone the men come back and move the room over to the chicken lot, and it's been the chicken-house ever since.

Me and J.T. always have to get the eggs up, and I hate to hear Virginia yell, "J.T.! Billy! Go get the eggs up! I need them for supper, so hurry!"

Trouble is, the minute we get inside the fence our old rooster tries to cut us off at the gate. Hersel says he's afraid we're going to hurt his girlfriends. But we've never heard talk about hens and roosters being like people – like they're married and stuff – but Hersel says they are married, and eggs are their little babies.

So old rooster gets stirred-up as soon as we take one-single-step inside his fence, and he jumps up in the air and tries to stab us with his spurs – and he slaps us with his wings – and that hurts a dang lot! I swear, some day I'm gonna kill that rooster and eat him – like we eat his girlfriends – but Mama laughs at me, and she says he'll be so tough we won't be able to chew him. But I don't care because he won't ever flog me again when he's cooked and sitting on the table.

A couple of weeks ago I sneak in the chicken yard so old rooster doesn't see me, and I get up the eggs, and I'm coming out of the hen-house – and he catches me sure as shootin' – and he chases me all the way to the gate – squawking and beating his wings up in the air! And he gets around in front of me and shakes his spurs at me – and he won't let me out of the gate.

And then I get so mad I forget to be scared, and I scream loud as I can, "Get away from me you damn old rooster!" And I grab some eggs out of my basket, and I yell, "Well, old Mr. Rooster, here

are some of your girlfriend's babies right up side of your head!" And I throw every egg I've got at him, and I hit him in the head hard as I can with the egg-basket – and he runs clean away!

And he never has come at me a single 'nother time, either – ever! Of course, I'd never tell Mama because she'd be upset about wasting that many eggs – but, she'd probably laugh about it, anyhow, now – because she thinks lots of things are funny even if we shouldn't do them.

We've got a bunch of grapevines in the back yard that Daddy planted the first thing when they moved here in 1925 Mama says – and me and J.T. eat some most mornings when they're ripe. And Mama makes preserves and jelly, and Mr. Wade makes wine. Daddy used to give a glass-full to Black George Johnson after he worked all day, but Mama says the Baptist Church is plain against drinking anything with alcohol in it.

We've got muscadines and concords which are real sweet and dark and almost black when they're good and ripe. Of course the birds know as soon as we do when they're good, and I try to keep them away. I yell at them, and I keep a pile of rocks out by the back door to throw at them – but I never have hit one yet. But it doesn't matter much what I do, because when they want grapes they eat them. And when I throw a rock their way they just fly off and sit on another vine and eat over there – black George Johnson says we've got the only tame birds in Stokesland.

Old Bessie and the pigs and chickens live in the little barn since Tootie burned the big barn down, and sometimes I go out with Mama to milk, and sometimes she squirts milk at me to be funny – and we didn't ever do that across the road in the big barn. She's got special tools for milking – she's got a stool with three legs and a bucket she makes sure is always double-clean – and a big slab of wood she ties to Old Bessie's tail so she can't switch her in the face when she's trying to get rid of flies.

And she gives the new baby kitten some milk now that she's figured out to sit down next to Mama's feet. And Mama turns Old Bessie's teat around and sends a big stream in the baby's mouth, and the baby meows to beat the band for some more. And she gets

milk all over her face and she licks it off the best she can, but she doesn't get clean until she uses her paws to do it.

Sometimes Mama lets me milk, but she says my hands aren't strong enough to squeeze the milk out yet. I expect Old Bessie knows it's me trying to get her milk, and she holds off just to best me like she does when I'm grazing her and she runs away.

Mama sings me songs sometimes while she's milking Old Bessie, like:

“Where have you been, Billy-boy, Billy-boy?

Where have you been, charming Billy?

I have been to see my wife,

She's the darling of my life –

She's a young thing and cannot leave her mother.”

Thursday I'm on my way up to the lumberyard to get some scraps for Mama's kindling pile, and there's a whole line of UNITED STATES ARMY trucks parked alongside Route 29. And they are lined up from the cemetery where Daddy and little Frances are buried clear down to Millner's store, and the soldiers are eating supper cross-legged on the ground. And I cross the road for a better look at the trucks, and one of the soldiers yells out, “Hey, kid, don't be bothering them trucks – them's UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT property! You'll go to jail!”

Well, shucks! I wouldn't touch one for a million dollars! I know better! So I stand right where I am and look. And a few minutes later that soldier comes over and says, “Hey, kid, you wanna make a nickel the easy way?”

“Yessir, I'll make a nickel anytime!”

“Well, you run over to that store there and get me a Baby Ruth and a Dr. Pepper, and I'll pay you for your trouble.”

Well, I've never had anything this easy in my life! So I grab the quarter and run over and get his stuff and run back fast as I can and give him his change, and he says, “Well, you gave me back fifteen cents, don'tcha wantcha nickel?”

“Yessir.”

And he pitches me a nickel, and I catch it with one hand, and the other soldiers whistle because I make a good catch. So I hang

around in case somebody else wants me to make a run to the store, and nobody does, but I like to hear them talk because they don't talk like us. But they laugh a lot, and they cuss right much, which Mama wouldn't like, but me and J.T. cuss too, sometimes.

After a while they start eating supper, and they've got real funny looking plates that I can tell are made out of some kind of metal because they clang when they're eating. And they've got real short squatty forks – but these guys can really rake it in anyway – just like Marvin does when he eats.

And an officer comes up, and you can tell he's an officer because the sergeant salutes him like in the movies, and he tells the sergeant, "Dispose of the leftover mess, Sergeant!"

And the soldiers dig three deep holes next to the road, and they bury the leftovers. And the kettles are real big, and there are a heckuva lot of sweet potatoes and snaps – and one is half-full of fried chicken. And they pour it all in the big holes and cover it over and climb in their trucks and drive up toward Danville.

### **Kerosene for the kitty**

Right across from where the soldiers ate supper and up the road a little, the D&W comes on to the Southern Line, and they put little bombs on the tracks that explode when the big train comes along to let it know the little D&W is on the tracks too. The D&W is really the Danville-and-Western Railroad, but we call it the Dick-and-Willy. The little bombs are called torpedoes, J.T. says, and they've got lead strips to hold them on the tracks, and we go up there and hunt for the lead that's been left after the explosions and cut it up and shoot it with a rubber band like spit-balls. And I figure you could probably kill a bird with one if you had enough luck to hit him a couple of times in the right place.

One day late I'm coming back from hunting lead strips, and it's getting dark fast. And I look over in the weeds next to the highway, and there's something looks like a raccoon or a 'possum hiding in the weeds. So I throw a rock at him but he doesn't move – so I go over and take a closer look – and it's a big old gray cat. He's lying real still on his side like he's hurt, and when I get closer he doesn't move an inch. And I can see he's got a hole in the top of his head the size of a pullet egg, and some of his brains are hanging out. He doesn't spit at me like most strays do, so I figure he's too bad-off to take care of himself – so I pick him up and carry him home.

Mama is in the kitchen fixing supper, and I take him in for her to see because she loves cats. She had a passel of kittens when she was little. A little gray one was her favorite of all, ever. But one day she was sitting in a big rocking chair on her Mama's front porch, and her little gray kitten was playing with a piece of wicker under the seat. And Mama didn't know where he was, and she rocked on him and killed him, and she says that's the saddest she ever got over a pet animal. But she likes to tell us that story anyway.

She won't let us have too many cats in the house at one time, and I'm afraid she's going to tell me to take the hurt kitty back up to the highway. But she looks at the hole in his head, and she takes



him and says real soft, “He’s mighty bad off, let’s look after him for a few days.”

Mama always loves our animals – even the chickens and calves we have to eat – and I do, too, except for that darn rooster. But she especially loves our kitties. One time we had one that was white with blue eyes, and she was deaf, and we named her Dummon. Mama says all white cats with blue eyes are deaf. She couldn’t tell when a car was coming, so she got run over out in front of the house, and I cried till supper time. But Mama says it’s better for her to be able to run outdoors and catch mice for a little while than for us to coop her up all her life just to keep her safe for us.

So she leaves the kitty with me and gets the kerosene from the back porch where we keep it to start fires in the stoves and to put on our places where we’re hurt, like the time I jumped off the terrace-wall and landed on a board with a nail in it that went all the way through my left foot. Then she washed it and poured some kerosene on the hole on both sides and tore some bandage off an old sheet and put an old sock on my foot – and it got well.

And that’s just like the time I poured some on J.T.’s foot. That day we’re out in the front yard, and there aren’t any birds chirping anywhere, and the girls are leaving us alone – and J.T.’s been acting sort of mysterious all morning. So finally he whispers, “Yesterday me and Pug and Marvin went up to the tracks near Aint Polly’s, and we hopped a ride on a cattle-car on the Dick-and-Willy! Man! It was just like Wild Bill Hickok!”

“So if you want me to, I’ll show you – but we gotta head up there now ’cause it’s time for old Dick-and-Willie – and maybe I’ll let you hop a ride, too.”

So we run lickety-split up to the sandy lot near Aint Polly’s, and he’s ragging me all the way because I’m pulling my new little red wagon along, and he tries to make me leave it home, but I won’t because I take it everywhere so nobody can run off with it.

And pretty soon we hear old Dick-and-Willy’s whistle, about when we get to the crossing where Mr. Patterson and Black John Roberts slaughtered old Bossy, near the sandy lot. And that whistle always means the train is slowing down for the crossing over Route

29.

Well, most of the train passes us and it slows down enough, and J.T. jumps up at the end of one of the cars and catches hold of the ladder and pulls himself up. And he turns one hand loose and waves at me just like Wild Bill Hickok does at the Rialto Theater.

But he doesn't get much of a ride before the train starts to pick up speed while he's still up there hanging on to the ladder. And I'm getting scared." J.T.! You, J.T.! Jump off! It's gonna take you to Danville. And it's getting dark! J.T., we gotta be getting home!"

And he looks a little bit afraid to jump off because it's speeding up, and he doesn't get afraid around me much. But right now he looks pretty scared – and I'm getting scared, too! "Jump off, J.T.! Jump off before it takes you to Danville! You hear? Jump off, J.T.! Please jump off!"

And he jumps off the ladder as far out as he can, and he lands bare-foot-first in the weeds – right smack on half a broken whiskey bottle – and he cuts his foot real bad – and, I don't know what to do when he starts crying because he doesn't ever cry – except when he wants Mama to stop whipping him.

And I look around everywhere for something, and right beside the track there's a dirty old towel caked with red mud, and I wrap it around his foot, and he crawls over to my new red wagon – and I pull him all the way home.

And I know Mama would pour kerosene all over his cut if she was here, so I get it off the back porch and douse his foot and it hurts – and he cries again, and I cry too.

So Mama gets the kerosene, and I hold the old cat while she pours it all over the hole in his head, and that big ole cat scratches me all over my arms and neck, and he hollers and jumps up and runs away and hides under some boxes on the back porch like we're trying to kill him.

After supper I put some milk in a saucer near the pile of boxes, and it's all drunk up next morning – so I'm not too worried about him – besides, what can you do for a big old stray except feed him and put kerosene on his head?

Then one morning about a week later that big ole cat walks right

out of his pile of boxes, and he's got a smaller hole in his head. Well, I don't know how he came back to life, except for Mama's medicine, but he did – and he's been the best cat I've ever had. And his name is Chink because his eyes are slanted like General Chiang Kai-shek's are, who is the president of the Chinese people, who are fighting the Japs in Asia like we are.

So nowadays old Chink goes everywhere I go, and he sleeps in our bed, which Mama doesn't mind but J.T. does. So I have to do a lot of favors so he won't chase him off at night. Sometimes I get real tired being his slave just so I can do things I want to do – I can't wait until I get bigger, and I can beat the tar out of him!

Me and old Chink go a lot of places together – like hunting and feeding the pigs and getting up the apples. And about a week ago we're on our way to go fishing down at Red Horse. But we never get there because he starts chasing field mice in the Rice's potato field – which is a lot more fun than watching my little old cork popping up and down and catching fish so little you can't eat them after you've cut their heads off and cleaned them.

Old Chink likes bringing me presents he's hunted up – like a half-dead mouse one time and green-snakes and whatever he's caught he can't eat right then. I guess he gives them to me because he expects me to have them for supper; so sometimes I feel sort of bad because I don't eat the stuff.

Just the other day I'm in the side yard next to the Cantrells', and I hear a cat squalling somewhere, and I look up. And there's Old Chink in the window in Lillian and Virginia's room where he sleeps a lot of times because the sun shines on that side of the house late in the day.

So I call him, but I figure he won't come, "Chink, Chink, come here, boy!" And that old Chinese-looking cat jumps right out of his window and hits the ground on both front feet and bounces like a rubber ball straight up in the air and runs over to see what I want. And that window is five times taller than me off the ground. He's for sure the best cat I ever had.

## Baptisms

Since Daddy died and Mama doesn't get his insurance check any more, we have to rent out part of the downstairs to the Hutchinson's, who've got a girl littler than Deanie and one six months old named Little Alice. Mr. and Mrs. Hutchinson work in the cotton mill, and they ask Mama if Lillian and Virginia can keep their big girl, Delia, and Mama says they can as soon as school is out. So every day the girls look after her – and sometimes J.T. looks after her – and sometimes I look after her when I'm playing with Deanie outside.

The other day we're in the back yard eating purple muscadines that just got ripe on top of the well-house, and J.T. is up there throwing them down to me, and Delia is running around after a hen that got out. Then Virginia and Lillian start whispering and giggling about something they're not telling me about.

But they tell J.T., and he says, "You gonna do it? I'll do it if you don't!"

And Virginia says, "I bet you won't either!"

And Lillian runs in the house giggling and brings back a cracker. And J.T. reaches down and picks up a slab of chicken-dookie that looks like a cookie and gives it to Delia – and she eats a big bite out of it, and she doesn't even know it's dookie. And they're laughing real hard, and then Lillian gives her the real cracker, and she eats that, too. And they keep laughing for a long time, and I get to laughing too.

One night Mrs. Hutchinson comes running out in the hall screaming at the top of her lungs like somebody's after her, "My baby's sick! My baby's having a fit! My baby!"

And Mama goes across the hall to see, and right away she calls Virginia, "Virginia! Fill up the big roasting pot with cold water, and bring me the tall bottle of salts in the cabinet – and hurry! Right now!"

And she tells Leroy Hutchinson to get all the ice out of the ice-

box and make ice water with it. And he chips the whole chunk in little-bitty pieces and dumps it in the roasting pot. And Mama dumps in the whole bottle of salts and dunks Little Alice in the ice water, and it makes her cry harder, but Mama won't let them take her out of the ice water.

And Mama and Mrs. Hutchinson rub Little Alice all over her body with the cold water, and after a while she stops crying, and she's shivering all over, and Mama gives her back to her mama. And she wraps Little Alice up in warm blankets and starts crying again – and she thanks Mama and hugs her, and she's holding on to her baby all at the same time.

And Mama hugs Mrs. Hutchinson back, and she says real quiet, “We just did what the doctor would've done, that's all. I've seen children with convulsions before, my dear.” And Mrs. Hutchinson keeps saying, “Mrs. Martin, you're a miracle worker! You saved my baby's life! Oh, Mrs. Martin! Thank the Lord for you, Mrs. Martin!” And she cries some more and Mama hugs her some more, and Little Alice goes to sleep while Mrs. Hutchinson is holding her.

Leroy Hutchinson is a mighty nice man because he takes us swimming at the YMCA in his Model A Ford rumble-seat coupe. We have to get naked and take a cold shower before we jump in. Leroy says it's a rule because it keeps you from peeing in the pool, but he's laughing and when we get home J.T. says he was kidding.

Now, you've got to know how to swim pretty good at the 'Y'. because you can't touch bottom like you can at Red Horse. And I'm shorter than J.T. is, so I have to hold on to the sides so I won't go under and get to coughing like I did the first time we went. So, I mainly practice my dog-paddling, which works a whole lot better in a real pool, and I can swim at least four times as far as I am tall.

Leroy says he'll teach us to swim the American crawl – which is what Johnny Weissmuller does in *Tarzan of the Apes*. It'll be good to learn that, but I'm OK with doing my dog-paddling right now because I'm scared to try much new stuff in this deep water.

When Leroy gets out to go home, he always takes his pocket-knife and carves down his toenails, which are real big. He says he'd have toes too big to fit his shoes if he didn't whittle them down while they're wet.

## Making noise

When Daddy was sick he used to watch us real close, and we didn't get in trouble because he would whip us with the long switch he kept beside his bed. But Mama is working all day so sometimes people tell on us for doing things – and that worries her – like Mr. Lawhorne who lives up the hill in the house next to Herman Winn. He got gassed in the War by the Huns, and he's been sick and nervous ever since, and he was sick long before Grandpa Sook-'n'-Polly built our house.

Now there's something I'd better explain: Grandpa Martin is called Grandpa Sook-'n'-Polly because he's got two girls named Aint Sook and Aint Polly. And Grandpa Turner is called Grandpa Robert-'n'-Nellie because his two youngest are named Robert and Nellie who we don't call 'Uncle Robert' and 'Aint Nellie' because they are younger than Sanford. And that way everybody knows which Grandpa you're talking about, Lillian says.

So Mr. Lawhorne came home to die – but he didn't! And now he won't let us talk out loud in front of his house, and he won't even let me drift my new red wagon down the hill in front of his house. And he claims it makes him nervous when we make any kind of noise, and I reckon that's true because his doctor says so – but I don't see why he's got to be mean and take Mama to court.

So me and J.T. set out to get back at him a couple of weeks ago – and we go up right after dark and skate down the hill in front of his house – and we make the curve down to our house and end up in some weeds in Mr. Wrenn's field – and he never sees us. And we're just plain lucky we don't get caught because Mama would have tanned our hides.

But Mr. Lawhorne always blames one of us when he hears a noise, and right now he's taking it out on J.T., who's got to walk his bike past Mr. Lawhorne's house when he's carrying his papers. And yesterday Mr. Lawhorne tells the sheriff Lillian and Virginia skated by his house, and he says J.T. rode his bike in front of his house

without any papers in his bag. So now Mama and everybody but Deanie and me have got to go to court to see what the judge says.

Mama says she's worried sick about all of it, and she's got to miss a day at the mill and not make any money – which is real bad. Sometimes I wish Mr. Lawhorne would get a lot sicker and have to go to the hospital like Daddy did! And that's not all I wish!

Mama says I shouldn't wish bad things on anybody, but that's the way I feel and nobody knows it but me. I made a joke up about Mr. Lawhorne like this: "It's against the law to blow your horn in front of Mr. Lawhorne's house." But I haven't even told it to J.T. because he'd probably say it's dumb. He's started a newspaper he writes by himself, and he draws funnies for it, and he writes every one of them by hand. I expect he might put my joke in it if I get up enough nerve to tell it to him.

One day when me and J.T. were riding the bus home from school, he told me there's a war going on in Asia, and I don't know anything about Asia. So anyway he said he hadn't heard of it until today – but the Japanese are fighting the Chinese. And I asked him who the good guys are and who the bad guys are like in the cowboy movies, and he said his teacher said neither side is right.

Jimmy Winn lives up the hill across the road from the Basics', and he's a bad boy sometimes even if Herman Winn and Mrs. Winn are Mama's best friends. They take her to buy groceries every Friday after work in Danville which is the only way Mama can get her things for the house that we don't raise in our garden.

Jimmy gave me something sweet in a glass one day when I was up at his house, and I got to feeling dizzy like I do when we play on the merry-go-round Daddy had Black John Roberts made us out of a two-by-eight on a piece of telephone pole stuck in the ground.

And when I got home I went up to our room and lay down and went completely to sleep. And when I woke up J.T. told me Jimmy gave me some peach wine like the glass of grape wine Daddy gives George Taylor along with a dollar when Mr. Taylor helps do things all day around the place. Mama doesn't like Daddy to have the wine in the house, but it gets Mr. Taylor over here to help out with things, Daddy says.

I don't think the wine Jimmy gave me was bad for me 'cause it was real sweet, and it didn't do anything but make me go to sleep. But Mama says it was wrong for him to do that 'cause it's got alcohol in it. And in Sunday school Aint Maude taught us that Southern Baptists don't drink anything with alcohol, and children shouldn't taste such things 'cause it'll teach them to drink and sin.

One time Jimmy made some noise in his back yard beating on the bottom of a wash tub to get the mud out, and Mr. Lawhorne claimed Jimmy did it just to disturb him. But the Winns live next door so he can't take them to court for living next door to him all the time, J.T. says.

But Mr. Lawhorne told Herman Winn anyway, and Mr. Winn didn't do anything to Jimmy at all. Daddy used to say that Jimmy Winn needs a good tanning, but I think Jimmy's getting back at Mr. Lawhorne for being mean to us 'cause he likes Lillian. Jimmy's sister Margaret and Lillian are real good friends, too.

One day on the school bus coming home some big boys were teasing Lillian about being skinny, and calling her bird-legs, and she couldn't make them stop. So Jimmy hit one of the boys and said, "Damn it, if you do that again I'm gonna beat your head in!" And the boy never teased Lillian again, anytime.

I like Jimmy 'cause the wine didn't hurt me, and he hurt that boy for teasing Lillian, and he gets Mr. Lawhorne's goat sometimes.

One of the most fun things in the world to do is climb a tree! We can climb any tree in our yard, in the front or the back. Of course, our maple tree is too little to have any good limbs down low, but we can shimmy up far as we need to. And all our china-berry trees are easy because I'm big enough to jump up and grab hold of the bottom limbs now.

Two weeks ago we're headed up through the woods to Aint Polly's on the other side of the Cantrell's, and J.T. sees a real big oak right far off the path. And he tries to get me to bet him he can't climb it, and it's more than twice as high as our house, and I would have bet him if I'd had any money. Well, he's never even tried to climb a tree like that one before, and he grabs hold of the trunk and



shimmies on up!

Shucks! I'm afraid for him to climb that high, and I yell for him to come down – but he won't – so I start yelling louder and louder – and Mama is out in the back yard hanging up the wash. And she hears me, and it sounds like I'm in trouble, so she starts running over to see what's wrong! And half way over she hears J.T. calling down at me, "Come on up fraidy-cat, you're chicken! Anybody could climb this old tree!"

And I yell out, "I'm not gonna climb that dumb tree! I'm afraid to even look!"

And Mama looks up when she hears me yelling scared! And she sees J.T. in the top of that tree, and she just about faints, and she yells, "J.T.! You, J.T.! Come down out of that tree this instant! Come down this minute, you hear me?!"

And he slides down – real quick!

And soon as he hits the ground Mama reaches up in a sapling and breaks off a real big switch and whips him to-beat-the-band all the way home.

And when we get there I can tell she's been crying – and she says, "Son, I'm sorry I whipped you so hard. I whipped you because I was so scared for you. Son, I don't ever want to see either one of you climbing a dangerous tree like that again. Do you hear?"

A couple of days later I find a tree I want to climb over near the dried-up spring across from the Cantrell's – and it's higher than anything I ever climbed before – and it's a mimosa with a lot of pretty flowers. And you know, if you beat a branch of Mimosa leaves against your hand and sing, "Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep" real quiet-like, the leaves will close right-up like they're taking a nap.

Well, when I'm most to the tip-top I figure I'll ride it down like you can a little hickory tree – so I jump out holding on tight, and I'm gonna ride that tree all the way down to the ground!

But when I'm about half way down I hear a big CRACK! And the top of that tree breaks off right where I'm holding on, and I tumble all the way to the ground – and I hit every single limb going down, and then that treetop lands on top of my head!

## Casting a spell

A lot of houses in Stokesland are just one story tall, and they don't have any stairs going up to the second floor like we've got. Mama says Daddy built it that way because she already had five of us by then, and he said we need the upstairs for the children to sleep in.

Me and J.T. like to slide down our cellar door when it rains, and sometimes we pour a couple of buckets of water on it – and that's near as good as a ride at the State Fair. But the best thing of all to slide down on is our banister that goes down the stairs from our room. It's got a real slick top that Mama says is built that way out of maple wood so you won't stick splinters in your hand when you hold on to it. Which is good because sometimes I catch a splinter in my butt when I slide down the cellar door – but Sanford says you didn't use to get splinters before all the paint peeled off when he was littler.

J.T. told me a scary story the other night when we got in bed about a little boy that liked to slide down the banister in his house, too. And one day some bad men came and drove razor blades in the top of the banister, and the little boy got up in the morning and jumped on the banister to go down to breakfast, and when he got half way down there were razor blades stuck all in the top of the banister, and he got sliced to pieces!

I still like to slide down sometimes, but I don't like it like I used to, and sometimes it makes me have bad dreams when I do it. So most of the time I just go ahead and walk down – besides, I can jump down the last four steps now, anyway.

Marvin tells us one day that he's got a Grandma who can cast a spell over you and bad things will happen to you. Well, that might have scared the daylights out of the other guys, but I didn't really believe in it till right now – and right now I believe somebody's put a spell on me because I've got the worse thing can happen to you!

I've got a bad case of poison oak down on my ugly-thing!

I don't know how I caught it, but I must have touched my ugly-thing right after I touched the poison-oak when I was taking a pee outside somewhere – and now I can't even touch it when it itches 'cause it makes it itch worse – and it might spread if I scratch on it like it did on J.T. one time.

I was ashamed to tell Mama, but she sees me scratching between my legs, and she asks me why I'm doing that so much, and I hate to tell her. But I finally break down, and she looks at it, and I would have bet she's going to laugh like J.T. and the other guys did. But they'll be sorry because if you laugh at somebody's bad luck you'll catch it, too – Eulilie told me that one day when she was shelling butter beans in the kitchen.

But, thank goodness Mama doesn't laugh, but she goes out and hunts up some snake-weed in the woods and makes a tea, and I have to wash my ugly-thing with it until it stops itching – and that makes it feel better.

But I wake up two days later and it's on my face, and Mama says that's real dangerous if it gets in your eyes – but it was in my eyes yesterday morning when I woke up. And now they're almost stuck shut, and at first I think it's just sleep in my eyes, but it's the poison oak because it won't pick off my eyelashes like sleep does. And they're swollen so tightly shut Mama says she might have to take me to the doctor if Herman Winn can drive us.

But then she borrows some calamine lotion from the Wades, and I put it on my ugly-thing, which is swollen twice as big, and it's healing up real nicely now. Well, boy, I learned a big lesson from all that itching – you just got to be real careful where you stoop and do it out in the woods – and don't say a single thing bad about Marvin's Grandma.

## Watermelon money

Mama always plants the garden down below the house and real far away from the outhouse because it's a matter of hygiene she says. I understand about that because we studied hygiene in school for two days last year. We've got two seats in our outhouse because Mama's got more children than any other family in Stokesland. Everybody else has got just one.

The Mayhew's have got an indoor outhouse and a telephone. One time I go in to use their indoor one and Mrs. Mayhew lets me try her telephone, but I don't know how to make it work. So she shows me how, but I don't know anybody to call – so I talk to the operator who lives in Newtown near where Daddy's shop used to be – but she doesn't know Daddy.

Well, Mama says she guesses she's got the best garden-spot in Stokesland for raising watermelons and cantaloupes – so when we eat one we have to look to see if we want to save the seeds for next year's planting. She says watermelons with a thick rind are best because they make good watermelon-rind preserves and pickles. And real sweet cantaloupes are the best, so we save the seeds from good ones, and Mama puts them up in a mayonnaise jar with the top on tight where mice can't get to them – or else we won't have a patch next summer.

I know how to tell when a watermelon is ripe, because it'll have a dead sound like it's made out of thick mud when you thump it. Sanford says if it's dead sounding it's had enough time to get ripe even if some people don't believe it – so we always go by the sound.

Sometimes me and J.T. and Herbert sneak up on other people's patches and sort of 'borrow' some of their watermelons, J.T. calls it. He says it's no use asking because they'll probably say no, so we're always in a hurry to pick them and can't always thump them. Mr. Harvel's got a real nice patch down below MacBride's orchard this year, so we ate one of his last week – which J.T. says proves that sometimes other people's watermelons taste even better than ours.

So last Thursday we go down to test Mr. Harvel's melons again, after dark, and they thump dead, and we drop one and crack it open and eat the heart out. And the next night we make another visit to find a few to sell Saturday on Tin Cup Alley. It's pretty dark because the moon is cloudy, and we haven't thumped more than two or three when some grown-up yells out, "Hey, whaddaya doin' in my watermelon patch?"

That scares the daylight out of me! And then somebody shoots off a shotgun, and I figure it's a shotgun because it's louder than a half-dozen .22 rifle shots put together! And that scares me so bad I pee in my pants, and J.T. and Herbert start crawling as fast as they can back up the hill to MacBride's. And I want to stand up and run away, but I'm afraid that shotgun will get me if I do, so I crawl on my hands and knees – which are sopping wet – as fast as I can!

And those darn old men are laughing and yelling, and they blast their shotgun again. We run fast as we can, bent over close to the ground so they can't hit us. And Herbert comes in and hides with us in Mama's closet between the living room and her room – but not a single soul comes up to our backdoor hunting for us.

So a half-hour later we crawl out, and Herbert goes home the long way around by the Cantrells' house. And that's the only time we ever tried to get watermelons to sell from Mr. Harvel's patch. I hope he gets a bellyache every time he eats one of them – and I hope all his melons have thin rinds.

The other day I found another real big patch over on Tin Cup Alley when I was looking for some good slingshot forks. It's on the same road we cut through to go see Grandma Sook-'n'-Polly instead of going up Route 29 to John Alley's store the long way.

Well, that watermelon patch is really something! It's bigger than all the land around our house and our garden put together. It's the biggest patch I ever saw! So I take off back home like greased lightning to tell the others, and they're coming up out of the bottom garden where the barn used to be. And they've got some fox-grapes which are ripe now, and Herbert tries to give me some – but I tell them about the patch, and they want to go see what I'm talking about because they think I'm making it up. And we run all the way over, and when they see that bunch of watermelons, both of them

let out a big double whistle,

“Wheeyyeew! Wheeyyeew!”

And Herbert says, “It’s lucky the vines are yellow so we don’t have to thump ’em!”

And J.T. says, “You know, with this many watermelons we can sell a bundle and nobody’ll even miss ’em – ya know that?”

“Yeah, we really could, J.T.,” I say.

“Yeah,” says Herbert.

So I run home for my new wagon, and when I get back they’ve picked a big pile of beauties – and they had eaten the hearts out of two more. So we fill up with a half-dozen beauties and go around to a bunch of houses, and we sell them for a dime apiece! And when they’re all gone, I feel rich with two dimes in my pocket, and Herbert says he’s going to save his for their trip back to Tennessee in a couple of weeks if we don’t mind – and that’s OK with us.

After Herbert goes, J.T. says, “Why don’t we go up to Strader’s Store and look at the new horse-racing machine they just got in? When you win it pays off in nickels! How ’bout it? You game to play a grown-up game, Billy?”

“I don’t know what I wanna do...this is about the most money I’ve ever had, ’cept from Mr. Wrenn last summer.”

“Heck, Billy, you know you gotta try it... just think how much money we could make if we beat that machine.”

Well, that sounds pretty good to me, and J.T. is usually right about making money, and we’ll make a bundle if we’re lucky! So we run down Tin Cup to Route 29 and up to Strader’s, and we sneak in the back room where they keep the gambling machines so the sheriff can’t see them – and nobody says a word about us being back there. And Joseph changes our dimes for nickels, and he doesn’t say anything either.

So J.T. gets to go first because he knows how to work it. He plops a nickel in the slot and chooses a red horse with a blue rider, and he pushes a button like he saw Mr. Handy do to bet his horse will win. Then the horses run down little slots that look like a racing track, but his horse doesn’t win and he loses his nickel.

“OK, Billy! Go ahead! It’s your turn! You know, you can’t ever tell when you’re gonna win on something like this, can you? Go on!

Win us four or five nickels! Mr. Handly won three last Saturday – I saw him.”

So I drop my buffalo in the slot and pick a brown horse, and the rider is wearing a red shirt and black boots, and I’m darn sure he’s gonna win – and I mean win some BIG MONEY! And I push the button and the horses take off and run down to the finish line! But my red shirt comes in next to last, which isn’t any fun because I lost!

But J.T. knows what he’s doing in gambling because he pitches pennies with the guys at school with his paper-route pennies.

“Come on, Billy, go again! You’re gonna win this time, I betcha! I saw Hersel win five nickels one day! Go on, try it again! Go on! Try it again or you’re a sissy!”

So I plunk another nickel in the slot and pick a different horse, and the jockey’s got on a green shirt. And I push the button, and the horse runs down the track – and he loses again!

“Dammit-to-hell!”

“Listen, Billy, I’ve heard some of the old men talking about the more you play the better chance you got to win – it’s playing the odds.”

So he plunks in another nickel and picks a horse and pushes the button and it doesn’t win, either! But he’s not upset because he makes a ton of money every week.

“Go on, Billy! You’ve done put half your money in that machine, and if you don’t play now you can’t get it back! You might as well play – that makes the odds better for you! The more you play the better the odds – everybody knows that.”

So I slip another nickel in and it loses just like the other ones. And I’m so mad I don’t care if I lose all the money I’ve got – which is exactly what I do because the next one loses, too. And now I’m broke, and it doesn’t seem fair!

“Darn, J.T.! I’ve lost all my money! And I didn’t win a single time! And it wasn’t any fun! I don’t like this horseracing machine no matter what Hersel Wade says! I’m going home!”

“Well, if you think I’m gonna stay here and gamble by myself, you’re crazy!”

So he buys an R.C. and sticks the rest of his money in his pocket, and he gives me a swig or two on the way home.

## Lumber

Last Tuesday we woke up with the sun because there's a lot of banging and slamming going on outdoors. So we jump up and run out to the front porch. Catty-corner from us they're unloading a truck from the lumber mill right by the ditch where June Gilley's old truck is stuck in the ditch. And they pitch a pile of two-by-fours and two-by-sixes off, and some bricks and cinder blocks and stuff, like they did when the Pugh's built their house down the hill on the other side of us.

"That's a lotta lumber – somebody's gonna build a house," J.T. says, because he knows about things like that. And then right out of nowhere he starts yelling at me, "Damn it, you piss-ant! You went and wet the bed again, and I slept in it when you moved over! And now I'm freezing to death! And you're just too lazy to get out of bed and use the window!"

But right then another truck roars up hauling a steam shovel on it, so he forgets the pee all over him, and we get dressed and eat a bowl of cornflakes and go outside to see.

Well, it doesn't take those guys but a couple of days before they've got a foundation and some two-by-fours up in the air, and they're ready for the roof by the end of the week. And every day I take them a bucket of water and a dipper from our pump, and I figure by the end of the week they'll give me a nickel for that, especially since I did it and they didn't ask me to – which is what Mama says we ought to do for others. And, soon as they get things ready for the roofers they hop over to the next lot and do the same thing, and now we can tell somebody is building two houses instead of one.

After the men go home for supper, all of us go over to play on the new houses. Marvin figures out how we can do stuff to make our muscles bigger – like pulling up on the two-by-fours in the basement. And we climb on the roof and see all over Stokesland, and this has got to be the most fun we've had in a long time, getting



muscles and all.

And after the men leave every day, I pick up some good pieces of scrap lumber, and I've got it hid away under the end of our front porch where it's high. I've got enough to make a car I can ride in – or maybe a truck. Mr. Gatling who just bought the Lumber Mill says we can get nails up there if we pick up the spilled ones around the nail barrels.

But the men who run the place don't want us hanging around all the time because it's dangerous, because there are trains unloading logs and big trucks bringing in lumber everywhere. So Mama says we can't snoop around unless we go by the office and ask.

One day I'm out back of the lumber mill looking for something we can use for tomato sticks, and there's a pile of lumber scraps all tangled up in honey suckle, and I'm pulling off the vines to get at the old lumber that's been there since before I was born, I figure. And I hear something rattling down at my foot, and I'm barefooted like we are all summer, and Marvin told us about things rattling like that in honey-suckle patches – but I haven't ever heard it for real – but I jump back quick as I can anyway!

And right there not a foot away from my foot is a big old rattlesnake! And he's coiled and he's mad at me for waking him up in the sun, and he's shaking his tail and weaving his head backwards and forward to beat the band! And I tell you! I don't wait around there for a second! I just throw a stick at him and jump off the pile and run all the way home.

And that's the scariest I've ever been of anything outdoors. And I told the guys, and they said I should have been scared of a rattlesnake! Marvin says he's going to hunt out that darn snake some day soon – but I don't think he'll do anything but talk.

Monday J.T. gets kicked off the bus for shooting a lead strip and hitting Jean in the leg, even if he didn't mean to. But it sticks in her leg and bleeds, and he has to walk to school all week. Mostly we hitch a ride or walk together when we get kicked off, but I've got to ride this week because our class is giving a play for all the fourth grades.

Wednesday we give the play and Bobby Jones has got the best part, but he gets sick and pukes all over the stage during practice and has to go home – so I get to do his part. I remember all his lines the first time – and we practice it twice – and, boy, it’s a lot of fun doing his part like that and being a hero.

And then, the very next day, Thursday, Mrs. Moore gets mad at me because I talk back to her, and she jerks me in the cloak room and slaps me real hard and knocks one of my baby jaw-teeth out. And I still have to practice the play – and that makes me really mad. And after school I’m playing with Tootie in the new houses, and I fall off the roof and land between two two-by-sixes and skin under my arms real bad. So Friday I’m sore as I can be, and I’m still mad at Mrs. Moore, and I figure I’ve got a good excuse not to go to school today, and J.T. doesn’t make me go – so I go back to bed.

Boy, it’s not even an hour after school starting time and our principal comes driving up, and I’m out in the yard, and she asks why I’m not in school. And I say, “Miss Patterson, I got hurt under my arms falling off the roof of that new house over there, and I can’t do the play because I’m too sore to.”

And she just sits in her car and says, “Billy, you’ll have to go to school and fulfill your responsibilities today.”

So I go get dressed and ride to school with her, and Mrs. Moore is so mad at me she gives my part to Bobby Jones like she did on Monday. And I wouldn’t mind too much, but I’ve got the best part in the whole play! I pretend like I’m fishing off the front of the stage, and I catch a fish, and I yell, “I done kotchted a whale!” because I’m acting like I’m a little black boy gone fishing.

But I like Miss Patterson anyway because one day last year she calls me in her office to read for her like she does all the good readers. And she lets me sit on her lap, and she gives me a fourth-grade reader to read, and I’m doing real good. And I read a word I think sounds like “fatty-gue.” And when she hears me say it like that, she laughs real hard and almost dumps me off her lap, and she says, “Oh, that’s alright, Billy, all the students make that mistake – I was just trying to fool you. But you’re a good little reader!”

## Champions of Stokesland

We never have played with the black boys that live up the hill in Colored-Town where Eulilie who helps us lives, so I don't know anybody else but her, except for Uncle Mose and Aint Caroline who used to help us before Daddy got sick. Mama says they're about as nice as any people we know even if they are colored.

One day we're acting like Indians going real quiet up the hill behind the Wades' to sneak a look at Mr. Wade taking a sun bath in his box – Tootie says he takes all his clothes off, even when it's real cold. So Herbert and Tootie start laughing about him being naked in his box, and Marvin shushes, "Now y'all be quiet before Daddy hears us and beats our asses to bits."

So we cut a wide path around the box, and we're heading to go up to Hauser's Store past Aint Polly's and up through Colored-Town to get there. And we're right in front of Uncle Wash and Aint Minnie's on the near side of the big gully that runs down the middle of Colored-Town. And all at once somebody shoots off a BB-gun or something, and it hits a tree where J.T.'s walking with a "Whack!"

And then another one comes shooting over our heads, and J.T. starts to get real mad, and Marvin whispers, "It's most likely some black boys fixing to kill us like the white men did one of them down in Mississippi and burned his body up."

So J.T. whispers, "They oughta not shoot at us! We ain't done nothing to them! Dammit, we'll fix 'em! Go get your BB-guns! We'll have a battle with 'em if that's what they want! We'll show 'em, dammit!"

So we run back to the house, and J.T. gets his, and Marvin gets his, and me and Tootie get our slingshots and run back up the hill fast so they can't get away. And J.T. lines us up behind the biggest pine tree around, and we start shooting at the tin roofs on their houses across the gully – just to pay them back.

Then those black kids start shooting back at us, and we fall

down and hide behind the pines like we're afraid of them. We can't tell where anybody is over there because there are some real tall trees growing in the valley that hide them – so we just go back to shooting at their tin roofs until we run out of BB's.

So Marvin sends Tootie home to get his bike and run up to Hauser's Store for some more ammunition. He comes back lickety-split, and right when he's jumping off his bike one of them gets him on the leg with a BB – and it hurts bad! Marvin gets so mad he starts cussing and yelling, and he starts running across the gully to get whoever did it.

And right then there's a big BOOM! like somebody shot off a cannon! And something blasts the tree right over Marvin's head – and that scares the daylight out of us because we meant to just play war games with them, but they're not playing anymore! And J.T. gives us an order like in a war, "Come on, somebody's got a .22 rifle over there – let's get outta here, now!"

And we take off running back down to Marvin's house like the devil's after us. And he shows us a trick we've never seen before by anybody – not even in the freak show at the State Fair. He goes in the kitchen and gets out a big tablespoon and dips it in Mrs. Wade's five-gallon-tin of cooking lard. And I would have bet a nickel he's plying – but he's not. And he takes a big spoonful of lard and swallows it down whole in one gulp. And we laugh like we're going to die because nobody's ever heard of eating lard – but he says he just likes the way it feels sliding down his throat.

Later that summer we're laying around in Mr. Wade's box to see if it'll make us any browner, and J.T. opens his eyes and says, "We can sleep in this box all summer, and it won't get us any darker than we are now – not a one of us has put on a shirt since school let out, except Billy and me on Sunday."

And Marvin starts talking about our war with the black kids, and we start to get mad at them all over again. Then J.T. says he's got a good idea that he knows will work to get even. And Tootie starts nosing up to him, "Yeah, J.T., what is it?"

"Well, me and Billy were listening to the Joe Louis fight on Daddy's radio Tuesday night, and I got to thinking – why don't we

have a fight in a ring like Joe Louis did. And why don't we match up one of us with one of them and beat him up real bad – and then we'll declare the white boy is the champion of Stokesland – and that'll pay 'em back double!"

And Marvin says, "We can beat up a black boy for sure! Boy, that's a real good idea if they're not chicken."

And J.T. says, "Well, we can try, can't we? We can see what they say, can't we?"

And everybody yells, "OK! OK!"

So J.T. talks to black Sam'l next time he's delivering his grandpa's paper, and he says Sam'l likes plyking he's on the radio, and yelling like they do on the radio. The next time we're in the box, J.T. tells us about talking to black Sam'l, and Marvin says, "J.T., I guess you're gonna fight Sam'l."

And J.T. starts backing down real quick, "Heck! I'm sure not gonna fight Sam'l! Heck! He's bigger 'n me! That's not fair, is it?"

So Marvin says, "Well, who's gonna fight for the white boys – what'd you tell him 'bout that?"

"I told him his little brother Joey is a good match for Billy – and y'all know he's not more than half as big as Billy is. And I figure we can have the fight up at the sandy spot near the railroad track where it's soft. And we can mark out a ring like a real boxing match in the newsreels, and we'll have one side of the ring that's ours to stand in and yell, and they'll have the other side."

Well, I start yelling then! No-sirree-bobtail-dog! I won't fight anybody! I don't know how to fight anybody! I've never had a fight in my life with anybody but J.T., and he always knocks me down and sits on me – and that's not any good for knowing how to fight, is it, y'all? Is it?"

J.T. acts like I'm crazy, "Listen, Billy, Little Joey comes 'bout up to your shoulder! And you know those black kids'll say you're chicken if you don't fight – besides, I've already set it up with Sam'l. You sound just like a chicken to me, Billy! Heck! How can you get hurt fighting somebody half your size? Besides...uh...listen...I'll make a deal with you, Billy! You fight Little Joey and I promise not to knock you down and sit on you for a month – for any reason at

all!”

Well, I’d do a lot of things to keep him from beating up on me all the time! So I’ll do it!

Well, J.T. gets everything set up, and Saturday morning everybody shows up at the sandy spot, and J.T. marks out a square place like a boxing ring. And pretty soon a lot of big black boys and one real little boy line up on their side of the ring. And J.T. and me and Marvin and Tootie and Herbert are on our side, and J.T. plays like he’s the announcer on the radio –

“And now ladies and gen’lmen, this is a very important fight today for the World Championship of Stokesland, Virginia! These two gen’lmen are gonna fight for three rounds, and there’ll be a bell to start the fight and a bell to end the round, and everybody’s gotta stay outside the ring except for Billy and Little Joey.”

So I step inside the square place, and now I can see Little Joey’s bigger than J.T. said he was, but he doesn’t come up to my chin even – and he’s skinnier than me – and I’m plenty skinny. J.T.’s got an old tomato can he picked up on the railroad-track, and he hits it with a big stick – Bang! Bang!

“This is a boxing match between Billy and Little Joey for three rounds! Whoever wins means he’s the Champion of Stokesland and all the world!”

Well, I’m not real happy about what he’s got me into – but I’m in the ring now – and I’ve got to fight or they’ll make fun of me! So I move sideways a couple of steps like the guy did in the Bowery Boys movie one time, and I put my fists up in front of my face like he did. And I skip over to Little Joey like he did, and I’ve still got my hands up.

And then I don’t know what else to do next!

So I swing at him like I try to hit J.T. when I’m mad at him, but I’m too far away, and I miss him by a mile! And then Little Joey looks at Sam’l, and Sam’l nods his head, and Little Joey looks up at me – and he’s not smiling or frowning or anything. And he hits me in my stomach real hard, and then he hits me again...and again...about a million times with both hands – one after the other!

And I can’t breathe! And my stomach hurts! And I’m going to puke! And I know I’m going to die if he keeps hitting me – and I

can't help it! And I fall down on the sand, and I can't move an inch.  
I just want to get my breath again so I won't die. And I can't get up!  
And I don't want to get up!

So Little Joey walks over to his big brother, and Sam'l takes hold  
of his hand, and all the black boys turn around and walk across the  
railroad track back home to Colored-Town without saying a single  
word – not about winning or being the Champions of Stokesland or  
anything. And that's the last fuss we ever had with the black boys.

## Big bang

A month ago J.T. saw a sale on BB-guns down at Sears, Roebuck when we went to see Charles Starret at the Rialto. He's always got lots of extra money in his pocket that he gets from collecting on his paper route. So he buys a new repeater Daisy BB-gun that holds about 20 shots under the barrel. Mama said he could buy it if he gave me his old one, so now we've both got BB-guns to hunt with.

Down the road to Herbert's house there are a whole bunch of glass insulators on the telephone poles, and we try forever to break one, but we can't because BB's don't shoot that hard. And then sometimes we find an old bottle that won't bring a penny at the store, and we jam it in the fork of a tree and shoot and shoot until it pops to pieces.

But what we really like is going hunting – you can hunt rabbits in the winter, but you can't in the summer when they're having babies. And you can hunt birds any time you see one, and there are maybe a thousand around our house and in MacBride's and over around Stokesland Baptist Church.

I think I've become a little better shot than J.T. is, but he wouldn't say I was if he was going to die. But I usually beat him when we line up tin cans on the fence down at the hog pen. And I'm better at shooting apples out of the top of a tree that we can't get to. Like one other time he found a pane of window glass, and we held it up while the other one shot the edges out – and I got the last shot on it before it broke to pieces.

Then a couple of weeks ago J.T. finds one of Sanford's .22-short bullets in the kitchen where he left it from hunting rats at the barn that didn't burn down. And he says we ought to be able to find a way to shoot a .22 bullet even if we don't have a rifle – but you can't hit it with a hammer because it might go off in the wrong direction.

So we head out to the back yard to see what we can find, and



we're going out the back door, and I see the thing that holds the screen door hook shut – and it looks just the right size to hold a .22 bullet. So I unscrew it and yell, “J.T., c'mere, I betcha a dollar I've got something we can use for that old .22 bullet.”

Of course it's hard to get him to do something I think up, but he follows me around behind the chicken house, and I screw the screen-door thing in the side of the house. And he's holding the bullet, so he pushes it in the eye – and it fits real dandy like I figured it would. And he gets back behind the corner of the chicken house, and he takes a bead on the back of that .22 bullet – POW! And he misses that old bullet by a mile!

But I don't say a word because a .22's really little to hit – it's even littler than the cherries in the top of MacBride's trees. We shoot them down because we can't climb up that far to get them, and the birds will just eat them. So we shoot down all we can, and some of them are still good enough to eat. So J.T. doesn't mind missing because he knows I can't hit it either.

And I cock my gun and shake the BB's in the feeder-pipe to make sure I've got one in the barrel, and I hold it steady against the corner of the house, and I aim exactly at the back of that .22 bullet – and I pull the trigger.

And man! KABANG!

That BB hits square in the back of that .22 bullet, and I've never heard a bang like that in my whole life. And that lead bullet probably lands over in the side of Cantrell's house, and I hear the empty shell whiz by my head making a hundred miles an hour! And one thing is for-sure real quick! I won't ever shoot my BB-gun at another .22 bullet as long as I live!

### Kindling wood

I wish we could play baseball on a team with real baseball gloves and real balls and real bats, and we could run around the bases and yell and stuff like in the movies. But we never have heard anybody talk about having a team in Stokesland like they've got in Danville – and in Chatham, I think. Of course we play pitch-and-catch when we're digging potatoes before the weather freezes and turns them to mush – but we never have had a real baseball. We got a hard-rubber ball one Christmas and the Smoot's dog came over and found it in the back yard and chewed it up into little-bitty pieces – which is dumb because he didn't even try to eat it.

About a month ago J.T. finds another golf ball on the tracks across from the Country Club, and it takes him maybe two days to figure out what to do with it. He goes in Mama's sewing basket and gets some bias-tape she uses to hem dresses with. And he wraps it around his golf ball until it grows almost double. And he wraps it all up with Sanford's electric tape, and he declares we've got a real baseball now, and we throw it around for a couple of days – but you can't throw hard because it hurts your hand.

So he finds some real heavy ticking-cloth in Mama's rag-bag and draws my hand extra big on it and cuts it out and sews it up – and makes a glove out of it! And it looks pretty much like a real baseball glove does, and it keeps you from hurting your hand if you're the catcher – which I usually am because J.T. says he'll be a pitcher some day, probably in the big-leagues.

So we're having a good time playing like we're big-leaguers like Dizzy Dean and them in the Danville Register and Bee. And one day we're playing Home-Run where one of us throws the ball high as we can, and the other one has got to catch it or it's a home-run. And he throws a doozy about as high as that tree he climbed that Mama whipped him for, and I try to catch it – but I don't – and it slams right in my nose, and Mama says it's probably broken.

It hurts a lot, and I can't blow my nose right now – but I can

smell things about as good as ever, even when Mama put some ice on it.

J.T. decides to make something else out of the ball, so he cuts the cover off with Sanford's kindling hatchet. And he starts unwinding the rubber band inside, and it's just flying around everywhere. And I take the end and run out far as the telephone pole near the Blaylocks', and it's not even all gone yet. And right then he whistles me back, "Billy, I got the best idea I ever had for my rubber band!"

"Yeah, yeah! What's that, J.T.?"

"Stop jumping around like you gotta take a pee! I'll tell you in good time soon's I figure out all the details!"

"OK, J.T., OK."

"What'll you gimme t' tell you right now, then?"

"Shucks, if I had anything you wanted you'd already have it in your pocket, I bet.... Uh...OK, then...I'll get in the next bucket of water."

"Awright, then, listen – I'm gonna wait till old Mrs. Tattletale Wrenn takes Daisy on her walk around the block – and while she's down at the Rices' I'm gonna take one end and tie it around the telephone pole in front of the Blaylocks' house – and you're gonna tie the other end around the bean pole in the garden-spot."

"That's neat, J.T....but what's it for? Whatcha doing that for?"

"Well, if you stop interrupting I'll tell you, OK?"

"OK..."

"Well, when Mrs. Wrenn and Daisy come back around to home, and they're in front of the Blaylocks' house, Daisy'll run into this rubber band. And she'll keep walking and walking till she walks too far, and the rubber band'll break. And it'll sting old Daisy something special! And that's for barking at me every time I come out the front door. Now, is that worth two buckets of water, or not?"

So we climb up on top of the well house and eat some grapes so we can keep an eye on Daisy, and pretty soon Mrs. Wrenn comes out and snaps her chain on and takes off down the road to the Rice's. Now, she can't tell we're on top of the well house because we scoot over to the other side. And when they're out of sight we run over and tie the rubber band to the poles, and when you stretch

the rubber band it gets real skinny, and you can't even see it. And we run back and hide on top of the well house again.

Well, it doesn't take a skinny-minute before she's coming around the Cantrell's and up the road to the Blaylocks' – and I'm about to pee in my pants – but I got to wait. And when they get to the right spot the rubber band is tied too high up, and Daisy slips clear under it. And Mrs. Wrenn doesn't see it, and we can tell she's walking against it, and it stretches and stretches, and she keeps walking into it! And all at once that old rubber band gets too thin and snaps in two! And Mrs. Wrenn jumps up in the air about a half-foot and yelps so loud we can hear it plain as day – “Yeowww!” – like a little bitty girl yelping.

And she stops and rubs the top part of her leg, and she looks all around for somebody – but she can't see us. And she hurries up to her house and puts Daisy back in her pen and gives her something to eat and Daisy's happy. And me and J.T. are too because our rubber-band-trick worked better than we ever planned it would!

Right before six o'clock we're up in our room and June Gilley drops Mama off, and she comes in and starts getting dinner, and she's calling Virginia and Lillian everywhere to come help out, but they're not answering. And somebody knocks on the front door, and Mama goes to see – and it's Mrs. Wrenn!

“Mrs. Martin, I hate t' bother you like this you being a working woman and just got home, but I must tell you what those two boys of yours did to me today. I'm really surprised and most grieved about it.”

“Oh, Mrs. Wrenn, come in – come in the kitchen. I'm just getting some things ready for supper. Come on in and tell me what happened with the boys.”

“Well, Mrs. Martin, I was taking Daisy for her walk, you know how I do that every day 'bout 4 o'clock round the road down to the Rice's and back up by the new houses.”

“Yes, Ma'am, I know where you mean.”

“Well, Mrs. Martin, well! Today I get back almost to my house – right in front of the Blaylocks' new house – and suddenly! Suddenly! Somebody shoots me on my leg, right up here on my thigh – here, see, it's terribly red! And a knot has risen up on it!”

“Oh, Mrs. Wrenn, I’m sorry. You think my two boys did that to you? Did you see them shoot you? Did you see them?”

“No I didn’t, Mrs. Martin, I didn’t see them. I don’t have to see them! I know when I’m shot with a slingshot by two bad boys, Mrs. Martin. And I was shot today – you can see for yourself, can’t you?” And she shows Mama her red spot on her leg.

“Oh, Mrs. Wrenn, I’m so very sorry! But I’ll make it right – they’ll get punished tonight after supper, I promise you.”

“Alright Mrs. Martin, you know I hate to bother you like this – just when you get home – but I thought you needed to know.”

And Mrs. Wrenn scoops up her apron and wraps it around her hands and waddles back across the road.

Well, after supper Mama calls us in the kitchen after the dishes are washed and dried and put up, and she tells us exactly what Mrs. Wrenn told her. And me and J.T. have already figured out we won’t tell Mama about the rubber band golf ball because they’re too hard to come by. But Mama’s got a surprise for us! “I want you two boys to go straight up and get your slingshots!”

We do it, and she makes us follow her out to the woodpile, and she takes our slingshots away from us, and she sounds kind of sad, “J.T. and Billy, I can whip you again, and that’ll just make me tireder than I am already. And you won’t remember it next week – but I know you’ll remember if I chop your slingshots in little pieces.”

“Yes, Ma’am! We will, we promise.”

And Mama does it! She cuts our slingshots in little pieces with the kindling hatchet – and she doesn’t seem real mad.

“Now, I know you two won’t pull that trick on Mrs. Wrenn again, will you?”

“No, Mama, we won’t – we promise, Mama. We won’t!”

### Sanford leaves home

J.T. teases me all the time, and sometimes I get so mad I can't take it anymore, and I jump on him and try to make him stop, and he gets me down on the ground and sits on me until I cry – and he's almost three years older than me. A couple of Saturday nights ago he's taking his bath in the wash-tub up beside the kitchen stove to keep warm, and I'm waiting. And he says, "You know Billy, Marvin says you're in love with Yolanda."

Well, Yolanda is Herbert's niece, and she's two years younger than I am, and I've never even thought about liking her.

"I wouldn't like Yolanda if she was the last girl on earth, J.T. Martin!"

But he keeps his stuff up, and finally I throw the bar of soap at him, and while he's looking for it in the tub, I pick up a big piece of oak bark and throw it at his head hard! But I miss by a mile, and he splashes water on me and my overalls get all wet.

Now, I've just about had it with him teasing me for nothing! And I run out in the hall and get my BB-gun – and I come back, and I shoot him right on top of his hip while he's still naked. And he starts yowling like he's hurt bad, and he cries like a baby, and Mama comes in and grabs me and whips me good with a stick of kindling – and I have to put my BB-gun in Mama's room for a month.

A lot of times Virginia takes up for me and won't let J.T. pick on me if she sees it happen, and when all of us get going at it, Lillian takes sides with J.T. – and me and Virginia fight together, and we usually win because she's older than they are. But she still fusses at me when I don't answer when she calls me to come get water or something – it seems like the only thing I ever do is pump water for them to cook with.

Sanford doesn't like Virginia anymore, but I don't know why and nobody else knows why, either. About a month ago somebody

got out Mama's snapshot book and took all the pictures of Virginia and punched her eyes out, and boy! It looks silly to see the rest of us looking at the camera and she's not looking at anything! Everybody believes Sanford did it, but he says he didn't. Virginia claims he did, but she can't prove it. And Mama's real worried about Sanford, and she asks him why he ruined Virginia's pictures, and he says he didn't do it – but nobody else would have done that to her.

Sometimes he does even worse things – like when Daddy was alive he got mad because Daddy wouldn't let him drive Hersel's Model A Ford Coupe because he didn't know how to – and he went off and didn't come home. Nobody knew where he was and it was dark, so Daddy figured he had run away, and Mama started tearing up – and we did too – and Mama doesn't usually ever cry.

So Daddy said we would wait a day for him to get hungry and come back, and if he didn't we'd have to get somebody to drive out to look for him. I was really sad because Sanford has never been mean to me – and I started crying, but Daddy said stop and I could go with him to look for Sanford – and that made me feel better – and Mama hugged me.

So next day when Willard McCraw got home from his dry-cleaning route Daddy asked him to drive down Route 29 to ask people if they had seen Sanford anywhere. So he took us out in his Plymouth businessman's coupe with the teeny back seat where I got to sit, and we drove down toward the North Carolina line – and all at once Daddy said, "Willard, stop the car, here!"

And right there beside the road there was part of our old churn that sat behind the barn, and it had a wooden propeller on it where the paddle wheel used to be, so Willard got out and put it in the car because Daddy didn't feel very good – and we kept on driving.

Daddy used to be a good driver but he doesn't drive any more except when he helped those two ladies get out of the ditch that time, and that's the only time I ever saw him drive anything. And Daddy said, "I'm glad we found this contraption here. I guess he might have used it to fan himself when he got hot and tired. Or he figured he could use it for a boat-motor to cross a river if he came to one. But it's heavy, and he just couldn't carry it any farther – being crippled like he is."

Well! Golly-Moses! I didn't know Sanford was crippled! He walks different from J.T. and me, but I didn't know Sanford was crippled! Heck-fire! Crippled people beg for money in front of Woolworth's when we go to the movies on Saturday. And I can't help crying because I didn't know Sanford is crippled – and I don't want him to have to beg for money in Danville, ever!

And Willard kept on driving until we came to a service station right over the North Carolina line. Then he stopped and asked the man to come outside because Daddy had been out of bed too long. And he asked the man if he'd seen a young crippled boy walking along the highway hitching a ride. And the man said he had, and he noticed he walked funny. He said he bought a soft drink, and Daddy said right then he knew Sanford was headed for Grandpa Robert-n-Nellie's to run away to.

So Willard stepped on the gas, and he got up to over 30 miles an hour. I could tell because now I was sitting up tall in the back seat, and I could read the speedometer. And when we got there Daddy said out loud like he wasn't talking to us, "He's sitting on the steps waiting for somebody to come take him home." Daddy sat in the car to rest, and when Sanford came out, Daddy thanked Grandpa for looking after him. Then Sanford climbed in the rumble seat with me, and we rode home without anybody saying anything at all.

And far as I know Daddy never did fuss at him for running away and causing Willard all his trouble. And that's the only time he ran away until after Daddy died. And when I said my prayers before I went to sleep I thanked God for bringing Sanford back home.

"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. Help Daddy get well. Help the sick, poor, blind and all that need help. And thank you, God, for bringing Sanford home safe and for Willard going out to find him with Daddy and me. Amen."

After Daddy died Sanford started getting upset with Mama a whole lot because she won't let him have his head and do like he wants with the house and the barns and things. He wants to be the boss like Daddy was, and Mama says she'd like some help with the place, but she can't let him run things because he's forever doing



things the wrong way. One day in the summer we're all out in the front yard eating watermelon we picked out of our own patch, and I'm trying to wash J.T.'s face with a piece of rind, and we're having a good time.

Then Sanford starts arguing with Mama again, and he's yelling at her for not letting him decide when to sell our calf to Mr. Patterson, and Mama tries to calm him down, but he just gets madder. Well, he starts running toward her when he sees half an iron pump-handle on the ground that he broke off last winter when he was hitting it with a big rock to get the pump unfrozen. He's so mad at Mama he picks up that pump-handle and throws it at her head! And thank goodness Mama sticks her arm up in front of her face, so the pump-handle hits her wrist. It swells up and stays black-and-blue and real sore for more than a month.

And poor Mama has lots of trouble going to work and doing housework after that for a long time. She says it hurts the most on rainy days. And she doesn't know what to do with Sanford if he's going to be dangerous like that. So she goes to talk to the judge in Danville, and the judge says he'll have Sanford put away for a while in an institution for boys who can't behave.

So one day around then Sanford's out in the front yard, and two big men drive up in a '34 Chevy sedan and jump out and run over to Sanford, and he tries to run away, but he can't run too good. They catch hold of him and put handcuffs on him and push him in the back seat and drive away. And Mama's crying! And she says it's real hard to do that to one of her children, but she doesn't know what else to do. And Uncle George thinks Mama is wrong, but he won't let Sanford live with him when Mama asks him.

I'm glad they took Sanford away! But, boy! It was real scary seeing those two big men treating him rough like he's a bad guy in the movies. He's not bad very much, except for fussing and picking on J.T. and ruining Virginia's pictures. But I'm glad, really, because he hurt Mama! Sometimes I cry after I say my prayers because he can't live at home anymore, and I don't know what to do.

So Sanford stays away for a couple of months and things are better, even if we have to do more work around the place. But one day Uncle George goes up to the county farm – he doesn't even tell

## Billy

Mama – and he gets Sanford out and brings him back to our house. And he just lets him out of his car and doesn't say anything about it to anybody. Mama has to let him stay because she doesn't know where else he can go.

## Weeds

After a while everything gets better around the house because Sanford gets a job with Uncle Buck who lives in Raleigh and owns a big woodworking plant. Sanford helps out a lot of different places in the plant, and he gets paid a real salary, and he buys a Model A Ford sedan. He learns how to drive, and he lives in a boarding house near Martin Millwork, which is the name of Uncle Buck's business.

One day Mama gets a letter from him, and he wants me and J.T. to come stay with him for a visit, and Mama says that's fine, but we can't ride in his Model A while we're there. So he pays ninety cents apiece for us to take the Greyhound bus to Raleigh to stay with him one at a time for a week.

While I'm there I get to go see Uncle Buck and Aint Mozelle – she's our aint who's married to Daddy's brother, and she acts uppity sometimes, the girls say. For one thing she comes to see us on Sunday mornings, and she knows good-and-well Mama helps out after church, and Virginia says she comes early to see if the house is straight. She knocks on the front screen door instead of walking right in like everybody does in our family, and she's got a funny high voice, and she always asks us, "Hello darling, where's mother?"

Well, Virginia says Aint Mozelle ought to be in church herself that time of a Sunday morning. But she gives each one of us a nickel most every time she shows up like that – so I don't much care myself what she does.

We have a lot of fun in Raleigh with Sanford, and he never yells at me or does anything bad like he did to Mama and Virginia, and we eat at a big table with all the other boarding people. There's always a bunch of food on the table, and you can eat as much as you want. And there's lots of sweet stuff that you can have it any time you want it – even if you haven't cleaned your plate.

One day after work we take a walk to a park that's got a fish-

pond in it, but you can't fish in it. Sanford says some people do it anyway early in the mornings, but that's trespassing, like swiping watermelons from Mr. Clay. I don't think Sanford has ever gone fishing, far as I know. Maybe if he did it would make him happy.

One day after dinner we walk downtown and go see two cowboy movies in a row – which is a double feature – with Tom Mix in both of them, but I go to sleep in the second one. The next day Aint Mozelle says for me to eat dinner with her, and I mind my manners so Mama won't be embarrassed. And she says she'll pay me to pull the weeds out of her garden, and there are a lot of them – about like in our potato patch after we've stopped hoeing it in late summer – but I don't mind because I've been pulling weeds since I was little. And she'll probably give me a dollar – or even five dollars – if I do a good job because J.T. says they're probably millionaires like John D. Rockefeller in New York City.

So I work a long time, and I pull every weed I can get a hold of, and it's mostly in the sun where it's darn hot, but I'm used to the sun from going swimming and hunting in the mornings. And when I'm finished Aint Mozelle walks outside and looks at the pile of weeds and says, “Now, Billy, I can see your Mama has taught you how to weed a garden! It looks real nice, Darling!”

And she reaches in her pocketbook and pulls out a quarter. Well, I don't say anything impudent because that would hurt Mama's feelings, but I've sure got a lot of bad things going on in my head about that quarter. She could have given me a dollar easy, and it wouldn't hurt her pocketbook at all. Boy! I hope I find a little boy some day I can pay for doing a job like this for me – and I'll give him five dollars! At least!

### First smoke

Almost every guy I know smokes something or other. J.T. and Marvin got the rest of us started. One day me and J.T. are grazing Old Bessie near Aint Maude Baker's house. Aint Maude has been our Sunday school teacher for two years now. J.T. and Marvin always crawl out the window down in the basement where our classroom is when she turns her back to write something on the blackboard, but some grown-up always catches them and sends them back.

So I'm grazing old Bessie in the tall grass far away from the honey-suckle so she can't get into it and ruin the milk – Mama always warns us if we don't watch what she eats, we still have to drink her milk.

And J.T. hollers, "Billy, get the heck over here! Quick!" He's holding some kind of weed, and he's sniffing it all over. "This is the rabbit tobacco Hersel's been telling me about! He says it's real good smoking stuff, and it makes good cigarettes – and it's a sight better than grapevines for sure."

So I take off lickety-split back home for some Sears, Roebuck catalog paper, which is stronger than newspaper. It won't burn up so fast, and it won't fall apart when you lick it to seal it. By the time I get back he's got a handful of leaves from down on the bottom where they're dried out. And he mashes them up to look like store-bought tobacco in the little cloth bag with the drawstring and the little red tag on it.

I'm rolling the first one in a square of paper with a Sears, Roebuck bicycle on it, and I stop to look at it, and he jerks it away and finishes the rolling-job and licks it and lights up. And man! After the first single puff he starts smiling silly like the Lucky Strike man does on the highway signboard on the way into Danville. And he says it doesn't sting near as much as the old cheap Marvels he buys for the Stokesland Smoking Club.

So I take a short puff and it tastes real good until the smoke gets

Billy

in my eyes and they start stinging and I have to rub them. That darn rabbit tobacco gets in my eyes, and really makes them hurt. But I wouldn't stop puffing for the world because I can smoke anything he can – even if it kills me, which it's about to do – until Bessie wanders off too far, and he yells, “It's your turn! Go get her!”

And thank goodness it's my turn. I head out lickety-split after her, and I chuck that cigarette and stomp on it, and that's the first time I've ever been glad he made me run after the cow.

### Confidence boy

J.T. woke up two days ago feeling good, so I tried to get him to go out in MacBride's orchard and get some free cherries, but he said he wasn't going to do things like that any more, "I've decided I won't lie to Mama, and I won't do anything that would make her unhappy. I've decided that because that's what made the mama happy in that funny-book I got from Marvin."

Well, I don't believe a word about him changing, and Virginia and Lillian don't believe he's changed that much, either. He still sits on me like he always has when he wants something. But he has quit smoking where I can see it, and he's acting like a little preacher-boy around everybody.

It's got so Mama believes him no matter what anybody else says – and when we try to tell her he's lying, she says, "I just know I can believe whatever J.T. says. I have confidence in him."

Now he acts like he's been to a revival meeting – and he decides he won't do anything Mama wouldn't like for him to do or anything that would disappoint Mama – and he's quit smoking! So now we call him Mama's "confidence boy"! But I think he's full of you-know-what!

Wednesday I'm walking down Route 29, and I'm looking for a hundred-dollar bill like always. And I find a broken-down tobacco pipe, and I go up behind Strader's and hunt in the cigarette butts they throw out, and take a couple of good ones home. And I get a match off the top of our new kerosene cook stove and plop down in the bottom of Mama's closet and light up.

And boy! It bites my tongue like Hersel says cheap tobacco will do, especially when it's been rained on! But I'm having a good smoke – until I try to stand up to go take a pee! And I can't get to my feet – I can't stand up at all! And the more I move the more my stomach hurts like the dickens – worse than the time we ate the minnows at Red Horse. And all at once it's just like Red Horse – because I puke all over the closet floor and all over Mama's Sunday

shoes.

And darn it! Right then “confidence boy” comes in the house and smells the smoke, and he grabs my pipe and stomps it in a thousand pieces. And he yells like he’s a saint or something, “If I ever catch you smoking again, I’m gonna beat your head in!” But he can say what he wants to because he can’t make me feel any worse than I do right now no matter what he does, and I still have to clean up the puke and clean Mama’s shoes.

And when she gets home and hangs her coat up she says, “My, this fireplace smells strong today – must be something in the new coal they just delivered.”

J.T.’s getting to be just like the sign in Dr. Dillard’s office that says ‘NO SMOKING.’ Yesterday he caught me again coming out of Strader’s Store puffing a butt Mr. Cantrell threw down inside. And he ran over and knocked me down right there on Highway 29.

It’s funny: one time last year I had to pay Marvin and J.T. the three cents I got from Mr. Wrenn for watering his dumb old dog for two days just to join the smoker’s club, and they bought the cheapest thing they could find – which are Marvels for 11 cents a pack. Luckies and Chesterfields cost 13 cents. But we couldn’t tell the difference because all of them made us cough. So I got to join the club and Tootie and Herbert did, too. But I don’t know how much they had to pay because they don’t tell us the club business, Marvin says.

After supper last night Mama tells us about a lady in the Inspection Department at the mill that she says is a hypocrite because she “preaches one thing but does another thing.” And I think J.T.’s probably a hypocrite, too.



## Pea-toy club

When Marvin gets home from his granddaddy's Saturday, he shows us how to make play-guns that shoot dry peas out of the kind of clothespins with springs in the middle, like Mama has – and we work on them all day Saturday. You stick the pea in the pinchy part of the clothespin, and when you pull the trigger that hard old pea pops out for fifteen or twenty feet – and maybe farther sometimes.

But Herbert has been in Tennessee for two weeks while we start the new club that takes the place of the smoking club because we promised Mama we wouldn't use the big wooden box to smoke in – so we change it to the Pea-toy Club. And when he gets home Sunday he comes up looking for everybody, and we're all out on the front porch taking target practice. He walks around the corner of the house yelling for us, and we jump out and attack him with, "The Pea-toy Club will get you!" which Marvin made up. And we shoot him a dozen times, and he yells, "Stop, ouch! Don't! That hurts!"

But we keep on shooting, and he starts boo-hooing and runs home, and Herbert's mama comes up to see Mama – but she doesn't go see Marvin's mama. So we have to let Herbert join the club even if he doesn't have a Pea-toy – because Mama won't let us use any more of her clothespins – so we start shooting at the cats. But you can bet your bottom dollar we don't shoot at old Chink because he is the best cat in the whole world, and I'd beat the dickens out of anybody that did.

When Herbert's not acting like a cry-baby, sometimes he's got real good ideas he gets from his Uncle Jim, who's his father's brother from Tennessee where all the Rices come from. The other day he's up at the Pea-toy Club meeting, and he tells us how his cousins in Tennessee change their names so other guys don't know who they are – and we have to promise not to tell anybody else.

He says you take the letters in your name and turn them inside out. So J.T. figures my name is shorter than anybody's, so he turns

Billy around and it comes out “Lib” – which is Billy spelled backwards if you leave off the ‘y’, which does better, J.T. says – so I’m Lib Nitram now.

And J.T. doesn’t want to be called T.J. because that’s our Uncle T.J.’s name, who is Daddy’s brother that lives in Raleigh and doesn’t ever come see us much. So he takes his first name, which is John for John Thomas, and turns it around to “Nhoj Nitram.” And he says it messes it up to put an ‘n’ at the start, so now he’s “Hoj Nitram.”

And Marvin says he’s decided to be Nivram Edaw – which isn’t very hard to figure out.

And when we start making one up for Tootie, he doesn’t like it. He says we’re making fun of him because J.T. calls him “Eitoot”. And Marvin points his finger at him and yells “EITOOT!” And then he tunes up louder! So J.T. says he’ll just be “Tootie.” And Marvin says that’s already crazy enough as it is, and Tootie starts boo-hooing over that, too.

And Marvin just moves his lips like he’s saying “Tootie” – and you can’t even hear him – and Tootie yells like a stuck pig – so he’s just Tootie from now on.

Well, Herbert’s got the hardest name of anybody because it’s “Trebreh” – which sounds sissified to me. Besides, everybody laughs at him when we call him Trebreh. And J.T. says, “Listen! Herbert’s name is already funny if you say it slow – like it’s h e r-b u t! He’s a girl’s hind-end!” And Herbert starts tuning up, “I’m not gonna be nobody’s butt, and I’m not gonna be in the Pea-toy Club! And I’m gonna tell Mrs. Martin what you called me.” But everybody keeps calling him Her-but until he gets used to it.

And about the time we’re all used to it, Marvin figures out it’s better if you say “Her-but” backwards – which is “But-her,” which sounds like “butter”. And everybody likes that, and Herbert does, too, and he’s Butter-Rice now – which is the best name we get out of the whole thing. After that we don’t remember to call anybody else by our Pea-Toy-Club names – but old Butter-Rice is his name from now on!

## **Times are good**

It gets hot as Hades in Stokesland in the summer! Red Dalton is our iceman, and he comes all year long and sells ice for our icebox on the back porch. All Mama has to do is put her card in the front window when she wants him to bring some. The card is shaped like a hexagon, J.T. says. And it's got numbers on it that go 25, 50, and 75. And if you want 50 pounds you put the number 50 up at the top, and he brings 50 pounds to our back porch where our icebox stays. I bet he knows where everybody's icebox is from here to Danville.

He's really fun if he's in a good mood because then he gives us ice scraps that fly off the big block when he's cutting it down – if they haven't melted by the time he gets to our house. And that is the coolest thing we ever get hold of all summer – except for Saturday movies with SUPER-AIR at the Rialto.

Sometimes Red Dalton won't pay any attention to us or give us any ice even if we follow him around his route. So if he's in a bad mood, we run up and sneak the little ice-chips from his truck when he's in somebody's house. Mama knows we steal his ice, but she's never told us not to – so we usually get some one way or the other.

George Taylor lives over on Tin Cup Alley. He can't read or write, but he's a real good worker, Mama says. The other day he brings a little goat over and gives it to us, and we keep him in the chicken yard. We call her Nanny because she's a nanny goat, which means she's a girl, and she can have baby goats. She'll give us milk to make cheese out of if we want to. But Mama says we've got enough trouble using Old Bessie's milk to have to churn goat's milk, too. So about all she does right now is keep the grass down at the bottom of the fence in the chicken yard, and Mama says that's nice.

But the other day I'm going out to get the eggs up, and I've got my eye out for old rooster. I'm walking quiet so maybe he won't

hear me since he's taking a ride on his lady friend's back. I'm almost up to the hen house when old rooster sees me! Well, he takes off like a bolt of lightning and catches me before I can make it to the steps. But Nanny sees him headed for me like that, and she takes off and puts her head down and butts old rooster three feet up in the air.

So, I'm here to tell you I'm real happy with Nanny if she'll keep that dumb rooster from flogging me all the time. So I get her a handful of corn and feed it to her from outside the fence where old rooster can't get to me. I'm right glad George Taylor brought us this goat.

Nanny's been a good pet, and we've had her a little over a month, but now Mama says we've got to get rid of her. We can't eat her like poor people do in South America that we studied about in Geography – so we've got to find somebody who wants her. Trouble is, she's learned to play too rough with us – especially me. I don't know how to keep her from running into me. She gets a head start when I come in the gate, and she puts her head down and butts my legs – and it hurts like the dickens!

Of course, I've been trying to teach her not to butt, but she thinks we're playing a game, Mama says. And she won't quit even when you hit her with a stick for doing it. Mama's afraid she might butt Deanie sometime, who's six years younger than me, and she could get hurt real bad. So Mr. Patterson is going to take her away and sell her if anybody will buy her. I hate to see Old Nanny go, but I don't hate not to get butted on my butt anymore!

Well, Mama always says when things get bad they always get good again – which is true because we just got a surprise for the kitchen, and it's the best thing me and J.T. have ever gotten – put together – even at Christmas! She's been keeping it a secret, but she gave us a hint a couple of days ago when she said it would save us work – but that didn't help any. And we've been begging and begging, but she won't give in, and she's having fun keeping the secret from us.

Then today Mr. Patterson drives up in his truck-the-sides-let-down-on, and he's got a kerosene stove in the back part! He backs

up toward the back door, but he can't get all the way there because of the pump-house, so he lets the side down, and me and J.T. and Mr. Patterson pick it up and haul it into the kitchen – and then I notice it's just like Mrs. Busic's stove.

So Mr. Patterson sends J.T. to the store on his bicycle to get a gallon of kerosene which Mr. Patterson pays for, which is real good because Mama doesn't ever have an extra penny that's not promised to somebody or other, she always says. And he comes back right when Mr. Patterson gets the feet leveled so it won't rock and spill stuff on top of the stove.

And the feet have got things you screw down with a pair of pliers to make it level! And he shows Mama how to light it, which she knows about anyway because Grandma Robert 'n' Nellie's got one, and Mama has cooked on it at family reunions. She's so happy, she cleans it and polishes it like it's something really special, and me and J.T. help out because it's something special to us, too – we won't ever have to bring another single, solitary arm-load of wood into the kitchen again!

## Halloween lights

Halloween is one of my favoritest times because we do crazy things and near 'bout get in trouble sometimes. But nobody's ever told us why we even have a Halloween. I think it might be part of religion, but if it is Aint Maude hasn't told us about it, and Preacher Houghton's never preached on it, so I don't think it's in the Bible.

What she told us is that Christmas is Jesus' birthday, and that's why we get the brown bags of goodies from Mr. McCubbins. And Easter is when Jesus came back from the grave like I prayed for God to do for Daddy. And that's when we have our Easter egg hunt and get the candy eggs.

But Halloween seems mostly like a time to play tricks on people and get away with it. I always go out with J.T. and Marvin and Tootie and Herbert because I'd be afraid to go by myself because there are a lot of big boys doing bad things to peoples' houses then – so we always do what J.T. likes to do.

One Halloween we took the Wrenns' front-porch-swing down and toted it over to the Pugh's house and put it on their front porch. We didn't let Mama know, or she would've made us take it back. The Wrenns are pretty old and Mr. Wrenn probably had to pay Black George Johnson to take it back over there, which makes me kind of feel bad. I bet Mr. Wrenn has got his own jug of wine to give George Johnson, too, because he's got a yellow-grapevine growing in the dog-lot where Daisy stays. She barks at us every time we go by her pen if we're going up to the Winns' or the Busics' or to see Aint Polly.

Another Halloween some boys a lot older than us took Mr. Mayhew's farm wagon and hauled it up on top of his well house, and it took two men to take it apart so he could use it again. Pug says Mr. Mayhew says he'll beat the pants off the people who did it.

The best trick I know of is when Hersel and Sanford and some other big guys put some fresh cow-dookie in a paper bag and set it on fire and threw it on Mr. Lawhorne's front porch – and he came

out and stomped the fire and got his feet all covered with cow-dookie. And we were hiding down the hill on Mr. Wrenn's place, and saw every single bit of it. And boy! Old Mr. Lawhorne got paid back that time for sure!

The worst Halloween trick we've ever done was to Mr. Pugh, who lives on the hill on the way over to the church. That night all of us push his outhouse down the hill, and now Mrs. Pugh tells everybody how mad she is because Mr. Pugh went out to use the outhouse in the dark, and fell in and he came back to the house tracking it all over her kitchen floor.

But Mama says Mrs. Pugh is probably just trying to scare the guys who did the pushing – and Mr. Pugh probably didn't really step in it. But boy, that would be real funny if he did, and I wouldn't want to have to eat at the table with him any time soon!

Halloween a year ago a couple of bad things happened that don't have anything to do with Halloween tricks at all, and they happened up on Route 29 where the Dick-and-Willy crosses over it. About 6:30 on Halloween morning a carload of people from down in Carolina are driving to work at the cotton mill, and they don't see the train about to cross the road. And they drive smack into the side of the engine, and two people are killed in the car.

And that same night another load of mill people are going home from the late-shift, and it's real dark. And they drive across the track in the same place the other people did, and the train engine runs smack-dab into that car full of people, and one of them is killed just like in the morning.

So now people are scared to drive over the crossing even if the train's not coming because the dead people didn't know the train was coming either. So the D&W Railroad is putting up a light that turns on when the train gets half-a-mile from the crossing – right up past the path to Aint Polly's house.

### A hundred-dollar bill

Lots of nights J.T. tells me a story after we get in bed if he's not mad at me or anything, and sometimes they're scary and I have to snuggle up to go to sleep. And sometimes he tells me a fun story about how we find a hundred-dollar bill up on the highway, and we can do anything we want to with it because Mama doesn't need it at all. That's my favorite story, and I know when he's going to tell it because it starts out the same way every time: "Plyke we're on our way up to Strader's store, and I look down on the railroad track and there's a hundred-dollar bill all rolled up tight with a rubber band around it, and it's sitting right on the track, and not a single soul's around to claim it, and I stick it in my pocket, and we go on up to the store, and we don't tell a single soul. And the next day we hitch a ride into Danville and go to the Ford place, and we buy two little kiddie-cars with motors that work and horns and shiny headlights and everything."

"And I get one of them, J.T., 'cause I'm with you when you find the hundred-dollar bill – so I get one, too, huh?"

"Naw, you don't get part of nothing 'cause I found it, and it's 'finders-keepers-losers-weepers' which you know always wins out – but I might let you drive one sometimes if you help me dig the tunnels."

"What tunnels, J.T.? Where're they going?"

"Just let me keep on telling it and don't interrupt me if you want me to keep on, hear?"

"OK, J.T."

"So plyke we thumb a ride into Danville to the Ford Motor Company on Main Street next to the Farmer's Supply, and we go in and I buy two little cars the size of kiddie-cars. And they've got motors and horns and headlights and brakes so we don't have to slide our feet to stop. And we can blow our horns at horses and people crossing the street."

"And what color are they, J.T.?"



“I said don’t interrupt me! And I drive the red car and you drive the blue car home right down Route 29 past John Alley’s Store, and the new tourist court, and Rudolph Wells’s house. And we can do that ’cause we’ve got motors and lights and all. And they look a whole lot like the Banty Austin Mr. Searcy’s got over on Tin Cup. And we drive over to Pug’s house, and he nearly jumps outta his skin when he sees what I’ve got to drive around in.”

“And he nearly jumps outta his skin when he sees what I’m driving, too, dudn’t he, J.T.?”

“Yeah, but you don’t do nothing yet ’cause I’m the one found the hunnert-dollar bill – so be quiet if you want me to tell the story.”

“OK, J.T.”

“And plyke Pug says, ‘Them are the two purtiest cars I’ve ever seen. I wish I had one, too, and I’d drive round with you.’ And I say, ‘You can drive Billy’s car sometime if you wanna go places with me.’ And he says, ‘Fine and dandy!’ ’cause that’s what Mr. Haynes says when he likes something a whole lot.”

“But you won’t let him drive my red car in the tunnels ’cause the tunnels are just for us. OK, J.T.? And where’re the tunnels going, J.T.?”

“OK. Wait up! I think I’ll make the tunnels go from our house to Herbert’s and to Marvin’s and up to Pug’s and right down town to Danville and over to the Danville Country Club. And we’ll make a little trailer so we can get a load of one-cent bottles and cash them in for gas money. Now! How d’you like that new part about the little trailer?”

“Oh! Yeah! That was real good, J.T.! I liked that new part a whole lot.”

“Well, I’m not through yet, so let me tell it while I’m going good! So we get in our cars one day, and we drive up to Mr. Baker’s, and we buy an RC and a moon pie. And then we drive over behind the Danville Country Club, and we get ’nough bottles to buy some new tires ’cause we wore out our old ones going places lickety-split and slamming on the brakes and all. Now I’m sleepy and that’s all I’m gonna tell for tonight.”

“Aw, naw, J.T.! You can’t stop now! Please! Oh, OK, then...”

You rest up and let me tell you what we'll do next, OK?"

"OK! OK! Tell me."

"So plyke we go up to the Danville Country Club dump, and we get a lot more bottles and turn them in to Mr. Strader, and he gives us four dollars. And we buy both of us a new BB-gun and ten tubes of BB's, and we go hunting down at Red Horse – and we get two crows like George Johnson did..."

"J.T.? Are you awake, J.T.? Are you asleep? Shucks, you've gone to sleep on my story. Well, I'm gonna go to sleep, too, 'cause I'm not gonna tell the story if you're asleep!

"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. Bless Daddy in heaven, help Mama, help the sick, poor, blind and all that need help. And help us find a hunnert-dollar bill. Amen."

## Coo-coo

I guess there's one bird I won't ever shoot – and that's a pigeon! Because I used to have a pet pigeon I found hurt beside the road near Aint Polly's, near the track where J.T. jumped off the train and cut his foot. And the first time I see this old pigeon he can't even move his wing, and he just hops around trying to hide from me. But I run after him and catch him, and I tuck his head under his wing like George Johnson does when he's taking a chicken to the chop-block. And I stick him in my jacket pocket.

And when I get him home he's too hurt to run away, so I put him in a box on the back porch with some paper in it and a little bowl of water and some biscuit crumbs. And I leave him there, and I hope to goodness Chink won't find him and bring him to me – so I put another box on top of him.

And he's still there after supper. But he doesn't eat anything I give him, and I can't tell if he's drunk any water, so I put the box back over him.

And in the morning he's still there, so I get some chicken-feed and spread it out in front of him, and he eats some while I'm watching – and that's a good sign. And he's a heck of a lot of fun to watch eat.

After a few days that pigeon is flying around the back porch and hopping from Mama's washing machine to the icebox and getting doo-doo all over everything that I have to clean off – but he seems OK now. So I open the screen door and wait – and he flies straight out to the pump-house. And I'm really glad he can fly again – but I'm afraid he's going to fly away for good. But he doesn't! He just flies back on the porch! And I slam the door for the night real quick – and I've got me a pet bird!

Of course, next day I'm afraid again, but I let him out anyway because Mama says he's got to have his freedom. And he flies out to the pump-house and over to the grapevines and takes off sailing away over the little barn and over to the hog pen and out of sight –

and I almost start crying because I know he's gone for good.

Then Virginia calls me to get a bucket of water. I'm in the pump-house and the porch door is open. Then that crazy pigeon flies right back in the door and lands on his sleeping box – and he just sits there looking at me with his head cocked sideways. And he's not running away anywhere!

So now I guess I've got a real pet pigeon because he sleeps on the porch every night, and he'll fly off in the morning and go do things he wants to do, and he comes back and stays on our porch the rest of the time. I figure I'd better give him a name better than "old pigeon," so I start thinking how he lets me know when he's back home, because he calls me just like pigeons call each other – he lets out a long "Coo, coo, coo" until I come out to see him. And then he'll fly over and rest somewhere near where I am, and he lets me touch his head.

And then one day he lands on my shoulder and stays there – even when I walk away. And right after that he even flies over and lands on my head and climbs down to my shoulder and stays until I shake him off to go in to supper!

So I think about naming him all night till I fall asleep, and in the morning when I go out to see him he starts to coo-coo at me – so right on the spot I decide his name is "Coo-Coo", because that's how he talks to me. And now when I call out "Coo-Coo" he flies in the screen door, and I feed him some grain or some crumbs or whatever I've got – and he gobbles it down.

Mama laughs when she says it, but she means it – she says I might as well call him Poo-Poo the way he messes up the porch. And I have to clean up old pigeon's mess when somebody fusses too much about stepping in it, but I keep it pretty clean most of the time.

Now, Sanford doesn't seem to like our pets no matter what we find to take care of, and he especially doesn't like Coo-Coo. He chases him with the broom every time he comes out of the back door and Coo-Coo's on the porch. And he yells at him, "Get away from here, you damn messy bird!" And when he cusses at him, Coo-Coo flies off the porch and keeps away from him until I come out of the house. I used to be afraid the cats might try to eat him,

but they haven't bothered him at all – especially since he's always up high on top of the icebox. Nobody minds about Coo-Coo but Sanford.

I guess that pigeon is my pet for over a year – until one day I get home from school, and I run around back to look for him, calling him. And when I get to the back yard I see him lying on the ground, and his head has been wrung off like Mr. Cantrell wrings a chicken's neck. And when I pick him up he's stiff as a board – and I know it wasn't an accident, and the cats didn't get him because they didn't eat him – and I don't have any way to prove who killed Coo-Coo – but I've got my suspicions.

## Egg

One day me and J.T. have to go borrow two eggs for supper because half of our hens are on strike, Mama says. So Lillian sends us to get them from the Rices.

A couple of days later Virginia gives us two eggs to pay them back, but Mama Rice isn't home, so we head back to the house. About halfway up the hill we hear a catbird fussing with another bird over in the fox-grapevines next to the road. Well, any time we hear a bird in a tree, we've got to throw something at him, so I pick up a smooth round rock – and J.T. whispers, "Don't do it!"

"Whatta you mean – that's a catbird!"

"Yeah, well, don't waste a rock! Let's nail 'em with one of these eggs."

Well, that sounds real good! I like that a whole lot! And he hands me an egg, and I start rolling it around in my hand, and it's about as good a fit for throwing as I've ever felt – it's even better than the rotten tomatoes we throw over on the Cantrell's roof when we're getting them up for canning. But then I think some more about wasting an egg on a bird, and what Mama will say.

"I'm not about to do that! Mama'd have a fit!"

"Shhh! Mama'd never know."

"I bet she would!"

"How?"

"You! You'd tell her!"

And I can tell he's trying to con me into it. I've done stuff before, and he's bribed me if I don't do what he wants me to – and I'm not about to be that dumb again.

"OK. Listen! Both of us'll throw one – you go first."

"You're crazy! I wouldn't go first if I had to die!"

"You gotta go first 'cause I'm a better shot – and if you happen to miss, I'll nail him with mine!"

And shucks! He is a better shot than me most of the time even if he's not a better slingshot shooter.

“OK, I’ll go first! But you’ve gotta promise you’ll throw yours! You gotta promise! Say ‘Promise!’”

“Uh ... promise!”

So I look up in the tree for that old catbird, and J.T. points to him in the fork near the top, and now I can see him clear as day. And I draw back and throw that egg hard as I can! But I miss by a mile. So I whisper real quiet not to spook him, “Go ahead! Before he flies away – go ahead!”

And he gets a stupid look on his face, and he whispers kind of slow, “I...changed...my mind.”

“Naw you didn’t! You can’t change your mind! You promised! You promised you’d get him with your egg!”

“I changed my mind. People got a right to change their mind.”

“But you promised you’d throw yours – you promised!”

“Yeah, but I’m not crazy – Mama’d kill me if she found out I wasted an egg.”

Well, I’m so mad I pick up a big clod and throw it at him! But he runs back up to the house and puts his egg in the basket on top of the icebox – and I should have known better...I should have known I’d get in trouble if I believed him!

It doesn’t take ten minutes before I have to pay off when Lillian yells, “J.T., Billy! One of you bring me a bucket of water for supper!” And he looks at me fishy-eyed-like – and I act like I don’t see him.

“It’s your turn, J.T.!”

“I don’t think I want to pump a bucket of water today! So, it’s your turn all day today. Go get it – or I’m gonna tell Mama you threw an egg at a bird when she gets home!”

I’m so mad I don’t know what to do! But I go ahead and get the water for Lillian – which was a big mistake because from then on he acts like I’m his slave! I have to do anything he wants me to – like chase the cow when she runs away because we’re not watching her – and sometimes he even lets her go on purpose, and when I yell, “It’s your turn, darn it!” he just whispers, “I ain’t gotta turn anymore.”

And I have to go get her!

And after a couple of weeks he's done arguing with me – he just says, "Remember the egg" and I go do what he's supposed to be doing, darn it! And before it's time to go back to school, he just says "egg" and I bring in the water and the kerosene and anything else he ought to be doing.

One day Mr. Patterson brings everybody ice cream in a Dixie-cup – the big size and not just a nickel one – and J.T. hogs his down in a minute and looks over at me. I'm saving mine and eating real slow around the edges. But I make a mistake and glance over his way, and he points at my ice cream and says with just his lips, "Egg." And he takes it and eats all my ice cream, and I run down to the barn to cry so Mama won't ask me what's wrong.

And when we're ready to go to bed that evening he says, "It's hot in here." And he's sitting on his side of the bed, and he points at the window on his side and whispers, "Open it!" like some king in a stupid moving-picture show. And I can't stand it! Right now I'm mad as an old wet hen! I really wanted that Dixie cup! And I don't want to be a slave another second!

And I yell out loud, so Mama can even hear me, "I'm not gonna be your slave another second! You can open the window yourself if you want it open! You hear me, dammit?"

And he opens his mouth like he always does like he's going to say "egg." And my stomach starts to hurt I'm so afraid, but I don't open his window!

And he starts toward the kitchen where Mama's canning the tomatoes we picked after dinner – I had to pick most of them – and I yell out, "Go ahead and tell her! I don't care what she does to me! It can't be as bad as you are!"

And he does! I didn't believe he ever would! But he does! He tells Mama I threw the egg at the catbird in the tree!

And Mama calls me into the kitchen, and she's sitting down at the table, and she looks hacked and real tired, and she says, "Billy, come here, Son. Did you really throw an egg at a catbird in a tree and waste it like J.T. says you did?"

And I can't help crying now, "Yes, Mama."

And she says, "Well, Son, that surprises me a good deal – I



didn't expect that of you. So go get me a switch. I've got to teach you a lesson about wasting good food. There're so many people who don't have enough to eat as it is, and you go wasting food like that!"

So I go slow as I can and break off a switch from the spirea bush at the end of the driveway where we always get our switches. And when I get back Mama says, "Son, you know how hard it is for me to make ends meet, and still you wasted a good egg throwing it at a bird. Now, I don't understand why you'd do such a thing – did you really do that, Son?"

And I can't help it! I yell out, "Yes, Mama, I did it when we were taking some eggs back to the Rices and they weren't home and we heard a catbird in a tree and J.T. said, 'Why don't you throw your egg and get that bird?' and I said, 'I wouldn't do that for the world 'cause you'd tell if I did,' and he said he wouldn't tell, and he said he'd throw his if I threw mine, but he didn't, and then he made me do everything he wanted me to do all summer like I was his slave – and I just can't stand it any longer, Mama!"

And I tell Mama almost everything else he made me do all summer, and Mama looks sadder than I've ever seen her look before. And she picks my switch up off the table, and she catches J.T. by his arm, and she whips the very living daylights out of him!

## Tobacco

J.T. is only three years older than me, but one day Uncle George comes by the house and asks him to work in the tobacco fields on his farm this summer – and he asks me, too! So we go over every morning before sun-up while it's still cool and help him to bring in the tobacco crop. J.T. can do all the jobs in tobacco – like picking and stringing and handing it up to the guys in the top of the barn. But I'm not old enough to do some things alone – like watch the fires. And I can't make the mules mind me out in the fields very well, either.

But I'm as good a tobacco-worm-hunter as I am a bird-hunter. I catch those stinging boogers in a couple of tobacco leaves and squish 'em till their guts squirt out. But you don't dare let any get on you because they'll sting the dickens out of you. And I make sure they're dead so they won't sting the pickers because it's worse than a bee sting – but not worse than a wasp. And boy, they're really not as bad as any hornet!

Hornets are the worst things that ever stung me, I'm here to tell you! One day I'm down in front of the Pugh's new house, and I'm showing off a little in front of Jane Blaylock who just moved into one of the new houses they built. And I'm showing her how fast I can climb to the top of a little maple tree, but I'm not looking where I'm going.

So when I reach up through the leaves to catch a limb, I hit a hornet's nest right smack in the middle, and those old buzzers get mad and pop out of their hole after me before I can climb down even a foot. And they whack me on my nose and all over my head and all over my arms and all over my shoulders and any place they can find some skin.

I try to get away from them, but I hurt so much I just let go of the limb and tumble all the way down to the ground, and bang every limb on the way down. I end up sore as a boil from all the stinging

and banging the limbs and landing on the ground, so Mama covers my face and my body with wet baking soda. And Lillian tries to be funny so I won't hurt so bad, and she says Mama ought to smear kerosene all over me, and everybody laughs – except me – I don't feel like laughing at anything!

Uncle George pays us 50 cents a day, and we eat all we want that Aint Maggie and the black women bring us, and everybody works hard except for Uncle George's boy, Bobby, who's lazy. Fifty-cents is a lot of money to me, but the grown men get two dollars and all they can eat, and we work from sun-up to sun-down except when I stay over with J.T. to watch the fires. Then we sleep on a quilt on the ground and feed the fires that have to be kept going all the time after the barns are full.

Working in tobacco is itchy, especially if you don't have a shirt on because the leaves make you sticky, and the tobacco worms sting you, and the sun is always hot unless it storms. Whew! It's a long day until quittin' time! But after a couple of days Uncle George gives me the best job around – he lets me ride the mules to water at dinner-time and supper-time. I like working the mules a lot.

See, mules don't do anything much but pull things, and they don't go anywhere but to the fields and to the creek for water and back to the creek after work and back to the barn at night. And I get to ride one to the creek when the mule-drivers come in for dinner, and one of the little black boys who belongs to Aint Sarah jumps on the other one, and we shoot off across the fields by the apple trees. Sometimes old mule stops and eats an apple, but pretty near every day they're too thirsty, and they won't stop for a wormy apple or anything else till they're on the way back.

There's a real steep bank going down to the creek, and the only thing you've got to hold on to is a rope around old mule's neck. So I grab her mane in one hand and the rope in my other hand, and I dig my heels in her sides – and I've never fallen off a single time. But it's right hard staying on while she bends over to drink, and it almost pulls me over her head every time, but I lean back till my head hits her rump – and I stay on that booger!

And when she's full she doesn't tell me – she just turns around

and races up the bank and goes back to the barn. Old mule is so smart she knows she's supposed to go back to the tobacco barn at dinnertime and back to her barn at night. Nobody warned me about it, but it's pretty dangerous riding her back to the barn at night because she's so hungry for her grain she'll run right under a limb or anything. One time I almost got my head knocked off when she ran me into a low limb of a big black-cherry tree near the barn. But I ducked just before I got it in the head, and I cussed that mule something big just like Uncle George does – but she didn't care because she was home filling her belly.

Most of the day I hand up leaves, and I'm a good worker, Uncle George says, because I don't stop to play. I'm not always going off to take a pee like little Black Billy does. So I pick up three leaves off the pile and hand them to Miss Annie, and she wraps string around the stems and flips them over a stick. And when the stick is full, I take it over to Wallace, and he hands it up to Joshua in the top of the barn, and it stays up there 'til it's dried out – and that's what curing tobacco is all about.

But I can't see why Joshua likes to work up in the top of the barn where it gets so hot. He just drips sweat all the time, and he has to drink a bucket of water or he'll pass out – and it's a long way to fall down. So he's got to climb down real often and switch places for a spell or he'll get sick. I don't think I want to do anything but hand leaves and ride mules and kill tobacco worms and stay up with the fires if I don't have to – and I don't have to right now because I'm the youngest white boy out here.

Watching the fires is the most fun of all. That means staying up all night and taking naps in between stoking the fires in the heating tunnels and telling stories and listening to the older boys talk about girls and drinking and things. One of them splits a pile of wood to stoke the fires with, and me and Little Herman stack it up near the mouth of the heating tunnel so it's handy. And we have to stoke it every half-hour because it's low again by then, and if we keep the fires burning high, we don't get cold either – especially if we roll up in one of Aint Maggie's old quilts.

One night I hear Ernest and Raleigh talking about one of the girls up on Ferry Road. Ernest says she'll kiss you and hug you if

you bring her a candy-bar or some apples or something sweet. But I don't think she does the other things Marvin told us about one time – because if you do that, you have a baby and have to get married.

When we're watching the fires, we bring a jug of water and a bag of apples, and sometimes Aint Maggie brings us a sandwich after dark. But we don't get paid for watching the fires – just the 50 cents a day for boys.

## My best girl

I've had a crush on a couple of girls in school. I liked Sarah McCubbins from church one time, but I like Helen Basic the most now. I guess I started liking girls about two or three years ago, when one day at recess I gave Deanna half my fudge-cicle. Then she looked at me in class after lunch, and I looked back at her as much as I could without Miss Pollock seeing me. And I wrote her a note that said, "I LOVE YOU DO YOU LOVE ME, SIGN YES OR NO." And I got Rudolph Wells, who's my best friend at West End, to give it to her and she sent it back with the YES circled – and that made me like her a whole lot more.

So I gave her the sweet potato I got from Beanie Ward for a pocketful of lead strips from up at the railroad tracks and a nickel I got from picking up bottles on Route 29. Alma had a sweet potato one time, and I used to play hers, and it looks like a sweet potato with holes in it and a place to blow, and it's like a fat flute I can play songs on that people can recognize. Alma says I play by ear – just like I sing harmony with the girls.

So we liked each other, and we sent notes to each other in class, and we talked on the playground until my bus came because she lived near the school and walked home. And when we picked sides we always played on the same side during recess when we had a ball. We lost our kick-ball right when warm weather came last year, and we haven't had any games to play since then except for tag and stoop-tag and hiding and hop-scotch – which is a girl's game, J.T. says – but it's still fun to play because you gotta jump a lot on one foot and be good at pitching your rock.

Before I liked Deanna I liked Grace Gordon one summer in Leaksville when I went to stay for a while with Grandma Robert 'n' Nellie right before the doctor found Deanie for Mama in the cabbage patch. We had the most fun I've ever had with a girl! We played in the yard beside her house – which belonged to the Epis-

copal church where her father was the preacher. And we rode back-to-back in her red wagon down the hill from her house to Uncle Oscar's place. It's a red-dirt road full of gullies like our road was before they put a hard surface on it. And I could pull her back up the hill, too, because I'm strong from pulling J.T. back home a lot.

She and I dug out little roads in the bank next to her house with her little shovel – and there was a little bucket that went with it. And we played cars with some I brought with me from home. After a week I had to come back, but I'll always remember Grace Gordon as long as I live, I'll bet – she was my first girlfriend, and I liked her at Grandma Robert 'n' Nellie's house.

This summer I like Jane Blaylock. She lives in one of the new houses they built catty-corner from us a couple of years ago where I fell and got hurt under my arms and Miss Patterson made me go to school anyway. But I want to like Jane different from how I liked Grace Gordon, but it isn't easy 'cause I don't know how to like a girl that way. So I do some things I won't do anymore – like showing her how fast I can climb a tree when the hornets stung me real bad not long ago.

But it gets worse than that. One day I see her over in her side-yard bouncing a ball up against the house, and I throw a rock at the telephone pole next to her yard, and I run over to get it, and that gets me over there – but I don't know what to do because I like her so much. So I figure I'll surprise her! So I'm standing there looking down at the grass, and all at once I jump up in the air and land on my side – and that's all I can think of to do. And we get to talk some, and after a while she tells me she likes a boy at school named Bobby.

But now Helen Busic is the best girlfriend I've ever had since I never got to see Grace Gordon again. We're the same age down to the month, and I'm just lucky the older guys don't try to take her away from me because girls like older boys, Alma says. So we like each other, and we play together, and I go up to her house across from the Winns' – but we play real quiet because she lives catty-corner from Mr. Lawhorne.

Last winter me and J.T. and Marvin were playing in the igloo we built in the driveway in front of our garage, when Helen came over, and Marvin says, “Why don’t we play doctor-and-nurse and plyke our igloo is an Eskimo hospital.” But a few minutes later Mrs. Basic drops by to see our igloo, too, and she sees us playing doctor and nurse – and she makes Helen come right home.

One day I’m hoeing potatoes down in the garden where the barn used to be, and I hear somebody screaming real loud up the hill, and I look up and the Basics’ house is on fire, and smoke is coming out of the roof and it’s terrible – it’s just like when Tootie burned the barn down. So I run up there fast as I can and help June Gilley and Mr. Smoot carry their settee out of the living room, and some pictures off the walls, and then the smoke gets too bad, and I can’t go back in.

Some older men grab what furniture they can and carry it out. Mrs. Basic goes back in and gets the family Bible and some papers they can’t do without, and then her house just burns all the way down to the ground – and all the time Mr. Basic is out on his insurance route. Nobody can put the fire out because there’s not a single fire station anywhere outside of Danville

I’m real sad when they don’t build their house back because they move to North Danville on the other side of town, and we don’t have a chance to see each other for a long time. But one day I call Helen up from over at Mrs. Mobley’s. I find Mr. Basic’s name in the phone book by myself, and I ask her if I can come see her, and she says I can come next Sunday after church.

So I thumb a ride into town. It’s kind of scary doing it by myself because I don’t know where I am without J.T. So for the first time in my life I’ve got to catch the city bus. But Mama told me last night while I was taking my bath that I’m to catch a North Danville bus and ask the driver to let me know when I get to Wylie Avenue. He does, and I walk straight to her house – because I can see she’s waiting for me in the swing on the front porch. And her house is number 411, and they’ve got the numbers nailed on the front door jamb. We don’t have house numbers or streets with names in Stokesland because everybody knows where everybody lives.



So, we play all day in her side yard, and we go over to a field across from her house where there's some tall grass so we can kiss some. I know she likes me a whole lot, and I like her a whole lot, and I promise I'll come see her again. And she writes me a letter, and I write her a postcard because it's cheaper to mail.

And it seems real far for me to go over to North Danville again, and she doesn't ever get to come back to Stokesland, so we haven't ever seen each other since then – but she's still the best girlfriend I've ever had whether she lives in Stokesland or in Danville!

## Hooky

We have to walk to school this week because last week we were catching the bus from Aint Ella's store (and she really is Mama's Aint). She emptied the bottle-caps from the drink-box out the back door, so we fill our pockets up. And we get to sailing them on the bus, and we throw one too hard and it makes Coleen cry, so Mr. Moore kicks us off the bus, so we've got to walk to school the rest of the week.

The first day we hitchhike and get to school right with the bus. The next day we walk all the way, which takes us about a half-hour because we're busy looking for bottles in the weeds that people who aren't poor throw away. And J.T. says it would be crazy to get to school the same time the bus does if we don't have to.

So every day we tell Miss Giles and Mrs. Huffer we can't get a ride, and it takes all morning to walk – and they don't say anything. So one morning we sneak over to the apartment buildings across the valley from the playground and hide down in the weeds, and we stay there until we see our classes go out to play after lunch. That means we don't get to eat the school lunch, which is our favorite – hamburgers and sweet potatoes with marshmallows. But J.T. says it's worth it to get to play hooky all morning. So he figures it all out, and we bring some ham biscuits, but we almost die from thirst because we didn't bring any water. Then when we see the other kids go in, we slip over and start our classes with them – a little late.

Well, we're having as much fun as you can have playing hooky – until the apartment manager sees us crawling around in the weeds, and he calls Miss Patterson, and she calls us up to her office and fusses at us. And we have to tell Mama we played hooky, and we have to stay in during recess for a week so we don't get to go out and play after lunch.

## The rock quarry

One day J.T. and Marvin call a meeting of the Pea-toy Club because they've got something secret to do, and they say we're going on an adventure like they do every Saturday morning at the Rialto – in “The Perils of Pauline” and “Deep Dragon Mysteries.”

So we get in a line behind J.T., and he leads us like we're in the army, and we march up past June Gilley's and down the road beside Colored-Town and past the sandy place where Mr. Patterson slaughtered Old Bossy – and where we had that boxing match, which makes me feel sick in my stomach. And we end up on the railroad tracks.

Of course, they won't tell us what's going on even when Herbert and Tootie start whining. And they're whispering to each other, so we figure pretty soon they're going to play a big trick of some kind on us. So we just stop walking and sit down on a rail, and they “swear to goodness” and raise their right hands to God that it's a good surprise, and we won't want to know until we get there – or it won't be as good. So we keep sort of quiet for a while – except for Tootie, who's sniffing like he's dying – and it's driving me crazy because that's what J.T. does to aggravate me sometimes. And when J.T. does it, I feel so bad I have to throw something at him to hurt him to make him stop.

Besides, it really isn't any fun walking up the train tracks, It's too hard to step on the ties for very long because they're too close together to step on every one, and they're too far apart to skip one in the middle. So we're really fussing the longer we walk.

And they still won't tell us anything, and I'm ready to turn around and head for home, when all at once we come around a big bend that we've never walked to before. And there's a huge gully like there used to be a river down in the bottom of it – but there isn't now – and the train tracks run right over top of the gully. And J.T. goes up the tracks a little ways ahead and turns around and yells, “THIS IS A RAILROAD TRESTLE LIKE THEY HAD IN

“THE PERILS OF PAULINE’ LAST SUMMER!”

And he announces everything like he did when I had to fight Little Joey last summer. “YOU’RE ALL GONNA WALK ACROSS THIS TRAIN TRESTLE TODAY LIKE ME AND MARVIN DID WHEN WE DISCOVERED IT THIS MORNING AFTER I FINISHED MY PAPER ROUTE!”

Well, things are getting better now, and we run down the tracks until we get to the trestle. I’ve never run down tracks before, and I’m here to tell you it’s easier to run on cross-ties than to walk on them – because you can jump.

But J.T. yells, “HEY, LISTEN NOW! STAY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TRACKS AND DON’T GO NEAR THE EDGE, BECAUSE IT’S A BIG DROP TO THE BOTTOM OF THAT GULLY. SO JUST GO SLOW – AND STAY IN THE MIDDLE – AND I’M TELLING YOU DON’T LOOK DOWN! YOU’LL GET DIZZY AND FALL OFF IF YOU DO, YOU HEAR?”

Well, it sounds to me like he’s trying to scare us, so I don’t pay him any mind till I’m out on the trestle about thirty steps, and I peek over the side – just a teeny peek – and boy! All at once I start feeling like I did when I rode the Ferris wheel at the fair last year and almost threw up. And right now I’m getting dizzy again, and I’ve got a feeling I’m going to fall down to the bottom of that gully. And then Marvin yells out, “Now we said don’t look down or you’ll get dizzy, you hear? If you look down you’ll be sorry, you hear?”

So I look as straight ahead as I can, and I don’t let my eyes look down at all – and I’m doing alright and Tootie and Herbert are pretty OK, too. And they keep yelling what to do and what not to do – and then J.T. yells “YAHOO! LOOK WHERE YOU ARE NOW! YOU’RE IN THE MIDDLE OF A TRAIN TRESTLE!”

And Marvin starts yelling something else, “HEY, J.T., I THINK A TRAIN’S COMIN’! I THINK A TRAIN’S COMIN’! I HEAR A TRAIN AND IT’S JUST COMIN’ ROUND THE BEND! THE TRAIN’S GONNA COME ACROSS THE TRESTLE!”

And I’m right in the middle, and I can’t look up ahead of me, and I can’t look back because I’ll get dizzy – and I can’t tell if they’re playing a trick on us or not. And Herbert’s too scared to move an inch! And Tootie’s whooping and sniffing like he’s stran-

gling to death! And J.T. and Marvin are almost back to the edge of the gully on solid ground, and they're jumping up and down and yelling something, and I just know the train is right behind me! And I wet my overalls all down my legs!

And then Marvin yells to Tootie, "TOOTIE, IT'S OK! STOP CRYING! WE'RE JUST KIDDING! NOTHING'S GONNA HAPPEN TO YOU! NOTHING BAD'S GONNA HAPPEN! WE'RE JUST KIDDING! Now come on, nothing's gonna happen to you! We're just kidding! Now come on, dammit! You're just carrying on like a cry-baby! Stop crying, dammit!"

But we can't tell what Marvin's yelling about, and Tootie can't hear him because he's bawling like he's gonna die! And then J.T. runs back out on the trestle yelling at me, "BILLLY, Y'ALL COME BACK TO LAND! GET OFF THE TRESTLE! YOU HEAR ME! RIGHT NOW! There ain't any train coming! We're just trying to have some fun with you guys, you hear? It's just for fun, you hear?"

And he takes Tootie's hand and pulls him back off the trestle – and me and Herbert crawl back real slow to the ground part. And when I'm back safe, I pick up the biggest rock I can find, and I throw it at J.T., and I hit him hard right in the chest! And I run all the way back home until I almost can't breathe, and I stop crying by the time I get back in our room. And I don't tell Mama for now, but he knows I can if I want to – so he's nicer to me for a while. He knows Mama would be mad as the dickens if she found out what he did, and she wouldn't have near as much confidence in him if she knew I had bad dreams a lot of nights where a train is catching me in the middle of that trestle.

A couple of days after they tricked us on the trestle, we're picking cherries off Mr. MacBride's trees or else the birds will just eat them, and Herbert runs up the hill yelling about a rock-quarry farther up the track past the trestle that his uncle just told him about. His uncle says it's been filled up with water for ten or twenty years, and all the train engines and train tracks and stuff are still down at the bottom where they were when the water started to pour in and they had to get out in a hurry.

So the next day pretty early we start up the track to find that rock quarry! And J.T. and Marvin don't even mention a train com-

ing or anything scary, but if they had done that I would have told Mama on him for sure.

Well, we have to push through a bunch of briars and stuff after we get off the tracks. But it's worth every bit of it, because right in front of us there's a big hole that's filled up with water, and it's even bigger than the field across the road from our house. And you can see all sorts of tracks and old train cars and stuff down deep in the water where it's blue and clear as glass.

So we climb down a path beside the track where they used to load the big rocks, and there are some black boys swimming there, and we don't know what to do because white boys haven't ever played with black boys in Stokesland – except when we had the boxing match – so we don't know if we ought to be swimming with them or not. So T. and Marvin have a conference – and they say it's OK for them to swim here because they're diving in the deep water off the rocks, and we're going to play around the shore where the other white boys are. And that's a lot safer for us, too, because on our side there's a big rock almost sticking out of the water, and you can tell where the deep water starts by that rock. And that's important, J.T. says, because some of us can't swim very good.

So we strip naked and wade in the shallow part, and it feels awful good after we've walked up here in the hot sun. And we play tag and see who can hold his breath the longest like we do at Red Horse. And we dog paddle out to the rock, and we can stand up on it and shallow-dive all the way back to shore.

On the way home J.T. and Marvin hold a meeting of the Pea-toy Club, and we vote not to tell Pug or Jimmy or anybody else older than us about swimming in the same place with black boys because they'd just tease us and say something like, "The black boys peed in the water."

So all summer long we sneak off to the rock quarry a couple of times a week. Sometimes big white boys from the North Carolina side are there, too. But we stay away from them because they want to play double-dare stuff and things that are dangerous if you can't swim too good. Besides, I'm scared to swim anywhere except on the side of the big rock where the water comes up to my titties. But I

can stand on that rock and push off and swim back to shore – which is a little bit farther than it is to swim across Red Horse.

But sometimes I get scared at night when I think about kicking off the rock, because it's all the way under water, and when you stand on it to shallow-dive off, you don't know how deep it is behind the rock if you slipped and tumbled back instead.

We don't know if he's telling the truth or not, but one of the big Carolina boys told us it drops off straight down to the bottom of the quarry. And J.T. says that's probably deeper than the tip-top of our house, and it's maybe as deep as the top of the steeple at Stokesland Baptist Church. So when anybody dares us to do scary things, we say it's time to go home and work in the garden. And we skedaddle out of there, and they don't know the difference – because they usually come from Mayfield or somewhere else in North Carolina.

The black kids don't ever try to get us to do dumb things to hurt us – but they don't play with us, either. And then one day we're headed half way up the tracks past the trestle to go swimming, and we hear a heck of a lot of yelling and crying – and three black boys come running around the bend yelling, “Oh my Lordy, what's gonna 'come of us now? What's gonna 'come of us now? Lordy Jesus!”

And we stop dead in our tracks! And they come up to us and the littlest one is crying so loud I can't understand him, but it sounds like somebody jumped into the quarry and didn't come back up.

And J.T.'s afraid somebody's put them up to playing a trick on us, and he asks the biggest boy what's happening, and he yells out, “Oh, Lordy, what's we gonna do? My big brother, he jump off the high rock! And he don't come back up! And he lost in the deep water! And it gonna kill my mama t' lose her big boy! Oh, Lordy, Oh, Lordy!”

And he keeps on crying and yelling! And they go on running down the track crying and hollering, and I start to cry because what would I do if J.T. jumped in the deep part and didn't come back up? So we turn around and head for home – sort of slow – and then Marvin starts running! And J.T. passes him! And we all light out for

home!

And we don't even think about going to the rock quarry that day. We swear before we get home we won't ever go up there for anything, ever again. Because we know Mama will hear about the black boy drowning, and she would have a fit if she found out we ever went up there, even if we did swim in the shallow part.

J.T. takes Uncle Mose and Aint Caroline their paper, and he runs into Sam'l one day and asks him what happened, and he says his Daddy and some other men went up there that day and tried to get his body to come back up. And they set off a stick of dynamite, which is supposed to make dead people on the bottom of a river come to the top – but the boy didn't come up. So they used fishing poles with turtle hooks, and they fished for him over in the deep part where he jumped in, and somebody hooked his big toe and pulled him out. That was a couple of days after he drowned.



### Jimmy Winn enlists

One Sunday afternoon Jimmy Winn comes running down the hill and tells us to come inside because his father sent him down to tell us about some terrible news on the radio. He tells us the Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor, and that's real bad, but nobody knows where it is, not even Jimmy knows. And his Daddy says we're going to have a war with Japan like the Chinese have been doing for a long time – so now I figure the Japanese are the bad side and the Chinese are the good guys.

Pretty soon after Jimmy tells us about what the Japs did, he turns seventeen, and he decides to join the United States Navy, and Mr. and Mrs. Winn sign for him because he's just seventeen, which is under-age. And he leaves home and goes to boot camp to be trained to fight in the war. Mrs. Winn says he'll be a sailor when he finishes his training.

A couple of months later Jimmy comes home on leave and sneaks up on us on the front porch where we're trying to stay cool, and he yells real loud to scare us like he always does. He's wearing his United States Navy sailor's uniform, and he looks real good in it! He tells us about his training in boot-camp and how he's home on leave. He looks a whole lot bigger in his uniform, and you can tell he shaves now because he's got a beard on his chin like Hersel's got.

Now Uncle Sam asks everybody to help lick the enemy by saving a lot of things our boys need to fight the war with. So people with cars have to put a sticker on their windows to tell how much gas they get each month, but you can't get any new tires, so the gas doesn't do much good by itself.

Even the Pea-toy Club has a meeting, and we join the war-drive and hunt along Route 29 for empty cigarette packs, then we take out the tin foil and save it rolled up in a ball. And we look for things made out of iron and aluminum and copper-wire and old rubber tires in all the dump-piles around.

And Mama gives us her old pots and pans made out of aluminum – which I've never even heard of before. And we take the one-sided records out of our Victrola stand-up phonograph and give them to the drive to help beat the Japs because they sneaked up on us and blew up our ships and killed our boys at Pearl Harbor!

Saturday before we go to the movies me and J.T. go by the Danville Post Office like we saw in the paper, and they give us a big book that's free that shows us the way airplanes look in the sky – called silhouettes, which is a French word. And we study it a whole lot to help our boys, and we learn which airplanes are good that are American and which ones are bad that are Nazis or Japs. And now we're prepared to run over to the Mayhews and call the headquarters and warn them if we see any enemy airplanes flying over Stokesland going to bomb Danville or Roanoke or Lynchburg or some other big city.

Everybody's joined the war effort like President Roosevelt asked us to, and we see a lot about it in the newsreels before the feature show, and we listen to the radio every night. I reckon the war is real bad on people. We pray in church for our men who have gone off to fight, like Mr. Lawhorne did in the first war against the Germans. Sometimes I feel sorry about not liking Mr. Lawhorne since he got hurt fighting the Germans the first time.

After Jimmy joins the Navy and finishes his boot-camp, which is where they teach you all about being a sailor, they put him to work on a ship named *The Borie*, which is a destroyer, Mr. Winn says. *The Borie* stays in the Atlantic Ocean and looks for German subs that are sinking our ships on their way to England and Europe and places like that.

And he writes home a lot because it doesn't cost anything to mail a letter if you're in the service, but you've got to write on the envelope that you're in the Navy. And he says it's always cold, but he can keep warm most of the time in his long-johns and his pea coat, which he let me wear that night he came to see us. And he says he's glad to be where the enemy is no matter how cold it gets.

One night when we're finishing supper, Mr. and Mrs. Winn walk down to see us, and Mr. Winn isn't laughing and telling jokes like he always does when he sits down. His face is red, and Mrs. Winn's face is red, and her eyes look peaked. And Mr. Winn tells us that a few days ago Jimmy's ship was looking for German submarines, and there was a big storm all over. Then they found one and they shot some bombs at it that made it come up to the top of the water. But the Nazis started shooting at *The Borie*, and Jimmy's captain told the sailor guiding the ship to run smack into the side of the submarine. And *The Borie* crashed into it, which made it start to sink.

And Mr. Winn says when *The Borie* and the Nazi submarine crashed into each other, Jimmy and some other sailors were bumped overboard, and the water was really cold, and the Captain commanded them to put a rescue boat in the water to save Jimmy and the others – and they pulled them up out of the water.

Then the captain of *The Borie* carried Jimmy up the ladder on the side of the ship by himself and laid him down on the deck with the other men they'd saved. Well, Jimmy was all covered up and was mostly alright until some really high waves came up over top of the ship and washed all the hurt sailors off the deck – and Jimmy was one of them. And he fell in the water and they didn't ever see him again, and he was only seventeen years old when he died.

I don't think I'll ever be as sad as when Mr. Winn tells us that, and everybody is crying, and I have to get up and go outside and cry by myself – because Jimmy won't ever come running down the hill to our house again.

## My uncles

Ever since they built our house, when somebody comes to see us, the neighbors tell them we live in the yellow house on the hill. But right after Daddy died the yellow paint started falling off, and our house doesn't look real good, Mama says. So our six uncles on Mama's side come to stay with us for a week to paint our house all over.

But they don't use yellow paint this time because white paint is cheaper. So now people won't know which white house we live in. All the houses in Stokesland are white except the top half of the Wrenn's house, which is green shingles and the top half of Tom Murphy's house which is brown shingles.

Mama's brothers are real funny, and when they tell jokes Mama laughs more than she usually does. And they kid each other, and nobody fusses or hits each other like me and J.T. do – and they're brothers just like we are. They play tricks on each other and everybody laughs, and it's funny to us too, except sometimes I don't understand why they're laughing so hard.

Like when the girls get supper ready, and me and J.T. catch three big chickens that have stopped laying, and Uncle Morris chops their heads off so Mama won't have to. And the other uncles pick the feathers off and take their guts out, and the girls cut them up, and Mama fries them like Grandma Robert 'n' Nellie does.

But soon as Lillian puts the big platters of chicken on the table, and all the uncles are waiting for Mama to sit down, Uncle Lloyd and Uncle Robert, who's the youngest, run around the table and pick up some chicken breasts and lick them and put them back – so then they get to eat them because nobody wants to eat chicken parts after they've been licked on. And Uncle Oscar, who's a Baptist preacher sometimes, licks a couple of ears of boiled corn – so he gets first pick on the corn.

After supper the uncles go sit on the front porch where it's still daylight, and Uncle Robert plays "Annie-Over" with us where half

of us get on one side of the house and throw the ball over the roof, and somebody catches it and throws it back. That's a lot of fun, even though the uncles are the only ones who can throw it all the way over without hitting the roof.

And they start calling Uncle Robert the baby of the family, and he pulls off some chinaberry balls which are still green and hard as marbles and throws them at his brothers – and all us young'uns get some, too, and we have a real battle. But the old uncles don't play because they're too tired, and Uncle Robert says they're just getting old – which is true because Uncle John is over 40.

### Sister trio

Before Daddy died and Alma was living at home we used to sing on the front porch in the summer. We all know “You Are My Sunshine” and “Beautiful, Beautiful Brown Eyes” and “The Great Speckled Bird Is The Bible.” And Alma learns them from Bea Burnette, who is her best friend and whose brother Voss sings in a country band.

Mama says the girls are as good as the people on the radio, and she bets they could be a trio on the radio, too. I sing along with them a lot of times, and then one day I start singing the harmony like Alma does – which I haven’t done before – and she hears it. She starts yelling, “Billy, I didn’t know you could sing harmony – did y’all hear that? Billy’s singing the harmony!” And she wants us to sing something else, and I can sing the harmony on that, too. And now I can sing harmony on any song I want to, and I don’t even know how I do it.

Alma is the oldest girl in the family, and she got into fusses with Daddy all the time over boys because he was afraid she would get to be wild like some of the girls in Schoolfield. So he wouldn’t let her out of the house after she got home from school. But she would sneak out the back door, and since Daddy was in bed, he couldn’t do anything except whip her when she got home.

For a long time she had a crush on Voss Burnette, and she would sneak off to meet him after school, but Daddy wouldn’t stand for that because Voss rides a motorcycle. Daddy said he’s too wild, and he was afraid she would take a ride on it and get hurt. But Alma was uppity with Daddy, and she would yell back at him, “Daddy, a motorcycle isn’t that dangerous if you know how to ride it! And Voss knows how – and he’s a careful driver!”

Then, a couple of days after they have that argument, Voss is driving his car home from down in Danville, and he’s going too fast. He tries to make a sharp turn across the railroad tracks in front

of the Danville Country Club. He's racing a buddy of his and the buddy is too close to him and when Voss turns, they hook bumpers and his car flips over, and he dies in the wreck. And about that time I'm coming back from Millner's Store, and I see a big crowd at the Burnette's – but I don't find out why until I get home.

Then not long after Voss dies Alma picks up and leaves home and goes to live with Uncle Leonard and Aint Polly. She gets a job and gives Aint Polly board money. And Mama says she's doing wrong because she could be helping out at home with the money.

But she won't come home, and Mama can't make her because she's already graduated from high school. Then she decides she wants to live by herself, so she moves over to Tin Cup Alley, and I take her the mail when any comes. She pays me a nickel for every letter, and that's about the best money I've ever made.

After Alma leaves, Lillian and Virginia have to do the housework because Mama's still at the mill, and when she comes home she's tired but works until bedtime doing washing and stuff. Still, the girls say it's not fair for them to have to do housework and go to school, too. So when Virginia reads about a school she can go to for learning how to fix radios for the US Army to use in the war, she figures she would be helping our boys fight the Nazis and the Japs. And since Lillian is just a year behind her, she says she wants to learn to fix radios for the Army, too. So they quit school before Virginia graduates, which is this May, and Mama's real sad. And they go to a school up in Maryland where you learn about things to help out in the war, like working on radios.

## Courting

After Christmas you have New Years' Eve, and we get to stay up until 1943 comes in. We listen on Daddy's radio to the party they're having in New York City. The radioman tells us all about the start of the new year, and he talks to some of our servicemen, and it makes me proud of every single one he talks to.

And right after midnight Mama gets real quiet, and then she says, "It's strange that we're in Stokesland, and it's 1943, and everything is different here at home, and there're just my three babies here with me now."

One Saturday after New Year's day Mama asks Aint Caroline from across the gulley to look after us, and she takes the Trailways bus to Leaksville to see Grandpa and Grandma Robert 'n' Nellie and everybody who lives down there. A big man gets on the bus and sits down next to her, and they start talking, and she notices he's wearing a real nice suit. She finds out he's not married, and he likes talking to Mama right off the bat. So he asks her if he can write her a letter some time. And Mama says yes, he can. And she gives him our address, which is Route 1, Box 74, Danville, Virginia – even if we live in Stokesland. And the man writes her, and she writes him back, and they write each other a lot of letters. And after a while he asks Mama if he can come to call on her some Sunday, and she writes him back – yes, he can.

So one Sunday soon after that me and Deanie and J.T. are swinging on the front porch waiting for him after church. And Mama is inside real nervous because she's never been around any man but Daddy – not even to talk to much. And we've been looking up at the highway for over an hour, and all at once J.T. yells, "There's a man getting off the Trailways bus at the crossing!" There's a man we don't know dressed in a dark suit walking down the hill. First he looks around and then he turns and walks right up the hill to our house. He sees us watching him, and he comes right up our front walk, and he steps up on the porch and nods to us and



smiles.

Then he knocks on the screen door, and Mama comes out and says, “Hello!” They shake hands, and Mama introduces him to us as Mr. Love. He talks to us a little while, and then Mama asks him if he’d like a glass of cold water, and he says he certainly would. So Mama and him go in the parlor to sit and visit for a while. J.T. whispers that’s how people act when they like each other but they’re not married.

A long time ago, our parlor was Daddy’s sick-room, but now it’s got all the nice furniture back in it that Daddy bought Mama when they built our house. Mama told us that Daddy bought her everything that’s pretty because she had to live in an old log cabin when they got married because he was managing the farm for Mr. Swann – and he couldn’t afford better. And then he started his own car business. He had the first service station there ever was on Route 29 when he got sick. But Mama says he was a good businessman, and he would bring home as much as \$100 some nights, and he’d hide it in his shoe in the middle of the floor. He was a good provider for us until he worked himself to death.

So Mama and Mr. Love like each other, and he comes to see her as often as he can – which J.T. says is “courting” – but I don’t think that’s right to say about Mama!

When he asks Mama to marry him, she says, “I would like that very much if the children would like it.” Well, we don’t mind! Me and J.T. are happy to have a new daddy who can take care of Mama and give us a whole lot of good things. So in February Preacher Houghton marries them in the Stokesland Baptist Church, and everybody who wants to come comes. It’s nice because we get about as many good things to eat as we got when Daddy died. They go on a honeymoon by train way down south in New Orleans, Louisiana, which is farther away than Mama has ever been in her life.

## Cousins

Uncle Morris and Aint Trudy take us home with them after Mama's wedding so we can play with Doug and Edwin and Teddy. I think they are the only boy-cousins our age on Mama's side.

Teddy's real name is Theodore after the President Roosevelt who came before the one we've got now. Aint Trudy used to dress him in little girl's clothes when he was little. He had long yellow hair that was curly, and Doug and Edwin used to call him "Faye Hill" – and he would cry every time. They're mean to him like J.T. is to me, but they don't beat-up on him as much – but they hit him to make him stop it when he's crying too loud.

When we see each other, we've got a whole lot of things we like to play – and the best one is where we sit on their side porch and pick cars that come by in front of their house. And we do the same thing in our swing when they come see us – but they don't have a swing. You pick a favorite car to look for that's passing in front of the house. J.T. and Doug pick the Fords and Chevys because they're older and have first-pickings. And I'm the third picker, so I have to settle for Plymouths – but not many people drive Plymouths, Doug says. And Teddy doesn't want to play, so he sits on the edge of the porch and eats boogers when we're not looking.

Sometimes it takes a half-hour for a single car to come by, and J.T. teases Doug 'cause they don't have as many cars ride in front of their house as we do up on Highway 29. But Doug wins anyway, and it's not much fun because he doesn't see but three Fords, and J.T. sees two Chevys, and I don't see a single Plymouth, and Teddy cries and runs in the house when we quit.

Edwin can play the piano now because he's taking lessons, and he's teaching me to play a song about an Indian who sings love songs to his squaw, and I make a lot of mistakes playing it, but he doesn't make any.

Teddy is the baby of the family, and he cries a lot – even for a

ten-year-old. He's always getting blamed for everything, so Uncle Morris whips him, which makes him cry even more – and sometimes he whips him if he cries.

I'm glad Uncle Morris is not my Daddy because he would've spanked me royal for what happened when I rode his saddle horse last Tuesday. Mama told us about his horses a long time ago, and she said he's had a saddle-horse ever since she can remember, and he keeps him in a fenced-in place in the woods out behind their house.

I'm out there watching him one day, and he asks me if I know how to ride, and I tell him I do because I rode Uncle George's mules to water all that summer when I was little. So he puts a saddle and other stuff on his fancy horse and helps me get on top, and then he walks away and starts working at the barn. And I look around to see where I want to go, but I'm in the middle of a bunch of saplings, and I can't see anywhere to go.

But I figure trees won't hurt anything because this saddle-horse will just take me out of there because he's smarter than a dumb mule, and Uncle George's old mule ran in and out of trees every time we went to the creek – and he never minded them at all. So I take hold of the reins, and I'm going to let him trot off somewhere he's used to going to, and I give him a “cluck-cluck” like Uncle Morris does – but that dang riding-horse doesn't take the first step.

So I'm sitting like I do on old mule, and I give him a couple more ‘clucks’ a lot louder – which always makes old mule head for the creek – but old fancy-horse doesn't take a step. Right then Uncle Morris looks up and sees us still standing there, and he yells, “Go on, Billy, give him a kick in the ribs! Make him gid-dap now! Come on! Gid-dap horse! Dammit!”

Well, heck! All I know about riding is old mule will head for water and take me with him – I don't know squat about how to make a fancy horse move. And I'm afraid to kick him in the ribs because he might buck me off like a horse did Smiley Burnett one time.

So Uncle Morris hollers out, “Kick him again!” And he's getting upset, I can tell! And I reckon I better – so I kick old horse real hard in his ribs! And man! I'll tell you! Old horse takes off before I know what's happening, and he jerks the reins out of my hand, and

he runs head-first smack into a big sapling – and he falls down on his knees! And he can't get up, and I can't get off because my feet are caught in the stirrups!

Right then Uncle Morris looks over and sees what's happening, and he starts yelling more cuss words than I've ever heard before anywhere. And he runs over and pulls me off the ground and grabs the halter and leads that horse away from the saplings like you would a baby girl! And he's cussing and fussing all the way to the barn, "Dammit! He said he could ride a damn horse! Dammit, he don't know piss-in-a-boot about riding a good horse – he could've knocked you crazy running you into a tree like that!"

But, heck, I can't help it if he's not as easy to ride as Uncle George's old mule is – and I'd rather ride that mule any time – to tell the truth! I'm not going to ever ride a fancy saddle-horse again no matter if somebody begs me!

## Jinx

When Mama and Mr. Love get home, Uncle Morris takes us to our new house at 510 North Charles Street in Greensboro because we've got to live where Mr. Love works, so Mama rents our house in Stokesland to some people who work in the mill.

I'm so glad to see Mama I almost cry, and they've brought sweet old white dog Jinx – who's half Eskimo Spitz – from Stokesland to live with us. And when that old dog comes running up to me and jumps up in my arms and licks my face, I just bawl and bawl. I hope it doesn't hurt Mama's feelings because it looks like I'm happier to see him than her and Mr. Love.

Mr. Love isn't used to having children around, Mama told us before she went on her honeymoon, and we sure aren't used to having a step-father around, and some real weird things start happening real soon. Like the first time I want something to eat right before I go to sleep – and he's already told us how he wants things around the house – and he doesn't want any eating at bedtime – he says if we eat a good supper, that's a-plenty.

But one night pretty soon Mama and him are upstairs in the bathroom, and I figure they'll never hear me, so I sneak downstairs and get a jelly biscuit. But he hears me in the kitchen and yells down, "Billy, what're you doing downstairs?"

And I'm sort of scared of him, so I make up something because I don't know what else to do, "I'm getting a drink of water."

And he says, "Well, why didn't you get it up here from the bathroom?"

And I know I'm in trouble already, and I think real quick – and I say, "Uh, 'cause y'all were in the bathroom."

And he says, "OK."

And I figure out for the first time in my life that I can think faster than some other people can sometimes.

Now everything is going pretty good with Mr. Love and us, and it's good living close enough to town to walk in and go to the mov-

ies, which Mr. Love gives us money to do on Saturdays. And he even gives us some extra, so I usually get a thick strawberry milkshake at the Abner Dairy Store. It's so full of ice cream we have to eat the first half with a spoon at the store, and then finish it with a straw walking on up to the movie.

Greensboro's got a lot of things better than Danville, but J.T.'s homesick something awful for his friends in school, and I don't know what to do about that. He keeps saying he's going to run away and go live in Stokesland – and that makes me homesick, too. But I can't leave Mama and Deanie – and Jinx.

We're not in Greensboro a month before Jinx gets lost and doesn't come home one night, but I'm not too worried because he used to stay out all night long in Stokesland to hunt. So the next day we go looking for him, and darn-dammit! After we look all around we go up an alley a couple of blocks from our new house, and we see him lying all still on the ground. And he doesn't jump up and come running when I call him – so I run over and pick him up – and he's stiff as a board!

And that's the saddest I've ever felt since Daddy died, and that was almost five years ago! Things this bad never happened in Stokesland!

I don't know what to do, so I pick him up and carry him home in my arms. He's cold and stiff, and I lay him on the back steps and go in and tell Mama Jinx is dead. And Mr. Love is at work so I can cry all I want to – so I cry in Mama's lap after I tell her.

We figure he was hit by a car or something – or maybe a neighbor who doesn't like dogs poisoned him. J.T. says Mr. Love probably poisoned him, because J.T.'s gotten so he doesn't like him because he's strict and makes us mind. Mama's home all day now, and we have to mind her, too, though we've always been able to take care of ourselves and do what we want to do.

So we bury the old dog in our new back yard. And I want to do it back home in Stokesland where all my cats are buried, but Mama says it's better to have him here in our back yard where I can go visit him when I want to – and that makes me feel a lot better.

Finding Jinx dead is one of the saddest days of my life – but not

Bill Martin

nearly like when Jimmy Winn died, and even that wasn't as sad as when my Daddy died a long time ago – but I remember everything about it.

### Then there were three

J.T. and Mr. Love don't get along at all because J.T. argues with him. I wouldn't do that, but J.T.'s older, and it makes Mr. Love upset, and it makes Mama sad like she was when my real Daddy kept getting worse. I can see why J.T. argues because he's older, and he's not used to minding anybody like Mr. Love. And besides, he didn't want to leave Danville and all his school friends and Alma and them in the first place. Mr. Love is right strict about where we go and when we come home – a lot more than Mama ever was – and he says, “Greensboro's not Stokesland, and it's my responsibility to take care of you. There are people here who can cause you trouble in the city. And that's why you've got to do what I say when there's any question about it.” And Mama says we've got to do like he says – but J.T. doesn't like it one bit.

Three weekends ago he caught a bus to Danville and Mr. Love told him to be back by dark on Sunday – and to catch a Greyhound bus if he couldn't thumb a ride and he'd pay for the ticket. But J.T. took it on himself to do just what he wanted to do and didn't come home Sunday! And he couldn't call us because we don't have a phone.

So early the next morning J.T. caught the bus from Stokesland and came home to Greensboro and told Mama he had missed the bus. But Mr. Love was really upset, and he said he didn't believe J.T. missed the bus by accident, and he got so mad he yelled and cussed about how J.T. doesn't want to be good – he wants to be disobedient! So Monday after work when Mr. Love gets home, he tells J.T. he has got to mind or go back to Danville to live.

So the next day J.T. stuffs all his things in one of Mama's old striped pillowcases and leaves home and tries to thumb back to Danville. And I am crying so hard that I run after him and beg him to come home. He did come back for a few days but then left again and went to live with Uncle George and Aint Maggie and Bobby our cousin who's an only child. And he's got to help out on the



farm and do work Bobby won't have to do now, which is going to make J.T. pretty unhappy. Mr. Love says that's just how it goes when you don't mind.

J.T. just turned 15 three months ago. He can't live with us anymore, and I don't know what to do. Everybody's gone but Deanie and me and Mama, and sometimes I get so upset I cry by myself at night. Mama's sad too, and she says now she's lost him like she lost all her other children who ran away. And she's crying, and she says she really doesn't want to go back to Stokesland and work in the mill – she just can't do that because J.T. and the rest acted up when they wanted to. And she couldn't control them any more than she could depend on them to help her – and she gets real sad when she talks about it.

Two months after we get to Greensboro, we move to a bigger house on the other side of town at 221 North Spring Street with a real big back yard and lots of trees and squirrels and rabbits. And some people have their own chickens, and one family even has a cow, but Mr. Love says he doesn't want chickens when I ask him if we can have some. But I like our new house better because it seems a lot more like Stokesland.

J.T. and Sanford come to visit us sometimes. They thumb a ride and it doesn't cost them anything. But one night Mr. Love gets upset when they are here too long, and he's yelling at Mama, and he says, "I don't want them around here for more than a weekend. And I don't want that either if they cause fussing and disagreements between us. They've got homes of their own choosing, and we have ours – and that's the way it's got to be!"

Mama is always real sad after they have a fuss, but she doesn't ever fuss back – she just listens and gets sad after it's over. I feel sad a whole lot because I miss my brother a whole lot – even if he is mean to me a lot of the time.

### **Charles B. Aycock Elementary**

My new school is Charles B. Aycock Elementary School, and it's closer to our new house, so I can walk there. I'll be able to stay after school and shoot marbles and play baseball with real balls and real gloves and a real bat because they're free for us to use. I'm finding new friends like Mama said I would, but they're not as good as Marvin and Tootie and Herbert – nobody will ever be that good friends to me.

Two weeks ago Charles B. Aycock had a tournament for all the boys who shoot marbles in the fifth and sixth grades – which is what I'm in – the sixth. I'm pretty sure I'll win easy, like I beat all the guys back home. I even beat them left-handed a lot of times. But when the tournament comes and the teacher gets us out on the ball field, which is real smooth and hard, I find out they play a new kind of marbles I haven't ever seen before.

I'm used to playing span-marbles where you dig holes in the ground and try to see who can get a marble in each hole without taking as many shots as anybody else. Another way is you draw a circle with a stick or the toe of your shoe, and everybody puts in five or six marbles, and you take turns shooting, and you get to keep all the marbles you knock out of the ring. And you can kill anybody else's shooter and keep it, too, even if it's his best marble. But usually we just trade it back to him for two or three regular ones. You can keep it if you want to, but J.T. always makes me let him buy it back for two regular marbles.

Well, they've got a new game here they call marbles – but it's not marbles! I don't even understand how you're supposed to play it – and I don't win a single game in the whole match. I sure don't like to play that way, but the teacher doesn't know what I'm talking about when I talk about playing it the right way. Nobody wants to play keepers! They just want to play the new way – so I haven't played marbles but once since we moved here.

Well, that's OK because it's not any fun unless I'm playing with

Marvin and Tootie and Herbert – I sure do miss Stokesland a lot – and I really miss old Chink and my old Jinx who’s up in heaven – but Mama told me, “Billy, dogs and cats don’t go to heaven, but if they did Jinx would be there.”

There’s a nice old lady Mama says must be sixty years old who lives across the street, and her name is Mrs. Patterson – just like Mr. Patterson in Stokesland who used to be so good to Deanie and us – but she tells everybody to call her Miss Pat. She likes to read a lot, and she talks all the time about books and people in the books, but I don’t know what she’s talking about because I’ve never read anything about Tom Sawyer or Sir Galahad or other guys who used to be alive. I guess she doesn’t have much to do – being so old – so she reads on her front porch in good weather. She’s got a little shaggy dog that sleeps on her lap while she’s swinging. I got Jinx in the swing one day back in Stokesland, but he didn’t like it – and when he jumped down he threw up on the porch.

Miss Pat gets me to go to the store for her real often, and she gives me a nickel or a dime depending on what I have to do. And when I’m real lucky she gets me to run up to the drugstore on Spring Street and get her a milk shake – and she buys me one, too. Of course, they don’t hold a candle to the ones we’d get walking into town up Summit Avenue when me and J.T. were together.

The week after J.T. leaves home I ask Mama if I should call Mr. Love “Daddy,” and she says that would be fine if that’s what I want to do. And that’s what I want because he’s the best Daddy I’ve ever had – because my real Daddy was always sick, and he’s been dead most of my life. And I feel OK about calling him Daddy now that J.T.’s gone. I don’t know what J.T. would have done if he’d heard me call him that the first time – I probably wouldn’t be here to tell about it.

And the first time Deanie hears me do it, she says, “He’s my Daddy, too! I want to call him Daddy, too!” So I tell her it’s OK if she makes him her Daddy – and I was thinking in bed the other night that it’s easier for her because he’s the only Daddy she’s ever had.

My best friend at Charles B. Aycock is Dickie Neal, who's shorter than I am, which is OK because I'm shorter than most guys I know who are 12, and he likes to play marbles as much as I do. But we don't play for keeps because I don't know how to play the new way very well, and he doesn't know my way at all – so we give them back when we quit and go home.

We eat lunch together every day, and we're both in Mrs. Green's room, and we're really lucky she gave us seats together my first day so we can be friends, because I miss the guys in Stokesland so much. Dickie's father moves a lot, and he misses his old friends, too. I think I'll like Dickie as much as I like Herbert and Marvin and Tootie after a while – and maybe I do already because we don't ever argue or have a fight over things.

About a week ago right after recess, Miss Green gets out her Victrola, which sits on top of the table instead of having legs like ours in Stokesland did. And she opens up a real thin box and slides out some big records that you play on both sides. And she makes us put our heads down on our desks and listen with our eyes closed, and she plays us some music that's different from anything we ever heard on Daddy's radio – or on our upright phonograph player.

She says we're listening to classical music called "The Unfinished Symphony" by a man named Schubert who died before he could get it finished. Well, boy! After she finishes I think hearing this kind of music is the best thing that's happened since we moved to Greensboro. I like it better than any music I've ever heard – even better than when me and Virginia and Alma and Lillian are harmonizing – or in a Gene Autry movie when he's singing and playing his guitar – and I really like Gene Autry!

Miss Green tells us about Schubert, who wrote lots of other songs, but this symphony is what he's famous for, and it's really sad he died so soon – but shucks, I couldn't even tell he hadn't finished it.

## Snakes

One Sunday after church Daddy takes us on the Greyhound bus about twenty miles up toward Danville to visit some new friends they met who drive down to our church on Sunday. We get there in a half-hour when it's time for dinner, and they give us a sandwich – which doesn't really fill me up – but at least my stomach stops growling like it did on the bus. And the grown-ups go out on the front porch where you can see the cars buzzing by on Route 29 – and they get to talking about grown-up things.

Me and Deanie get bored as the dickens because there's not a single thing for us to do that's fun, so Mama tells us to go out and look for four-leaf clovers – which we like to do. One time I found a five-leaf clover when we were up at Uncle Oscar's house when he was a government guard at a gunpowder plant near Roanoke. And he wore a uniform and had a gun around his waist like a cowboy does, but it didn't hang as low as Charles Starret's does.

But they don't have very good clovers to hunt in here because the yard is all burned up. Daddy is watching us getting bored, and he tells us to go down to the mill-pond back of the house and look around for bird's nests if we want to. So we walk on down, which isn't very far, but the weeds are right high, and I have to carry Deanie piggyback. And right on the edge of the pond there's a row-boat somebody has been using because the oars are still in it. So I figure we'll take a little ride even if I don't know much about rowing a boat – except for what I saw Charles Starret do in a movie when he was going down a flooded river. So I put her in the front seat, and I crawl to the back so I can reach the oars – and the boat is rocking a lot, but I'm OK.

Well, shucks! It's not that hard to do. I mess with the oars a little, and I get us moving in a big circle, and pretty soon we're going straight! I'm not-half bad at this rowing business. Pretty soon we're out in the middle of the pond, and Deanie's holding on tight like she's a statue. And there are some minnows swimming up to the

top of the water that are bigger than the ones me and J.T. ate that time down at Red Horse and got sick.

Now all I need is a fishing line and some worms – so I start rowing back to get some, but I’m not getting there very fast – and we’re almost tipping over hurrying, and we’re going in circles again. So I give up and we just sit there and watch the minnows come up to the boat. And there are some huge black birds in the top of a dead tree at the end of the pond that George Johnson would give his right leg to get a shot at. And I look up to see if Deanie’s OK on the front seat, and when I glance that way there’s something moving around under her seat – it’s swaying sideways, and it’s got a little black head and a long gray body, which is sure enough a huge snake.

Of course, snakes don’t worry me much when I’m out in the woods. You just throw a rock and they run in the bushes – but now I’m in a boat and Deanie’s sitting on top of that darn snake! So I whisper real quiet, “Deanie, honey, listen to me. Just listen! Just lift up your feet – and put your feet on your seat – and sit sideways – and sit where you are – and don’t say anything at all – and don’t ask me why – and whatever I do, you just sit real still!” So she climbs on top of the seat and starts crying because she knows something’s wrong, and I pick up an oar and slide up front, and I stab at that snake under the seat! He strikes at the oar coming toward him and I stab again! He tries to run away, but he doesn’t have a single place to run to – so he coils up to strike at me again! Then I punch him up side of his head with a good whack! And I get him good! And he stops everything and stays still.

And I row back to shore fast as I can – which is pretty slow because I still don’t know how to row real good, so we’re still going around in circles. Well, finally we make it back, and I get Deanie out of the boat, and I take my oar and beat that snake in the head until he’s not moving, anywhere! And I lift him out of the boat on the end of my oar and dump him on the grass, and he’s still not moving. So I drape him over the oar and carry him up to the house and walk around the side of the porch and somebody screams out, “That boy’s got a snake!” And I show him to everybody and tell them where I found him, and when Mama hears that, she faints right where she’s sitting – she’s that scared of snakes! Of course, I

didn't know Mama would be so scared, but she said something could have happened to Deanie.

And then when she's feeling better she tells us a real funny story which wasn't funny back then when Mama and my real Daddy were living in the log cabin on the farm he managed when they got married. My real Daddy always had a six-shooter under his pillow for protection from robbers, and he showed Mama how to use it. Well, one day she goes out in her garden to work the corn and tomatoes, and she sees a little green snake, which isn't dangerous, but she's always been afraid of any snake. So she runs in the house and gets Daddy's pistol from under his pillow and comes back and aims at the snake and closes her eyes and pulls the trigger until it's empty. But when she opens her eyes that snake has slid away in the bushes, and she didn't hit him even once!

## Young warrior

One Sunday I'm over at Charles B. Aycock hanging around to try playing marbles with Dickie again, and a bunch of men are out on the playground marching like soldiers, and I go over and watch. And when they take a break for water I ask them what they're doing, and a nice man tells me they're members of the North Carolina State Guard, and they're training to defend North Carolina and the whole United States from Hitler and Tojo if they try to invade us.

So I watch for a long time since Dickie doesn't show up, and I really like to watch them! I'd like to learn to march and be able to defend my country, too. So when they finish I ask if I can be in the State Guard, and a man says I'm not old enough. And I ask if I can learn to march with them anyway, and a man who's a sergeant from the First World War says I can if I want to take it seriously, but I'll have to come every Sunday to drill-practice. And so I go there every Sunday after dinner.

I've learned how to do the same things they do. I can turn a "Column right!" and do a "Left face!" and "Right face!" and "About face!" And I know how to get back in step because you just skip the next step. And you've got to stop on "Platoon, halt!" or the guys will crash into you. And when he yells "At ease!" we put our hands behind our backs and spread our feet farther apart and stand there looking straight ahead until he lets us go by yelling "Dismissed!"

This is the best thing I've ever found to help win the war, and I'm glad they let me learn how to march with them. Of course, I've always tried to find iron and copper things and take them to the scrap drives. And Mrs. Green's room buys more War Stamps than any other room, which we should do since we're the oldest class in school. But, I tell you, being able to march and get ready to go to war if I have to makes me feel better about Jimmy dying in the ocean when he was just five years older than I am – so I'm going to keep coming and practice until I'm old enough to join-up.



Daddy's real good to Mama and us, and he brings us presents sometimes when it's not anybody's birthday or anything. The first week we're on Green Street he brings me a bow and arrow set from Woolworth's that's fastened on a piece of cardboard that opens up into a bull's-eye-target. And he thinks I can handle it OK because there's room in the back yard to practice, where there wasn't over on South Charles Street.

Now this is a real hunting set, and the arrows have got sharp metal tips like a real bullet – and real feathers on the back. And the bow is strong enough that I can shoot from our back porch to the garage – which is about as far as it was from our back door in Stokesland to the chicken house that used to be my real Daddy's room. The first day I set my target up against the garage door, and I shoot and miss, the arrow plows into the door and the shaft splits in two – so now I pin the bulls-eye on the clothes line so if I miss I won't break anything.

Back in Stokesland I made my own bows out of a hickory shoot and my arrows out of dried weed stems, and they wouldn't shoot but once before they broke up – and sometimes not even that. And I never had feathers or points on them, and they were just for fun to plyke Indians with. But these arrows are real, and you could kill things with them, and I've been doing my bird hunting with them because our neighbors are against BB-guns in town.

One day I'm practicing long-distance shots off the back porch to the clothesline, and a hen from next door is scratching in the dirt looking for grubs and things. She's the first moving target I've seen since I got my set, and I know I couldn't hit that chicken in a month-of-Sundays. So I draw back far as I can and aim right at that white Leghorn's belly, and I let go! And that arrow flies like it does in the movies – and it lands right in her side! And old hen falls over on the ground dead as a doornail – exactly like one of those feathery dolls do at the fair when you knock them over with the baseballs.

Well, I run out to look, and I'm scared to death just like the time I killed my first bird up behind the Stokesland Baptist Church. And I'm hoping the dickens I haven't really killed it, but when I get there its eyes are gray just like they are on a chicken head when Mama's chopped it off! And I don't know what to do because I know

Daddy will take my bow and arrow, and Mama will be embarrassed in front of the neighbors.

I know the man-next-door is going to be real mad at me because I've been so careless at my age – so I grab old chicken by the arrow in her side and throw all of it in the honey-suckle vines behind our garage. And I leave it there and nobody ever asks if I know anything about a missing chicken.

Now we're moving to Louisville, Kentucky, where Daddy's got a new job. He's an optician, so he makes eyeglasses and is needed up there for the war-effort! But I like Greensboro, and wish we could live here all the time.

## God is in all of his churches

Daddy likes horse-racing a whole lot. In Louisville we live just a few blocks from the Churchill Downs horse racing place, and a lot of evenings we walk down there to see the race track – but we aren't allowed to look at the horses in the stables because strangers might spook them, Daddy says. But that's OK, because I've seen lots of mules on the farms around Stokesland, and I can ride a mule pretty good even if I can't handle a saddle-horse worth a darn. When my real Daddy was alive, we had a riding horse named Dan, which my real Daddy kept on our place even after he got sick. And he would let me walk under his belly, and he never kicked or bucked or anything, he was so tame.

Last Sunday morning we're going to church for the first time in Louisville, and Deanie and I get ready early, so Daddy tells us to go on ahead, it's just a few blocks away. He tells me how to get there, and we're to save them some seats. So I take Deanie's hand like I always do when we're crossing the street since we moved from Stokesland, and we walk down three blocks and over three blocks like he said – and I'm looking for a real big church.

And there's a huge one with four tall columns in front and colored glass windows that are all different, and big doors – and it would swallow up two or three Stokesland Baptist Churches in one gulp. So we go in the big door that's open, and it's packed with more people than I've ever seen in one church – even for Daddy's funeral where we had the church full. And we can't find a seat, and nobody comes to help us, so we go over next to the wall and walk down, and we come to two empty seats behind one of the big columns that go all the way up to the ceiling – and we sit down.

Deanie is on the outside, and she can't see much of anything. I can, but I still don't understand what's going on. They must be having a funeral, because there's a big box-thing covered with a cloth like in funerals. And the preacher has got on a pretty robe that looks like an evening gown in the movies, and he's reading and talking

real loud, but we can't understand a word they're saying. But we told Mama we would wait for them, so we stay there until people around us stand up and go up the steps and get on their knees down in front of the casket. And the preacher gives everybody something to eat off of a little shiny plate.

But some people on our row don't go up front – they sneak out the back door. So we go along behind them and go home, and Mama and Daddy are already home. And I tell them about this funny Baptist church and how pretty it is and how big it is and the people eating on their knees. And Daddy says we went to the wrong church because they couldn't find us anywhere at their church. And Mama says, "That's alright, God is in all of his churches, and we'll wait and go together next Sunday."

So next Sunday we all go together to the Presbyterian church, and we ask the preacher about the other church, and he says it's the Catholic church and we shouldn't be going in there unless we're Catholics! Well, Deanie and I certainly don't want to go in there again because there aren't any good seats, and they don't preach a sermon or sing good Christian hymns like we're used to. And I've never heard of eating a meal in church except for the little square pieces of light bread the Deacons give you sometimes in the Stokesland Baptist Church if you've been baptized.

## Settling in to Louisville

We live in the upstairs part of Mrs. Underwood's house at 2829 South Third Street, which is right in front of the railroad round-house where they turn engines around to make the trip back up the track. And there's a thing over there that makes a really loud banging noise about every half-a-minute like somebody hit a big sheet of steel with a sledge hammer like George Johnson used to drive big stakes in the ground. And the noise is loud enough that it keeps us awake at night for a couple of weeks before we get used to it. But now we don't even notice it unless somebody brings it up, or unless they have to repair it and it stops banging – which Mrs. Underwood told us would happen.

Mr. Underwood is dead but he used to be a doctor, and now his son Paul is studying to be a doctor and goes to college right here in Louisville. We have fun playing cards and drawing things, and he kids me a lot, and he's full of jokes, Mama says, so she likes him. We get along really nice even if he's almost twenty years old. One of the nicest things about him is he doesn't ever hit on me like J.T. used to, and he kids a lot, and he makes jokes about how I talk sometimes.

I ride the trolley to school, and it's a really good school, and I like everybody there, and I'm maybe the smartest boy in arithmetic because I've only missed one problem since we moved here. When I get out of this school I'll go to Male High School for boys who are smart, where Paul went. And he says they've got a Corps where you get a uniform and march and stuff just like we did back in Greensboro. And they've got Manual High School for boys who don't like to study or learn anything.

Deanie goes to elementary school down near our church, the Presbyterian one – not the Catholic one – and she's in the second grade, and she likes her teacher a lot. After her first day she comes home and sings Mama and me a song her teacher taught her, and it goes like this:

“Was a kitty,  
Was a witty,  
She’s a prize  
In the city,  
With her boots on,  
Silken suits on,  
She’s a gay puss in boots ...”

And she’s real cute singing it – but when she sings it she sounds like she’s crazy or something – she doesn’t sound like Deanie at all. She sounds like a Yankee up north, like one of the Bowery Boys or something – but Daddy told us Kentucky was in the south like Virginia and North Carolina are.

And she says the words like she’s a Yankee now – like this:

“Was a keeutee,  
Was a weeutee,  
She’s a praiieese  
In the ceeutee,  
With her booots on,  
Silken soots on,  
She’s a gay puss in booots.”

And I have to tell Mama how I feel! “I can’t stand to live outside of Virginia, Mama! It’s hard enough to live in Kentucky, but it’s too hard if they’re gonna change the way we talk and all. I want to move back to Virginia if we’ve gotta change the way we talk!”

And she hugs me, “You don’t have to worry about that, Son. That’s only the way Deanie’s teacher talks. Everybody I’ve talked to at the grocery store talks just like we do in Virginia.”

Well! That makes me feel a whole lot better! But I don’t want to hear her talking like that again! And I tell her so – but I don’t fuss at her because she doesn’t know better.

Mama and Daddy give me a brown leather jacket for my birthday on October 12, which we’ve always celebrated as Columbus Day in Virginia. And boy! I’m happy as a June-bug when I go to school, and they talk about Columbus and how he discovered America – just like we did back home.

And one day about a month after my birthday I go up to the

playground near our house to play basketball, though I'd never played before we moved to Louisville. And I take my new jacket off, and I forget to take it home when I finish – and when I go back just a half-hour later it's gone. And that makes Kentucky worse than ever because you would never have to worry about your coat in Virginia, especially in Stokesland – and it's the first leather jacket I've ever had!

J.T. and I wore high-top boots in Stokesland, and they had to last all year long, and nobody would ever think of stealing them like they would here in Kentucky. And it gets worse the longer we live here! I get a new bicycle for Christmas which we tell Deanie is from Santa Claus because she still believes in Santa. And right before school starts again, I ride it up to the playground one Saturday to play football. And when I go over to get my bike, it's not where I parked it. And I look everywhere, and it's gone! Somebody's stole the first bicycle I've ever had!

So I won't go up there to play anymore – I'm going to stay home and play Rook with Mama and Daddy – and play with Deanie and Paul. Louisville just isn't a nice place like Stokesland and Danville are – or Greensboro!

One day in school they test everybody in the seventh grade to see if we're good in music, and they say I'm real good, and I ought to take clarinet lessons, but I've never even heard of a clarinet. Our teacher says it's like a big flute – which I saw in a Shirley Temple movie when she led the band. But Daddy says it costs too much, that they're just trying to make money off of us because they're charging 75 cents a month for the lessons and to use the clarinet. Well, I wish I had a chance to try it anyway.

When our uncles came to Stokesland to paint our house a long time ago they played Rook every night before they went to bed, and Mama played too – and everybody in Leaksville plays it, I think. But Grandma Robert 'n' Nellie stopped playing for good because she says everybody fusses so much over it. We play after supper, just Mama and Daddy and me – and Paul, sometimes, when he doesn't have to study his medicine.

But Mama says maybe we should stop for good if anything happens again like it did the other day when the three of us are playing a hot game, and Daddy asks me if I've got the yellow six in my hand. And I look at him kind of funny because you can't ask that because half the game is to keep what you've got hidden from everybody. But he asks me again, and I say, "I'm not gonna tell you." And he says, "Billy, I want to know if you've got the yellow six," and I figure he's plyking – so I say, "Nope!"

And before we finish the hand he plays a card, and I play my yellow six on it and win the trick, and he gets real mad and starts yelling, "You lied to me, Billy. I'm not going to play with you anymore because you lied to me about your yellow six!"

Mama doesn't say a word because she doesn't like to get in between people fussing – but she probably should have told him he was wrong – but she's never done that with him, ever. So we don't play Rook any more, and I really miss it – but I still don't think I did anything wrong in not telling him I had the yellow six.



## Cincinnati

1944

843 William Howard Taft Road, Cincinnati, Ohio, is our address now, not Louisville, because after Christmas Daddy gets a new job here and our street is named after one of our Presidents who lived in Ohio. Now I go to C. C. Cummins Junior High School and Deanie goes to the elementary school a couple of blocks away – and we live catty-corner to my school in a brick building with four apartments.

It's really good living close to school because I can run over to the playground any time and play with other guys like Tony Cucinello, who lives downstairs from us. Of course, he's older and he goes to Walnut Hills High School where I'll go some day. He's a pitcher for the baseball team, but he still plays catch with me out in the yard between the buildings – and now I've got a real baseball glove Daddy gave me for Christmas.

I really like Tony! He says someday he'll play baseball for the Cincinnati Reds. Sometimes I go see the Reds' games with other kids in the Knot-Hole-Club which lets us in free. Tony used to go to Knot-Hole-Club games, but he's too old to now. I wish he'd go with me sometimes like he's my older brother.

The first day of school we have to register, and I'm talking to the teacher who writes down my name and address, and she says, "Billy Martin, you've got the cutest southern accent I've heard in years!" Well, that doesn't make much sense to me! Nobody's ever said anything about how I talk! And she asks me if I'll talk to some teachers who are working in another room – and I say, "Yes Ma'am, if you want me to." So she stands me up in front of them like I'm in a play, and I tell them who I am and that I'm from Virginia. And they start smiling, and some of them laugh, and somebody says, "You've got the cutest southern accent I've ever heard." And all I know to say is, "Well, I don't know – I just grew up in Stokesland, Virginia!"

I'm not sure what this is all about – but I figure it's not bad for me.

Then I see something crazy when I go to my first class Monday. I'm headed across the street to the playground where there's a whole bunch of black girls playing hopscotch. And there are black boys playing baseball with a stick – and there are white boys playing with them! I've never seen kids like that playing together anywhere I've lived – we wouldn't be caught dead even going swimming with them in the rock-quarry back home. But Mama gave me a talking-to before I left this morning, and she said I have to make friends with the new kids and not mind if they think I talk different. So I walk up to the front door, and I find the room they showed me last week – and there are a lot of black people in my class, too!

Mama says we've got to live here as long as Daddy's got a good job, and we've got to make the best of everything – so I try to make the best of everything until right before we get out for lunch. I'm sitting at my desk, and a little black girl two rows over smiles and winks at me right out of the blue – and I don't know what to do – I just can't stand it! I want to jump out the window and run home, but I know Mama won't let me stay! And when the lunch bell rings I run back to my house, and Mama is sewing in the living room, and I yell, "Mama, there's a little black girl winked at me in class! I'm not ever going back to that school – and I mean it! We've never had to go to school with black kids before, and we didn't even play with them back home – and I'm not going to start now!"

Mama says probably the little girl just wants me to feel welcome – and she wasn't flirting with me, and she says I have to go back because I'm too young to quit school – so I do, and I don't dare glance at that little black girl again.

After lunch we have a spelling test, and I didn't have the words to study – but I get them all right, and Mrs. Rheims, my new teacher, tells the class I must be a smart little boy from Virginia because I certainly know how to spell! And that makes me feel better about being in Cincinnati.

The next day Mrs. Rheims takes me to the office to get my books for the rest of the year – and boy! Am I surprised when they hand me a book on South America! Heck! We learned everything about South America in Louisville, and we were supposed to study

North America the rest of the year. But Mrs. Rheims says they've finished North America, and I'll just be the smartest boy in South America for the rest of the year!

So now when the class is studying, sometimes Mrs. Rheims lets me do extra-credit stuff. I know all the products they make in South America, and I can spell all the countries, and I know the capitols of every country – and I can spell them. So to give me something new to do, she lets me take a big sheet of brown paper about eight feet tall down to the auditorium and lay it out on the stage – and I get some paints and brushes from Miss Millner, the art teacher – and I'm in charge of making a really big map of South America with all the information on it. So when we have leftover time in class some of us go work on the map, and that's about the most fun I've had in school since Dickey Neal and I heard *The Unfinished Symphony* for the first time.

Miss Millner, our art teacher, is the toughest teacher I've ever had – which is funny because she's really pretty. Last Thursday some of us are talking too loud, and she says, "I want you to work and not talk!" And Tex, who's from Texas, whispers kind of loud, "I work better when I talk."

And she thinks I said it because we're both from the south, and she says, "That's enough, Billy! Get back to work!"

"I am working, Miss Millner."

And Tex says, "He's working, Miss Millner."

And Miss Millner says, "I want both of you to be quiet and get to work – now!"

And I say, "Whatever you say, Miss Millner."

And Tex chimes in, "Ditto, Miss Millner."

Well, by now Miss Millner is sort of aggravated at both of us, so she comes over to our table and talks real quiet to us about being nice people, and then she goes back to her desk. And Tex thinks it's all funny, and he starts giggling and I can't help giggling, too. Miss Millner tells both of us to come in the supply-room, and she reaches up over the door and takes down a paddle a mile long, "Are you going to calm down or do you want the paddle?"

And Tex says, "Yes, Ma'am."

And I can't help it because he's not even smiling when he says it – and I let out a giggle. So she sends him back to his seat and closes the supply room door and tells me to bend over a table in there, and she hauls off and whacks me three times with her paddle! I didn't think she could hurt me – but she does! And the rest of the class I don't laugh or even smile.

Tex is the first person I've ever met who's really from Texas. His daddy works for the government, but Tex doesn't know exactly what he does like I know Daddy makes eye-glasses. I guess he's the best-built guy in our class. He's got wide shoulders and muscles in his arms and legs, and he can do almost anything – like basketball and tumbling and rope climbing.

But I can climb the rope pretty quick now, because one day in gym all the guys snicker when I try to make it to the top, but I can't. So I start going to the gym after school, and I climb and climb and climb for over a week until I figure out how it's done. And now I'm about as good as anybody except Tex and John Westbrook, who's the best athlete we've got – and he's my good friend even if he is black. I like the black kids if I don't think about them being black – they're just like us, but they don't have an accent like I do – except for Agnes. One day John told me he didn't like me at first because of the way I talk, because he said I sound like guys from over in Kentucky who beat up on black boys when they cross the river.

Tex can hit a rubber ball a mile with a broomstick – which we use in stickball on the play ground – and he can run faster than anybody except John, who's already big enough to play football at Walnut Hills. I expect he's a better athlete than Tex is if you want to know the truth. For one thing he doesn't smoke and Tex does. But Tex is tough, and he's mean even if he is my best friend – which I learned about the other day when we're playing stickball after school.

We were on different sides, and when he gets up to bat he yells, "I can lick anybody on this field, right now!" And nobody says anything. John Westbrook isn't here or Tex probably wouldn't have yelled that. John Goebel, who's a real boxer, isn't here either. So nobody else wants to take up Tex's dare, but I'm not about to let it

go! Heck! I learned long time ago not to let J.T. push me around, even if he has won every fight we've ever had.

I'm out in center field and I yell, "You can't lick me!" And I start walking in and Tex starts walking out, and we come up to second base, and I've got my fists up in the air – and he walks all the way out with his hands in his pockets. I figure he's thinking about not fighting – until we're right up on each other – and all at once he whips his right hand out of his pocket and slams me up side of my head and knocks me down on the black-top, and everything starts whizzing around in circles, and I don't know what's going on. Everything is turning light and dark! And when I try to get up I can't.

So Tex reaches down and grabs my arm and pulls me up. He's upset when he says, "Billy, you oughta know better'n to let somebody you just called out walk up to you with their hands in their pockets. That's a set-up every time, hear? You can't let nobody sucker you like that!" Well, I'm not able to make it across the street, so he takes my arms and drags me all the way home and helps me lie down on the settee.

Tex is a really good friend even if he did cold-cock me. He said he thought I was going to hit him first with my fists up like that, but I don't guess we'll have another fight now because I won't let him come at me with his hands in his pockets again.

My other best friend in Cincinnati is John Goebel. We take turns going to each other's house after school because we live close to each other – both of us on William Howard Taft Road. His father wants him to get good at boxing, so he bought him grown-up boxing gloves, and he trains him, and John says he's probably going to box professionally someday.

About a week after Tex got me with that round-house, I'm telling John how my Daddy was a good boxer before World War I, and that I'm pretty good too because he trains me sometimes. So John says it would be good for both of us to practice together, and we both say, "Oh boy! Yeah!" So he rides his bike home and gets both pairs of gloves, and we mark off a ring in the side-yard. Then we put on the gloves, and he has to show me how because I've never had them on before. They make me feel like I really could be a boxer, and if I practice with John enough, I could challenge Tex

next time, and I could beat the snot out of him – even if he is my good friend.

So John shows me how you always start in opposite corners and come to the middle and start boxing. And we dance around a little, and I'm getting the hang of the gloves, and he yells, "Clang!" And I put my hands up like he does, and he acts like he's going to hit me with his left hand, and I try to block his glove – and when I do that he hits me with his right hand and knocks me down on the ground, which is pretty soft – but I can't get up when I try to. And he puts his hands up in the air and announces I'm knocked out! And he wins!

I'm still lying on the ground, and I still can't get up, so he pulls me up. He's a lot bigger than I am, so he helps me in the house, and I lie down and rest, and he jumps on his bike and heads for home. And that's the first time – and it's going to be the last time – I ever have a boxing match with anybody with boxing gloves on. But, it probably won't be the last fight I ever have because you just can't let anybody call you chicken and get by with it.

Daddy was a motorcycle messenger in the First World War in France, but he didn't get hurt. Lots of messengers got killed because the Huns wanted to get their messages, he said. And he learned to box in the First World War, too, and he boxed some after it was over, but not as a professional. I like to play like I'm a fly-weight boxer with him, and he lets me hit him because I'm not strong enough to hurt him after he takes his glasses off. I weighed 88 pounds last week when they weighed us in gym.

A lot of people think Daddy looks like President Roosevelt when he's dressed in his blue striped suit, and he says that when he rides the streetcar to work sometimes he can feel people in the back staring at him because he looks like the President.

It's not more than two weeks after I get to C. C. Cummins that we have a scrap-paper drive in all the homerooms to help the war effort. So I get all the paper Mama saved from the stuff she packed our things in for our move, and I go around to our new neighbors and ask them for any kind of scrap paper. And they give me all they

can spare, and I take it to the paper drive the next day, and I've got about as much as anybody does who's been living here all their lives. We bring the paper around to the back of the school where there's a big stake body truck just like Mr. Patterson had that the sides come down on. And John and I are sort of in charge of loading the truck and getting all the scrap paper out of the school wastebaskets from then on.

### **Around town**

Everybody gets a chance to buy War Savings Stamps on Tuesdays in homeroom, and almost everybody buys some, and Daddy gives me money to buy them until a few weeks ago when I find a way to make good money on my own. The second day after we move in I'm walking up Melrose Avenue, which runs down to our corner on William Howard Taft Road, and I discover a grocery store a lot bigger than the A&P in Danville. So I tell Mama, and she's real glad to have a good grocery store so nearby and to not have to get a ride to the store. Of course, she didn't have much money to spend on groceries when we lived in Stokesland, and I expect she never spent over \$5.00 for everything she would buy when she went with the Winns – and she didn't go but once a month because that was all she had to spend.

This store's got a lot of things they didn't have in Danville – like cash registers where you pay for your groceries – and the ladies roll their groceries up to the counter in a cart with real little rubber wheels. And a lady punches an adding machine and finds out how much you owe. And then you pay her and another girl puts your groceries in a bag – and that's all there is to it. But sometimes the ladies have two or three bags, and they're heavy as the dickens, and I see some boys my age standing out front to help the ladies carry their bags home. So I go up there the first Saturday I can, and they let me stand outside with them, and Allen tells me my first morning to say something like this, "Lady, can I tote your groceries home this morning?"

So I say, "Ma'am, would you like me to help you carry your groceries home?" And a lot of times they smile and say something about how I talk – but that's OK, long as they give me a tip. But nobody says they've got to give us anything at all. I make 45 cents the first Saturday working most of the day, and it's really hard work. Allen says some ladies find good meat here real often and sugar and soap sometimes – and some of them walk real far to save gas for



the war-effort.

I carry the bags to their house, and they usually tip me fifteen or twenty cents for helping them. But usually I just carry them two or three blocks, and they give me a nickel or a dime – and sometimes fifteen cents when they hear me talk.

I carried the bags in my arms for a couple of weeks until one night Daddy says he figures we can make a cart to haul them in a lot easier. So the next weekend we build a two-wheeler. He's really good at making things. One time in Greensboro he built an airplane out of balsa wood and covered it with tissue paper from the hobby shop, and he lacquered it all with dope, and it looked like the real thing. And it was over three-feet long, and the wingspan was longer than that. But we never got a motor for it, and we couldn't move it to Louisville, so I don't know what ever happened to it.

Anyway, he does most of the work on my cart, and it costs a little over \$3.50 for everything – including the wheels, which have hard rubber tires like my wagon in Stokesland had. But they're pretty big, and they cost a dollar-fifty just for the wheels – he says it makes it easier to roll if it's got big wheels, which I would never have even thought of. But you bet your bottom-dollar we don't work on that cart on Sunday because Mama says you can't work on Sunday – the Bible says it's a day of rest. Besides, the store isn't open on Sunday.

It's good having a job and making my own money like J.T. did and not having to ask Mama for a dime every time I want to buy something – especially for cigarette-money, even if she doesn't know that's what I do with it. Tex and I go up to the drugstore after school and buy a Coke and have a smoke with the girls from school who sit in the booths near the storage room.

Now, I didn't smoke anything at all after we moved away from Stokesland until we moved here – I didn't have anybody to smoke with. And then one day two girls in class ask me if I'm going up to the drugstore after school, and I figure I ought to so I tell them, "Yeah, I'll see you there."

Well, these girls are really nice and pretty, and it's sharp to have a few puffs with them – almost like a date – which I've never had except the time I rode the bus over to Wylie Avenue to see Helen

Basic, but that might not count because J.T. said we were too young to date back then.

Of course, one of the main things about smoking is finding a store that's got butts in the first place. They're scarce as hen's teeth since they send most of what they make to our boys overseas, so usually you can't find them at all, except for dumb brands they make out of grapevines or new tobacco that tastes like rabbit tobacco, or something else that bad.

Last summer I rode the Greyhound bus back to Danville to see J.T. and the girls, and Virginia sends us up to the front to buy her cigarettes, and all we can find are Piedmonts. J.T. says these things are so bad that they're not worth even a dollar a carton. But we buy them anyway because she says she needs a cigarette, and when we get back they're so bad she pitches them and loses her dollar! But she can afford that because she works, and she gets a government allowance since she's married to Frontis, who's a soldier.

But we go to the drugstore up here a couple times a week, and Mr. Baumgarten saves candy bars for us under the counter, and he's almost always got Wings or Pall Malls in a brown bag under there. All we have to do is buy a large Coke, and then he doesn't care how long we sit in the back booth. We figure there's nothing wrong with us smoking like that, and nobody at home suspects anything. But last week I did have to go to the dentist, and he says I better quit smoking or else brush my teeth every day. I can't see how he knows I smoke now, anyway.

## Strangers

I finished seventh grade with really good grades. This year I'm in Mrs. Rheims's homeroom, and everything we're studying is new, not like last year. Of course, I was the smartest kid in Geography every day back then.

This year I'm singing in the choir, which is a really fun thing. We're going to sing a big Christmas program, and Miss Hallis is even starting to work on graduation. She says we'll have two numbers with solos for somebody. My voice is changing from soprano to bass, and we're not even halfway through the school year. I don't know if I'll be able to sing a solo because I don't know what I'll be singing by then. Sometimes when we practice I sing like a boy, and then I go back to soprano if they're singing a part I like better – I guess I'll do that at graduation, too.

Goebel and some of the other guys ask me to go trick-or-treating with them the night before Halloween. I've never heard of it, but I say, "Yeah! Sure! If Daddy says it's OK." And he says, "Sure, you should go have fun with your friends."

So I get a Lone Ranger mask up at the drugstore, and John comes by, and we walk over to Tex's, where three more guys are hanging out. And his mama gives us some hot cider, which isn't bad – but a Coke at the drugstore tastes better. And she gives each of us a big grocery bag – and I'm headed out to trick-or-treat for the first time!

What it means is you go up to a house and knock, and when somebody comes to the door you yell "Trick-or-treat!" and they give you some candy or cookies or some cider – and if it's not wet you put it in your bag. So we go over around Eden Park, which is a good part of town even if some black people have moved in there, John says. And you bet I don't tell him anything about Uncle Wash and Aint Minnie living right across the hill from us.

Almost every house gives us some candy or an apple, and one

lady has homemade doughnuts wrapped up in wax paper, so we stop between houses and eat them. And we have to ask for a glass of water at the next house when they don't serve us cider. This is really a whole lot better Halloween than we had in Stokesland by a big bet. We don't mess anything up, and people aren't afraid of us when we come to the door.

A really funny thing happens at one house. The man acts kind of funny, and he doesn't have any sweets or anything like the other people. But he's got a hat full of brand-new shiny pennies like I've never seen before. And he gives each one of us a half-a-handful, and he says he would have given us just five, but these pennies are messed up – so he's giving us ten. They're fuzzy on the side with Lincoln's head on it, and they've got two lines everywhere there should be one – but we don't care because nobody's going to look at them that hard when we go to the store. So I guess Halloween is the most fun I've had since we moved to Cincinnati – except maybe going to the drugstore after school.

One Saturday at the grocery store I carry a lady's groceries about a mile, and she gives me a quarter, and when I look at it, it doesn't have a picture of George Washington like they usually do – this one has got a picture of a woman standing up on the front and an eagle flying on the back. I notice it's different, so I show it to Daddy, and he says it's an old one called a Standing-Liberty quarter. The lady is Miss Liberty, and that's what they used when he was in the War.

So when we have our history lesson Monday I ask Mrs. Rheims if I can show everybody the quarter I found that's different, and she says I can. And I give it to Janet King in the first row because she's the prettiest girl in our class. And she looks at it and passes it on to the next person. And everybody is looking at it and nobody has ever seen one like it. And Mrs. Rheims is talking about Ohio history, and when she finishes I call out, "Who's got my quarter?"

And nobody owns up to having it! My quarter is missing and nobody knows where it is, and I'm really mad because somebody stole it! A quarter can't just get up and walk out of the classroom, and a quarter means a lot to me even if it doesn't to people up north – especially with a woman standing on the front of it.

About a month after school starts we get a new girl in home-room, and she's a Jap! She just moved to Cincinnati from out West where her family has been in a concentration camp for three years, and now they've been turned loose, and they've come here to live. Some of us don't like her because the Japs are as bad to American boys as anybody could possibly be – and she's a Jap!

Her name is Susan, which is American, and she's smart, and she doesn't ever do anything to make you mad at her, so after a few days we sort of don't notice she's a Jap. Everybody's friendly with her because she smiles a lot, and she talks in a real little voice, and she sounds just like an American talking.

Tuesday Mrs. Rheims asks her if she'd like to tell us about the camp she was living in, and she says she would, and she talks so you almost can't hear her. She grew up in California and went to school there just like we do, and she's got an older brother who goes to Walnut Hills High. And before Pearl Harbor was bombed by a sneak attack from the Japs, her father worked in a plant and her mother stayed home. But after the sneak-attack all the Japs in California were sent to a concentration camp the army built in the desert so they couldn't fight for the Japs if they ever invaded America.

And we ask her some questions, and she says she's sorry the Japs hurt Americans and bombed Pearl Harbor. But she says she's a real American, and her brother is, and her mama and daddy are even if they came over here from Japan – and she says they don't want to hurt anybody. And after she tells us all of this, I don't want to hurt her either, but I still want to kill every Jap who lives in Japan because they're mean as anybody can be to our boys in the Pacific – and every time we go to the movies we see what they've done to our boys in the newsreels.

Humphrey is a guy in our class that nobody likes except for a couple of guys who hang around with him. He's bigger than most of us, which Tex says is because he's got more dumb in him than the rest of us put together – and he should be in high school anyway. One day we're leaving Mrs. Rheims's class, and right when I get to the door he shoves me out of the way and whispers, "Get

outta my way, Jew-boy!”

Well, I don’t know what Jew-boy means, but he’s picking on me, and I don’t like it, and I come back, “What d’ya mean, Humphrey? I don’t even know what ‘Jew-boy’ means!”

“You got a big nose like a Jew – I bet you’re a Jew, ain’tcha?”

“Naw, I’m not a Jew! I’ve never even seen one!” Which is a lie because one time an old man with a beard came around Stokesland selling things out of a big bag from New York City, and Mrs. Wrenn said he was a “wandering Jew” like in the Bible.

And he pushes me again, “Well, I bet your daddy’s a Jew, ain’t he? Anybody can tell you’ve got Jew-blood – lookit your nose!”

Well, I don’t know about my nose, and I don’t know what a Jew even looks like, but I know I can’t let him get at me like that any more than I ever could J.T. So I haul off and whack him in the back of the head with my books, and Mrs. Rheims breaks it up.

But he keeps ragging on my nose when we’re in line or in gym, and I don’t know any way to make him stop, and I hate to be in a fight all the time. So I tell Mama after a couple of days, and she says, “Some people say Jews have big noses, and your nose is a little big, Son. But it’s supposed to be big now because you’re growing all over – you just have to wait for your body to catch up with your nose. I think it’s a pretty nose!”

And she hugs me real tight, and that makes me feel OK for a while. But when I look in the mirror I can tell it’s bigger than it used to be – especially when I look at it sideways with Mama’s hand mirror.

But as of this week everything is better because Humphrey has to move to Detroit, and the day he leaves I stand in the hall outside Mrs. Rheims door, and I yell “Good riddance, stupid!” right at him, in front of everybody! And he doesn’t even look back at me!

## Ten on the train

Well, we've been in Cincinnati for a year, and Mama and Daddy decide we can go for a visit back to Stokesland, so we ride on the train, and it takes us almost fifteen hours. But looking out the window is a good way to pass the time, and it's all really interesting. Some places there are just big rock cliffs high as you can see – but that gets dull after a couple of hours. Other places there are big piles of rocks and broken down trees everywhere you can see – in Kentucky and West Virginia – which Daddy says are slag-piles left over from mining coal. But you can't look at scenery all the time because everything starts looking the same – so I sleep a lot of the way.

The first night I'm headed to the bathroom at the end of the car, and a man is coming toward me, and he's really wobbling – like he's drunk – and he asks me to carry his suitcase to the next car. It's not too big for me to carry – heck – I'm fourteen now, so I pick it up and follow him. And he makes it to his seat still in one piece, and he plops down real hard, and I put his bag on the floor beside him. And he reaches in his pocket, after he finally finds it, and gives me a dollar bill – which I can't believe! Golly! That's like finding a hundred-dollar bill in J.T.'s stories!

So I stuff it in my pocket before he can take it back, and I thank him a couple of times – I'm so nervous – and I run all the way back to our car. And I have to keep myself from just yelling out about it! And I tell Mama and Daddy about the drunk man and show them the dollar bill – and Mama looks at it, and she almost yells it out, "Billy, that's not a dollar bill, Son! You didn't look at it when he gave it to you, did you? Son, that's a ten-dollar bill!"

Well, I feel like I'm going to flip out! They're as surprised as I am because that's more than anybody can afford to give for a tip. Mama says I should give it back – because it's a mistake since he said he'd give me a dollar – and Daddy says it's up to me.

Well, I'm telling you, I've got to think about this. That's more money than I've ever had – all put together! But after a while I fig-

ure I'd be real upset if I made a mistake with a ten-dollar bill like that, and Mama says I should give it back – so I decide to go see if he made a mistake – or not.

When I get back to his car he's asleep – and I shake his shoulder, and he opens his eyes part-way. "I'm sorry to wake you up, Mister, but I need to talk to you about this ten-dollar bill you gave me."

Well, he can't seem to wake up, and he tries to stand up – and I guess he's just too drunk to. So I sit down next to him and push his shoulder, and he grunts at me, "What's going on, junior?"

And I talk real slow, "Mister, I really appreciate this money you gave me, I carried your suitcase, remember? But I don't think you meant to give me a ten-dollar bill, did you?"

And then he wakes up mighty quick! And he starts yelling, "I gave you a ten-dollar bill?! A ten-dollar bill?! Well, boy, I certainly meant to give you a one-dollar bill! But I don't seem t' know what I'm doin' t'night. I ain't been well since supper."

So I give him back his ten-dollar bill, and he almost drops it his hand is shaking so bad – and he starts crying. And he gets out another bill and gives it to me, and this time I look at it and make sure it's a dollar bill. And he can't talk he's crying so much, so I just say, "Thank you very much for the dollar, mister."

And he's still crying when I get to the end of the car.

Boy! I really hate giving up that much money – that's as much as I've ever had in my whole life at one time. But Mama and Daddy say they're proud of me, and I feel pretty good about that – but it's hard to feel real good when you've just lost ten dollars – or at least nine.



## Coney Island

There's a huge amusement park up the Ohio River called Coney Island with rides and things just like a big Danville State Fair. If you live here, you can ride the *Island Queen* to get there. It costs fifty cents – and that pays for getting in the gate, too. The rides are a dime apiece except for the roller-coaster and the spook house, which cost fifteen cents.

Mama and Daddy and Deanie and I have gone up there twice now, and it's the most fun I've ever had. So about a month ago I ask Mama if I can go up by myself on a Sunday because I haul groceries on Saturdays. And she says it's alright with her, but I should ask Daddy. And he says sure since I'm making my own money now – but I can't spend over five dollars for everything. See, Daddy makes thirty-five dollars a week as an optician.

I catch the streetcar downtown to the *Island Queen* dock for a nickel, which doesn't count. I'm the second one in line when it leaves at ten o'clock! And by the time we get there I'm ready to do just what I want to do, and nobody's going to tell me what's too dangerous to ride on or what to do! So I ride the Buck Rogers space ship, and I get to steer it, and it feels like I'm shooting the moon! It's going around and around, and by the time I get off I'm about to throw up every hot dog in my guts – but I hold them down!

Then I ride the merry-go-round – the one for grown-ups – and it plays some of the prettiest music I've ever heard, and if you lean out and catch a brass ring you get a free ride. But about the time I'm ready to catch it, I figure I'd better get off and sit down for a while. So I play games where I win things I can take home for Mama and Deanie. I've always been good at fishing, so I try that – and I win Mama some nice pot holders. And the second time I play the man gives me whatever I want, and I get Daddy a hammer with a screwdriver in the handle.

Then I waste a bundle of dough throwing baseballs at those dumb furry dolls trying to win Deanie a baby doll, but I can't ever

get all three of them down in one go! So, now I know there's a trick there somewhere, because I can throw a baseball real hard – so I keep throwing my money away trying to figure out what the trick is!

Shucks! I should have watched myself better, because by two o'clock I've spent five dollars, and I've got three more hours before the last boat leaves – and I'm getting hungry again. So I have to sit down and figure things out: this is the end of the season for Coney Island – and this is my last trip this summer – and I've got fifteen dollars Mama's saving for me at home – and I've worked real hard carrying all those ladies' groceries all over Walnut Hills – and I ought to be able to spend some of it to have fun now and then. So, I go ahead and spend three more dollars – besides, Mama gave it to me my last birthday before I started hauling groceries – and I just don't worry about all of that – I just have fun!

Until I get on the *Island Queen* going home, and I start thinking about what Daddy's going to say when he finds out I spent eight dollars. I know he'll ask me since we almost had an argument about it. The *Island Queen* is paddling down the river, and we're getting closer to Cincinnati, and I'm scared to go home and face him. The best I can do is hope Mama will take up for me – but I know she won't because I did wrong – so I start thinking up stories that might get me out of it. Me and J.T. have always been good at that, especially J.T. So by the time the boat is tied up and I go down the gangplank, I've come up with a real good story:

“Daddy, somebody stole my money on the way home! I had it safe in my wallet in my pocket until I got in the crowd pushing and shoving up the gangplank getting on. Somebody must've picked my pocket and taken my money out of my wallet because when I'm getting off I find it on the ground where the robber threw it after he took out my money. Boy, I'm really glad – at least I found my wallet Mama gave me – even if it was empty. Things could have been a lot worse!”

And Mama is real happy I found my wallet, and she hugs me because I look sad, and Daddy says, “That's a lesson to learn when you go places like Coney Island – on a boat full of all kinds of people – the good and the bad!”

But the more I think about it, I don't like lying to Mama. She

Bill Martin

wouldn't have done anything if I'd told her the truth. She would've said what she always says, "Well, Son, I hope you've learned your lesson from that."

### **Kissing cousins**

Our boys' Phys. Ed. teacher is Mr. Umphlett, who owns a swimming pool down on William Howard Taft Road. It costs a quarter to get in unless you go to C. C. Cummins. I haven't seen any black kids down there, even from our school. That's just like it is in Virginia, except for at the rock quarry.

Miss Drake is the girls' Phys. Ed. teacher. She's really pretty and she wears shorts to class. One day she comes to our class. Together they tell us about how boys and girls like each other in different ways when they get in the seventh and eighth grades – and they tell us some things we aren't supposed to talk about outside of class. Mr. Umphlett says when boys reach puberty, which is when they get hair growing on their ugly-things, they want to smooch and play with girls a whole lot more, and, "Sometimes boys want to explore the girls above and below the waist. But you shouldn't use these words with girls because it wouldn't be respectful."

Well, there's a girl in our class named Mary, and some of the boys say she'll do things like Mr. Umphlett told us about. So the next day I write her a note, "Dear Mary, I would like to explore you above and below the waist if you'd like it, too. Signed, Billy."

Well, she's not the kind of girl the guys say she is, and she gets mad at me and goes to Miss Drake and tells her and shows her my note. Then Miss Drake calls Mr. Umphlett – and I have to go see them together after school the next day.

Well, Miss Drake asks me to sit down beside her, and she says, "Now, Billy, we thought we could tell you boys about girls, and you wouldn't go tell them the things we talked about in class. But you did tell, and I wish you hadn't, but you didn't do anything wrong – it's just embarrassing to the girls if you do that."

And Mr. Umphlett says, "OK, Billy? Now I hope you won't talk out of class again, understand?"

"Yes, Sir. I understand now."

But I've got to admit I want to do those things lots of times –

especially with Lorraine, who lives next door to our old apartment. When Daddy decided to move, the people who run the apartments told him we have to fix up the new one ourselves due to the war and all. So Lorraine and I spend four whole evenings together cleaning the walls with wallpaper cleaner, which is like a ball of modeling clay, only softer. You just rub it over the wallpaper, and that takes off the dirt and soot from the coal stove.

So I've got a really big crush on Lorraine, and I think she likes me, and I want to kiss her so bad I don't know what to do. But I'm afraid I might do it wrong, and she might not want me to. So I haven't kissed her and she hasn't done anything either, and I'm really sorry we haven't – and I don't know what to do.

Kids my age do a lot of heavy kissing in the Grand Theater up beside the big grocery store at the matinee every Saturday morning. The little kids and their mothers sit all the way back where they can get to the bathroom easier, Mama says, and us teen-agers sit all the way up front where the ushers don't come to bother us, and we take our candy and go up and look around to see who's there. There are usually a couple of girls who'll neck with you even if they don't go to C. C. Cummins. One girl is older than us, I think, and she kisses a different way from the other girls – but she's stopped doing it with me. She said, "I think we better stop kissing this way because you might get the wrong idea."

Well, I'm not sure but I think what she does is French-kissing that Tex talks about all the time – though I doubt he's ever done it – but I have. And I think I know what she means that I might get the wrong idea – but I wish I could find out for sure if there's anything else I don't know about.

Well, something really special happened in Cincinnati a month ago when my second cousin moved here to go to nursing school. Her name is Iris, and she won a scholarship from the Norfolk and Western Railroad to study for two years. She lives close to us, and she can ride the streetcar to see us whenever she wants to. Last Sunday she went to church with us and stayed and had lunch and played with Deanie and me out in the side yard – but she played

with Deanie mostly because I'm a little too old to be playing kids' games any more.

Iris is what I would say is the prettiest girl I've ever seen. She's even prettier than Jane Blaylock, who is blond and real cute and used to live catty-corner from us in Stokesland. If I had to compare those two pretty girls, I would say Iris wins. She's even prettier than Janet King in my class, and I've always thought she's the prettiest girl in the world.

Iris's Daddy is Mama's uncle, so Iris and I are second cousins, and second cousins can marry because they're far enough apart to make it legal. I'll be fifteen in seven months, and Iris will be nineteen her next birthday. I haven't heard of many girls that much older marrying guys my age, but I can sure think about it all I want to – and that's all I've thought about every night before I go to sleep for the last month!

### Growing-up lessons

One day I come out of a movie, and I'm supposed to call Mama on the pay phone about going over shopping at the store, and when I hang up it gives me back four nickels – for nothing! I didn't touch anything or say anything – four nickels just dropped down in the change slot! So I put another nickel in that darn thing and make up a number and call it and hang up – and it gives me two nickels back. So I do that until I've got nine nickels, and then I go home and I yell to Mama when I hit the back door, "I've struck a gold mine, Mama!" And I tell her, and she says it's not right. I should take the money back to the people who own the drugstore. Mama's almost always right about what I should do about things – but a telephone is different from a person!

A couple of months ago Mr. Umphlett tells us about going to the Y.M.C.A. during the winter and being able to go swimming on Thursday nights. I really like that because I can swim for real now, and they say the 'Y'-pool is almost like an Olympic pool. So I meet John out front and we go in and sign up, and then we have to strip down and take a shower. Everybody goes in the pool naked, and a young man is in charge who checks us out and looks behind our ears and lets us go in if we're clean.

We play games, which the young man gets started, and we have swimming races that I never win – but they're fun. And when somebody pushes you in the pool, when you don't expect it, you've just got to chase him until you catch him and push him in, too. But then the man blows his whistle, and you have to sit on the edge for five minutes – and I'm telling you, in five naked minutes you can turn into a blue icicle.

Last Thursday some guys who don't go to C. C. Cummins try to bully us, and one of them pushes me up against the wall, and I punch him, and the young man breaks it up. But the bully says he's going to see me outside the back door, and I'd better watch out –

and he means it. Well, he's a lot bigger than I am, and I don't stand a chance in hell fighting him. Sometimes I get tired of having to act tough when I'm not. This big guy is not a friend, and he'll murder me if we have a fight.

So I get dressed and leave by another door where he won't be waiting for me. I guess this is my last night here because it just isn't worth it any more if I have to fight every night.

Every time I go up to the 'Y', I pass a big brick house on William Howard Taft Road that Mrs. Rheims told us about. It belonged to a woman named Harriet Beecher Stowe, who lived back before the Civil War. She dug a tunnel from her house all the way down to the Ohio River, and she used to take in runaway slaves from Kentucky and let them escape through her tunnel. She would help them find a way up North where slavery wasn't as bad as it was in the South, and they would be free. And that's good because it's not right to belong to somebody else besides your mama and daddy and God, and I got that directly from Mama. I don't understand a whole lot about being colored, and I get mixed up when we're playing with John Westbrook because he seems just like everybody else.

John's not anything like the black boys who lived up behind Marvin's house that we had the BB-gun battle with – or the little one who hit me in the stomach and knocked the breath out of me – or the poor black boy who drowned in the rock-quarry – those black boys in Virginia didn't act like John does at all, and I don't know exactly why it's that way.

I make good money carrying the ladies' groceries home from the store. Now I can buy things I want like J.T. always could. A couple of weeks ago I go in a junk store near our house where they sell used things like stoves and chairs and old tools. And the man's got a .22 rifle for four dollars, but it's different from my real Daddy's .22. It doesn't have a trigger – you pull the hammer back and it catches on a spring, and when you push the spring down the hammer hits the back of the bullet and it shoots just like my real Daddy's gun.

So I go home and get \$4 out of my drawer and buy it, and I hurry home and hide it behind the back door in the kitchen. Nobody's home, so I run over to the playground where there's a stick-



ball game going on – and I know better than to tell anybody I’ve got a new gun – yet.

But when I get back home, I go in the kitchen to get it – and it’s gone! I ask Mama, but she says she hasn’t seen it, and Daddy isn’t home yet.

But now I think I’ve figured it out – Mama came home and found it, and she called Daddy, and he told her to do something with it – because after supper we’re talking about it, and he says a .22 isn’t the kind of toy you’d want to have in the city.

Well, that was the sweetest looking thing, and it handled just like a carbine in a western movie!

We go to the Walnut Hills Baptist Church now and I sing in the young people’s choir, and we practice Sunday mornings during Sunday school, and sometimes we sing specials in church. I’m a soprano and I sound like the girls do, but my voice is louder than most of them, and I can sing higher than most of them can, too.

Mary Fuzzio and I got to sing a duet in church three Sunday’s ago. It’s called “When At Night I Go To Sleep” from *Hansel and Gretel*. I sang the soprano part, and Mama says we did a good job on it. After church people crowd up to tell us how nicely we sang. And almost all of them tell Mary how nice her soprano voice is – which really aggravates me.

When we graduate from the eighth grade our school choir will sing, and I’ll be able to sing bass on some things and soprano on other things if I’m still in the middle of my voice changing, our music teacher says. I remember Mr. Umphlett telling us about how our voices will change, and we’ll like some girls more than we like boys.

A special thing happened last Tuesday out in the hall between classes. It’s just a month until graduation, and Mrs. Rheims and Mr. Carter stop me in the hallway, and Mr. Carter asks me if I know the President’s middle name – just like that. And I say, “It’s just a plain letter S because President Truman didn’t get an actual middle name when he was born. He picked out an initial for himself when he got into politics.”

Well, Mrs. Rheims gives me a big smile, and I go on into class,

Billy

and later she calls me out in the hall and tells me that I'll get the award as outstanding student in the graduating class. And right along with it I'll get a lifetime membership to the Mercantile Library Association in Cincinnati, which is down at Fourth and Walnut. So I'll give a speech about the Mercantile Library and thank the Library Board and my teachers. I feel really proud of winning that award, but it's kind of silly getting it for knowing President Truman's middle initial.

## The war plant

A few days after graduation I'm out in the side-yard mowing the grass, and a real skinny man who looks a lot like my real Daddy comes by looking for cigarette butts on Melrose Avenue. It looks real funny because I haven't picked up butts since we moved away from Stokesland. He must have seen me working hard and sweating, and he comes over, "Say, buddy, I like t' see young fellas sweatin' when they work."

He says he works in a war plant and he's not well enough to go in the army because he's had T.B. I tell him about my real Daddy, and we talk about that right long. He ends up asking me if I'd like to work in a war plant this summer, and I jump at it! He tells me where to find his plant on Monday morning and tell them Mr. Ames sent me.

Of course, Mama and Daddy have to hear all about it before they'll even think of letting me work in a war plant at my age. I'm kind of skinny and Mama says I haven't reached my growth, so I don't look any older than that at all. Daddy says he doesn't see what harm it would do for me to go down there and find out about the job – especially since it pays fifty-cents an hour – and seventy-five cents for over-time on Saturdays. I've never come close to making that much hauling groceries – and I used to work all day for Uncle George for fifty cents.

So Monday morning I walk across town to the docks on the Ohio River where the manufacturing plants are. And I find the right place because I ask people like Daddy told me to, and I ask for the man who does the hiring. And it turns out this is a millwork plant like Uncle Buck's in Raleigh – except this one makes things for the U. S. government for the war-effort.

I tell the man about meeting Mr. Ames on the sidewalk, and he says, "Yup, Ames is my man." And he hires me on the spot, and I start work right then helping make crates to ship rockets for airplanes for our boys fighting overseas. There are a lot of young-

looking guys working here, but I expect I'm the youngest one. When George from over in Kentucky hears me say I'm fourteen-going-on-fifteen, he says I'm not old enough to hold down a job here – but I'm going to work here, anyway.

My job doesn't seem very complicated – five of us stand at a long table and glue strips of felt inside pieces of wood. One guy picks up three or four pieces and brushes the glue on, and another couple of guys press the felt on tighter against a round block. And then they stack them up on a dolly, and another guy pushes them to the other side of the plant where they're nailed inside a long box.

So I press felt for a couple of hours, and we get an official smoking break out under the shed – they make us go outside away from the wood things and sawdust. And when we come back, Mr. Ames tells me to do the glue-brushing. So I take hold of four pieces and slosh it on – and after a while I get up to five. And before long I'm up to six pieces, and I'm brushing glue on so fast Mr. Ames comes by and tells me to slow down. Frankly, I would have told the next guys to work faster, but I'm not the boss.

Mr. Ames stands around sometimes and talks to us like he's a coach or a teacher, and he tells us we can be proud because these boxes are going to hold rockets that they shoot from under the wings of the Grumman Hellcat – which is one of the planes J.T. and I saw in our book on identifying airplanes. So I'm real proud to be working here – I might even be shipping rockets to one of the men I marched with in Greensboro.

Of course, this kind of work gets real boring after a while, so we talk all the time, and everybody tries to tell the best joke, and we kid a lot about where we're from. After a couple of days I can tell these guys are different from guys I usually hang around with.

But that's OK – we're helping our boys in a different way from just buying War Savings Stamps and having scrap-drives. Anyway, I'm glad I've found something like this since I can't march on Sundays any more.

Mr. Ames tells us where to work on different jobs every day. For instance, sometimes I help haul sheets of Masonite from the railroad siding back over for the rocket boxes. He's a lot better off than my real Daddy ever was because he can drive the truck to the siding,

but he can't lift anything heavy so Arnold and I do the heavy jobs.

Riding on the truck is pretty much like time off – when it's not raining – and we get to smoke a butt each way. Sometimes when Arnold's on another job it's Harold and me. He's from Kentucky, and he likes to show off how strong he is, even though he's a heck of a sight bigger than me. He always picks up three sheets of Masonite where Arnold only picks up two, so I lift anything he can even if I stumble with it sometimes. Daddy says I'm liable to get a hernia doing that, but I don't worry – it's not that hard – besides, this is war work.

Well, talking about Harold, he's really strong everywhere except in his head. He never learned to read or write where he grew up in the mountains of Kentucky, and Mr. Ames says that's what keeps him out of the service. He says Arnold hitchhiked and walked all the way to Cincinnati to get a job and make money to send back home, which is over four hundred miles from here. I guess things are pretty bad for his family like they were for us in Stokesland.

I find out he can't read one day when we're gluing up, and all the guys are telling dirty jokes and making wise-cracks, and I know a bunch of good ones, like, "Have you read *The Silver Stream* by I. P. Freely?" and "Have you read *The Golden Stream* by P. A. Little?"

So I'm telling these, and I'm really into it, and some guys are laughing their heads off! But a couple of guys don't laugh at anything I say – and I can't figure it out because they're real funny. And when the smoking break comes, Mr. Ames takes me over to another department and says, "Billy, maybe you shouldn't talk so much about all them books you can read, 'cause some of the boys here don't read books. And I know for a fact Harold can't read or write, which is why he's not in the army."

My first day there I ask Mr. Ames why we get a smoking break, and he says government war regulations say we've got to get a break twice a day. So everybody who smokes walks out to the shed and has a roll-your-own and shoots craps for pennies because nobody's got the money to lose any more than that. But you can lose a lot of pennies if you're not any good at it, and I guess that's me because I lose most of the time. But I like to play – so I stick in there to the last roll – and it usually costs me a dime or so. But I don't care any-

anymore because I'm making \$4.00 a day every day I work.

I make fifty cents an hour, which gives me twenty dollars for a regular week and twenty six dollars if I work Saturdays. I'm glad to work overtime – that's the most money I've ever made in my life, and I'm saving a lot of it for some good clothes to wear to Walnut Hills High School in the fall.

Every Monday Mama takes my savings up to the bank, and it's earning 2% interest – which is a lot better than having it sit home under my mattress. I like working and saving money and getting interest on it. But it seems funny that I'm making all that money when Mama wasn't making but \$16 a week when she married Daddy.

Well, we might need to use my money for our family now because Daddy was on a trip to Louisville to see his friends down there, and he took all our savings with him, which Mama didn't know about, and he lost his wallet just like I told Mama I did. But I just lost four dollars, and Daddy lost \$300 that they've been saving since they got married. And she's about as upset as I can remember since my real Daddy died, but she doesn't fuss about it or anything. The other night she said to me, "Son, we have to trust in the Lord to take care of us, because the world is too hard a place to live alone."

## Back in Virginia

1944

I'm all registered to go to Walnut Hills High School, which is about the best anywhere in Ohio and maybe Virginia, too. But then two weeks ago, Daddy gets a job in Norfolk, back in Virginia. We're happy to be moving back home even if we can't live in Danville. But to tell the truth, I don't think Daddy wants to live anywhere near Danville where all Mama's children live now. It's funny, but when I was little I always thought we'd live in Stokesland all our lives.

So Mama's packing everything up in boxes that they let me have at the big grocery store, and we have to wait our turn for the moving truck, due to wartime. So Mama says Deanie and I should go ahead to Danville and spend some time at Alma's and see J.T. and Lillian, too. So they bring us down to the train station, and we all kiss goodbye, and Deanie and I get on the train and Mama's crying a little, I think.

Nearly the entire train ride is at night, and we have to stop for six hours in Lynchburg to get the next train to Danville. We stay in the station all night except for a few times we take a walk out front where it's already light – to wake me up. There aren't more than a half-dozen people in the station all night long, and it's kind of lonely, but I never go to sleep – except I dozed once and fell off the bench – but on this trip it's my job to look after Deanie. I figure any guy who can work in a war plant and smoke and play craps with grown men and carry lumber a guy twice my size can carry is big enough to look after his sister for two days.

We have a real good time in Danville with Alma and everybody. It's funny, I walk in her house with J.T. and when I say the first thing she breaks out crying, and she hugs me like I've been lost in a jungle for a year or two. And she says, "Billy, you've grown too much – you're not my baby brother any more." Well, I am as tall as she is now, and I guess she didn't see me growing up because she never got the chance to come see us in Cincinnati. One day, Alma

asks me a question and I say “Yes, Ma’am ” like Mama taught us to do – and she hauls off and gives me a good lesson right in front of everybody.

“Billy Martin, you don’t ever say ‘Yes, Ma’am’ to me again. I’m not your mama or your aunt or your grandma. I’m your sister – that’s all. Now, come over here and let me hug my tall little brother and hear your man’s voice again!” So I go over and hug her and everybody laughs, and I’m glad they’ve started treating me like a grown-up. Now I don’t feel funny smoking in front of her or the rest of them.

J.T. comes to see us every day from the boarding house, and all of us have a family reunion like we used to in Axton and Leaksville every year. Of course, I’m growing up right fast, like Alma said, but I still cried a little bit when J.T. hugged me when we got here. I tried not to show it because I want everybody to see I’m grown up now – besides, I don’t think he was crying.

On Tuesday Mama and Daddy meet us at the Greyhound station in Norfolk, and Mama says they took the bus because it’s cheaper since Daddy lost all that money. I guess I’ve never been happier to see anybody – except maybe old Jinx in Greensboro that time. And we ride on a streetcar like in Cincinnati, and it takes us to a boarding house in Brambleton. Then we go to bed, and I sleep the longest I’ve ever slept at one time.

When we wake up Mama takes us for a walk to show us what Norfolk is like, and I’d say right now it’s mostly water and old houses and cobblestone streets – at least it’s that way in Brambleton. They have a room and Deanie and I do, too. And we eat all our meals here except once when Daddy says, “I think it’s time you two learn to eat in a restaurant.” See, they ate all their meals in restaurants in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, which is like having a party for a week, Mama says.

So we catch the streetcar over to Granby Street and walk over to Monticello Avenue, which is named for Thomas Jefferson’s home – we learned that in history in the fourth grade under Miss Moore. Daddy picks out a nice restaurant and we go in, and a lady takes us to a table with a white tablecloth on it. The knives and forks and spoons are already on the table, and everybody gets one of each.



And we get cloth napkins like we had when we spent the week at Aint Trudy's and Uncle Morris's.

Pretty soon a man with a towel around his waist comes over and asks us what we want to eat. But I don't know what you can get in restaurants, so Mama says to read the menu, but I can't tell the difference in all the things they've got listed. So when she orders a small chicken dinner for Deanie I chime in, "I'll try that, too."

In ten minutes the man brings our chickens. I timed him on the clock on the wall to have something to do. And then I start thinking – if he can fix a chicken dinner in ten minutes, and it takes Mama half-an-hour to catch one and pluck it and cut it up – he must have cut that bird's head off and plucked it long before we got here. Shucks! I'll bet they've got dead chickens all over that back room.

Of course, Mama says the blessing, though she's the only one here who does – and Daddy tries to shush her – but she says it anyway. That's the first time I've ever seen her do something he didn't want her to. And when she's finished, I gulp down the chicken and finish it quick because there isn't much of it – and I'm still really hungry. I figure you're not supposed to get full in a restaurant, so I don't ask for a second helping like I would at home. Then I eat all the leftover bread and drink my water and Deanie's and half of Mama's – and I figure I'll be OK for a while.

It's hard to find enough to do when you've got to kill a whole month, even if you're at home, which we're not. So I read a bunch of Mrs. Berkeley's books from her living room shelf – but they're mostly old history books that aren't interesting. And Sunday we go to a Methodist Church around the corner, which is really big, maybe even bigger than Walnut Hills Baptist Church. And afterward we fish for minnows down off the pier – and it's real funny, but Mama doesn't say a word about fishing on Sunday like she did in Stokesland. And I never even consider eating them this time – like when we almost threw our guts up after eating the minnows at Red Horse!

One day I'm walking around looking at Brambleton and the pier and the water and the ships, and it's all kind of familiar – and then I figure it's because it looks a whole lot like a place I saw in a Bowery

Boys movie about New York City when we lived in Cincinnati. And now I go to sleep every night trying to dream about being in the movies with Leo Gorse and The Dead End Kids and stuff like that.

Like I said, we've got a room right over Mr. and Mrs. Berkeley, and one night it's too hot to sleep, and I hear them whispering, and he's trying to get her to kiss him and do the other stuff – but she keeps saying she's too tired. He keeps begging her like we do Mama sometimes when we want another piece of pie – real cute-like. And she starts giggling, and he giggles, too, and she says, "Stop that, Tom, you're making too much noise, honey!" And then they get real quiet except for the way their bed rattles. And then they must have gone to sleep because it gets quiet again.

Well, I don't have much trouble figuring out what's going on down there – especially after the things I learned at the war plant – and now I know a lot more about what Mr. Umphlett and Miss Drake were talking about in health class, too.

The next Sunday we ride over the Berkeley Bridge to the top of Granby Street to do some sightseeing. We're standing on the steps of our streetcar looking down Granby Street, and the whole city looks like it snowed last night. The streets are crammed full of sailors in white uniforms like they would be in a movie – every single man is in a white uniform!

The lady next to us says, "The fleet's in town!"

Well, I've never felt so proud and happy all inside my whole body, and she says it looks like the whole United States Navy is here in Norfolk – right now – today! I don't know if it could be true, but just think! Some of these men might have known Jimmy when he was on the *USS Borie*.

I don't think I'll ever forget seeing Granby Street like that – with all those sailors covering everywhere you could walk, even in the middle of the street – and the cars having to stop if the sailor-boys want to stand somewhere – and everybody blowing his horn and looking happy! It makes me feel safe to have all these men willing to die like Jimmy did so we can win the war.

Daddy says Norfolk is a city and a county too, and the county is a lot bigger than the city. Now he's bought us a house, and we're going to move to Norview – which is called that because it's half-way between Norfolk and Ocean View. The Chesapeake Bay and the Ocean View Amusement Park are at Ocean View, and we can take the streetcar there any time we want to like when we went to Coney Island.

A few days later Mama says, “Billy, we need to go on a shopping trip to get you a new suit for the first day of school – one you can wear to church on Sunday.”

So we take the streetcar over to Granby Street and go in a fancy men's store called The Hub, where we buy the fanciest suit I've ever seen. It's brown-striped and 100% wool. And when I put it on I feel real proud, and I think how maybe one Sunday I'll just walk up to the front of Norview Baptist Church in my new suit and sing in the choir like in Stokesland – because we're back in Virginia now!

## **New friends and old**

We move to our new house at 110 Windermere Avenue. It's real small, but Daddy says we'll trade for a bigger house when we find the right one. I sleep in the living room on the fold-down-couch we bought in Cincinnati because we don't have but two bedrooms. Mama says Deanie needs her own room now because she's nine years old and is growing up.

The last people who lived here gave us their big brown dog because they had to move to California. His name is Sport. He's a German shepherd, and he's a beauty. But I've got to admit it's kind of hard to like a German dog with the war going on – and Jimmy Winn dying and all. But he's a good dog, and he sleeps in his own house, and he comes every time I call him – and we got him for free! But darn it! It just makes me miss Jinx more every time I look at Sport.

Norview High School started last week, and I caught the bus out on Sewell's Point Road the first day in front of a store called Summers' Grocery – but I expect I'll walk up from now on unless the weather's doing something dumb. I register for classes, and nobody says anything about me talking like a Yankee now, and nobody wants to hear me read – so I guess I'm a southern boy from Virginia again, and nobody's going to make fun of that.

Mr. Chittum is the principal, and they send me to see him in his office. He says since I came from a school that lasted twelve years, I'll be put up to the tenth grade. I'll just skip ninth – especially since I made all A's last year and got the Mercantile Library award. He says skipping a grade doesn't matter much because I can do the work.

Right when I'm leaving the office looking for my homeroom, I hear somebody yelling in the hall that sounds exactly like somebody I used to really like a lot – I run down the hall and stick my head in every single room until I find him.

And I swear! It's Dickie Neal! He was my best friend at Charles B. Aycock in Greensboro. Darn it! I want to hug him like I do J.T., but that's not what boys do at our age now. So we just hit on each other and laugh and spend all the time we've got left talking about what we've been doing for the past two years.

And now, shucks! My first day at Norview is about the best day I've ever spent in any school! Dickie likes my new suit – but he says it'll be real hot this time of year in Virginia. But I'm proud of the way I look because I'm the best-dressed guy I've seen all day.

Last Sunday we went to church and I got to wear my new suit. We walk up Sewell's Point Road past the movie theater to The Norview Baptist Church, and we meet the minister, Dr. Meade, who's really a nice man. But he's kind of old – his hair is whiter than Daddy's – so I figure he's got to be 60, because Daddy's 55. I like him – but I don't understand most of what he preached about.

The next Sunday we get there earlier, and a lady shows me the way to a garage behind a house the church uses for the Sunday school, and there's a sign that says "Junior Boy's Sunday School Class." I find the side door and knock, and a guy my age opens the door, and I climb over somebody's legs and find a seat in the back. It's real crowded and real hot, and I don't know if I'm going to like this after Walnut Hills Baptist Church – which was really big and nice and fancy.

We have a man for a teacher, which I've never had before – except for Mr. Bridges who taught math in Louisville – and he's kind of big, and he yells like a preacher sometimes when he teaches. His face gets all red, and he walks around while he's talking – and yelling! But I like him from the first word I hear him say. He tells us how he used to be a sinner – he was a drinker and a gambler. And he never darkened the church door, and he cursed all the time, and he got into fights, and he used the Lord's name in vain and did all kinds of things we learned not to do in Stokesland. And then he found Jesus, and he's been coming to Norview Baptist Church ever since.

Well, shucks! I never expected to have that kind of guy for a teacher in Sunday school, anywhere! Aint Maude Baker probably

## Billy

never committed a sin her whole life. And we had really nice teachers in the Louisville Presbyterian Church, and they were real good at Walnut Hills Baptist, too, but I can't remember what any of them ever said to us.

The man's name is Don Meadows, and he's a tough guy you like to listen to. His stories about his life are better than Bible stories, and he's got a real cute daughter – but she's two years younger than I am. I think I'm going to like his class!

### **Not that kinda guy**

The second Saturday we're here I go up to the Norview Theater to see a Buster Crabbe movie, but I'm not going up there to see cowboys – I'm going up there to find girls to do some hot necking with. But there isn't anybody sitting anywhere near the front – boys or girls! So I plop down in the middle and watch the cowboys, and Buster is right good. He's wearing an old Civil War army uniform before he gets to be a cowboy, and the movie has a lot of fighting and chasing Indians.

About half-way through an old man about 50 comes along and sits down a couple of seats away and offers me some Milk Duds – but I'm eating popcorn and you can't eat them both at the same time. Then a couple of minutes later he moves over and sits next to me – and he hits my knee with his knee – and I move my leg away. And he's looking at the movie, and I don't know it but all at once he's got his hand on my knee, and he starts rubbing my leg. And I push his hand away, and he smiles and offers me some Milk Duds, and I shake my head. But he keeps his hand out with the Milk Duds in it – and I whisper so everybody can hear me, "I'm not that kinda boy – now leave me alone!"

Then he gets up real quietly and sneaks over to the other side of the theater and sits down near some other guy. I've never had anybody do that to me before, but I've heard about it. It was pretty clear what he wanted to do. I guess I'll just sit near some other guys next time I come here.

Right up Sewell's Point Road before you get to the movie theater there's the Norview Pool Hall, but you can't play unless you're sixteen. You can't even go in and watch, either, unless you're sixteen.

But the guy who owns it lives across the street from us, and one day I make up my mind to see what's going on in there. So I just walk in like I'm 16 or 17 and sit down on some bleachers they've

got so you can watch grudge matches. I watch for a while, and then I walk out like I belonged in there in the first place.

Nobody says a thing to me about my age! So I go in whenever I want to now, and I play a game or two when I've got the money because it costs a dime a cue – that's what a sign says: "A-dime-a-cue." And after a while I'm getting pretty good because I figure out the angle-stuff. You got to see the angle you want the ball to go on and then hit the ball on the side with the cue-ball so it'll go there. But I think you've got to hang around the pool hall and play a whole lot to get really good at it.

One day late I'm playing with Sport in the front yard and the man across the street who owns the pool hall drives up in his Model A Sedan. He's been real nice to let me shoot without ever asking my age. Well, he cranks down his window and yells out, "Hey, Billy, you know how to drive one of these things, huh?"

Well, of course I don't – I've never even tried to steer a car because Daddy hasn't had one since he married Mama, and my real Daddy couldn't drive one when he was sick – so I yell, "Naw, I've never been real good with cars."

And he yells, "There's no time to learn like the present! Come on! Get in!"

Well, this would really be a good time to start learning, like I'm learning how to play pool. And he moves over to the other seat, and I slip in under the steering wheel, and he shows me how to push down the clutch pedal – and he puts my foot on the pedal and pushes it real hard so I'll really know how – and I stomp the accelerator pedal and let out on the clutch – and it conks out.

And he says, "That's OK, Billy, everybody's got trouble with the clutch. That's the hardest thing to learn about driving."

So I try again, and it conks out again. And then I get the darn thing rolling down the street, and we come to the end, and there's a dirt road going through the woods. Heck, this is more fun than I ever thought it would be – I'm really driving a car! And he pushes my knee down on the gas, and we speed up. And I'm getting scared, and I take my foot off because there are a lot of trees in the way. And he says, "Don't be afraid. You're doing a good job. I bet



you've been driving a long time!"

We come to the end of the dirt road, and there's a path through to the other side of the woods that I've gone through lots of times hunting with Sport, and he says to stop. And when I hit the brake he puts his hand on my leg and starts rubbing it. And he puts his other hand on my shoulder and rubs it, too. And about then I'm getting wise to what he's trying, and that's why he let me drive his car. He's just like the old guy in the movie theater.

And I yell out loud as I can, "Hey, wait, I'm not like that! I don't do that kind of stuff! You got the wrong guy, hear?! I'm going home!" And he takes his hand off, and I jump out and run back home – and he drives his damn old car back by himself!

I heard guys talking back at the smoking place that now he gets guys from school and tries to do things with them in the back of the pool hall. I don't know if it's true or not, but it probably is after what he tried with me.

## Summers' Grocery

Y'know, it's hell not having my own money and having to ask Mama for a quarter when I want to go to the movies. I spent all the money I had on my new suit for church, and I'm growing so fast it's almost too short for me now. But Mama says she can let the cuffs down for one more year, so that's OK. *The Green Lantern* is playing, and I want to see that because Dickie says it's real tough, and it's got a lot of shooting in it – so I ask Mama, “I think I'll go to the movie tonight if you've got any spare change in your pocket-book...”

“Well, Son, we always seem to be able to find some for you, don't we? Here, have a good time and spend the extra for some Milk Duds if you want to. I know you always like Milk Duds.” And she gives me 50 cents, and the movie costs 35 cents, “Yes, Ma'am. Thanks...and have you got another penny in there for some gum?” Which I really need because Camels cost 16 cents up at Abby's Texaco, which is the best place to buy because nobody asks your age like they're supposed to.

I know Mama is plenty smart, and she's figured out the penny is for cigarettes, but she never asks me what I want it for – and it makes me feel bad lying to her like that. Pretty soon I'm just going to have to get it out in the open about smoking, and why not? I just turned fifteen, which is plenty old to make up my own mind what I want to do because J.T. left when he was just barely fifteen. But I won't ever leave home on Mama – I know that for sure!

And that's what's behind it one day when I walk up to Summers' Grocery on Sewell's Point Road right up from Windermere Avenue. Mr. and Mrs. Summers own it, but Mrs. Summers really runs it, and Mr. Summers just hangs around, they say. Old Mr. Privott, who lives next door, says Mr. Summers spends more time talking than he does working – or else he's at his house behind the store doing some repair job – so it's Mrs. Summers who gives me a Saturday job for the winter – and I can work all the time in the summer.

I help people carry out their groceries like I did in Cincinnati, but they don't tip me very often. Mrs. Gatewood gave me a nickel last Saturday because she had three boxes and two twenty-five-pound bags of biddie feed I had to take out to her Chevy. What I mainly do is put up cans and stuff on the shelves and sweep out the store at night and pump gas on a really old hand-pump that takes forever to put five gallons in.

And it's funny, but I don't know how much I make an hour like I did at the war plant because Mrs. Summers just comes over to me right before quitting time and hands me a little brown candy bag all folded up. And she doesn't say a word. She doesn't tell me why she gives me that much, and she never has told me how much I'm supposed to make. But that's OK because I like it a lot here, and I usually get two one-dollar-bills for the whole day – and that pays for my cigarettes and the movies and some pool – and that's enough.

I'm sort of learning the rules of the store. For instance, I can have one soft drink without paying for it. But last Saturday Mrs. Summers went home for something, and Mr. Summers was outside talking to Mrs. Baumgartner – so I drank an orangeade, too, in the store-room before they got back. I take one cookie when I want to out of the cookie bins, but Mrs. Summers hasn't told me what I can eat without paying for it. So I ask Mama what she thinks, and she says I should pay for everything I eat.

Veronica came in the store last Saturday, and I flipped over her! Mama says I've got a crush on her because I'm always talking about her. But she's in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and that's too old for me – since I jumped a grade. But I'm not going to let that matter because I'd really like to ask her to go to the Teen-age Club some Saturday night. She's as pretty as a girl can get! Except maybe for the Brett girl!

One day Veronica comes in the store wearing one of those peasant-blouses cut real low in the front, and she leans over to get some cookies out of the cookie bin, and I can see everything she's got on – and that's not much. I've got to find a way to ask her to go to the Teenage Club with me.

## In the Navy

J.T. has graduated from Schoolfield High School where he made really good grades. Then he took a test to be a Navy pilot, but he flunked because he said he didn't like fast cars and doing risky things. So he joined the Navy, and I'm as proud of him as I was of Jimmy Winn – but he won't get killed and be a hero like Jimmy was because the war is over and he's in basic training in Williamsburg near us.

So we all ride the bus up there one Sunday, and they let us in, and we're sitting in a big room at Camp Perry where boot camp is, and other families are here visiting with their sons, too. After we wait a long time, I start thinking "Suppose they've shipped him out, and we don't know it!" and I start getting scared.

And all at once he walks through some swinging doors at the end of the big room, and he's got on a white uniform, and his hair has been cut so short it looks like mine did when he strung chewing gum in my hair and Alma cut it all off. I'm so glad to see him I almost pee in my pants! He's bigger and he looks older, and when Mama sees him she squeezes my hand like she's going to break my fingers. He runs over to us, and Mama hugs him a long time, and she's crying. And Deanie hugs him and I hug him, and I cry. I don't want anybody to see me, but I can't stop. And he hugs me real hard. I don't think he's ever hugged me before.

They let us stay for nearly an hour before he has to go back to training, and then we catch the bus back to Norfolk. I don't think I'll get in any more fights with him because he's too big now. I never could win even when he was littler – but I had to fight anyway.

## Sticking together

We've been back in Virginia about a year when things start to go wrong in our family. Daddy is always upset because everybody in the family has moved here except for Alma and Joe. They live in Chatham because Joe's nerves went to pieces after his ship made five round-trips in the Atlantic with enemy submarines everywhere sinking our ships and killing our boys. And he couldn't take it, so he had a nervous breakdown – and now he doesn't do anything but play solitaire all day long.

Virginia is living here with her husband, Frontis, and they've got a new little baby boy named Evans. Mama goes over to help her every day because they just live a few blocks away. Daddy gets really upset when she spends time with her children – and he doesn't want them around here anyway.

So one day he tells Mama he can't stand it any more, and he leaves home, and we don't know where he went, and he doesn't write us but once. And in no time at all everybody in our family comes to live with Mama and us except for Lillian.

About a month later Daddy comes back home to find everybody is living in our house, and Mama is working downtown in a ladies' dress shop. And then one night all Mama's children get together and decide I shouldn't call him Daddy because he's not my real daddy – and I know they're doing it because they're mad at him. So now I call him Richard like they do, and that makes him sad.

He doesn't have a job, so he takes care of the house and helps Virginia cook. Now the house is really crowded living like this. Then one night after Mama and Richard have gone to bed, Virginia says Mama's children need to have a family meeting, so we crowd into the living room.

And she starts off, "I'm tired of Richard living here and not giving Mama any money for board like we do. And I think he's been mean to Mama – I can tell! I can hear him sometimes. He fusses at

her at night, and he doesn't want us living here to take care of her. And we don't like him, and he doesn't like us, and I can't see any reason for him to still be here. Mama shouldn't have let him come back, anyway!" And they keep on fussing about him for a long time.

I don't know what to say to anybody because I like Richard because he's always been real good to Deanie and Mama and me – but I can't turn against my family. So I just say, "I'll do whatever y'all do."

"Well, I think we've got to drive him out of Mama's house. We can't let him treat her like he does and us not take up for her. She was a lot better off while he was gone, wasn't she?"

And somebody says, "I know he lost all Mama's money at the Kentucky Derby, and then he lied about that to everybody!"

"Yeah, and he wouldn't even let J.T. live at home when he was just barely fifteen!"

"And he moved Mama all over the country, and she had to pack-up and move just because he couldn't hold down a job!"

"Well, let's go in there and tell him he's gotta leave this house. He's not gonna stay with us any longer!"

"Yeah, we'll get rid of that devil! He's just been a devil for all of us ever since he married Mama!"

"C'mon, let's get him outta there!"

And everybody rushes into Mama's room where they're in bed talking, and J.T. turns on the light switch, and Richard looks mad as he can be. But he doesn't get out of bed. And Mama's real scared.

And Frontis and J.T. get on the other side of the bed, and Virginia stands at the end – and they start yelling, "Listen, Richard, we've been talking in the other room, and we've decided you've got to leave Mama's house! You've got to find some place else to live! We'll take care of Mama – you just get out of here as fast as you can!"

And Frontis runs over to Mama's closet and reaches up to the back of the top shelf and feels around and comes down with a really weird-looking thing like a whip. It's made out of a broomstick and some leather shoelaces, and it looks like what you'd whip a slave with back before the Civil War.

About that time Richard starts to get up and put his clothes on,

and J.T. pushes him down on the bed, “You just stay on that bed! We’re not finished with you yet! You’ve been mean to Mama! We can hear you all the time yelling at her when we’re in the other part of the house!”

“And what did you make that whip for – to whip Mama? That’s what you did, didn’t you? You whipped our Mama, didn’t you?”

And Mama is crying, and she can’t say anything because she’s caught in the middle – like she says she’s been all her life. And everybody’s yelling at Richard, and Virginia says he’s got to leave and never come back. I just can’t say that to him, so I don’t say anything at all.

So he packs his suitcase and leaves home right then and there! And we never heard another word from him. I’m real sad for what went on that night, and I’m ashamed I didn’t take up for Daddy because he was always really good and kind to Deanie and Mama and me.

But it’s awfully hard to go against what the others are doing. I guess we’ve got to stick together like Mama always taught us.

## Sunday special

Well, one of the best things about having everybody home again is we go to church together. Mama's got a smile all across her face when the bunch of us walk in early and get a good seat up front and fill up a whole pew on one side – sort of like we did in Stokesland Baptist Church a long time ago.

A couple of Sundays ago Mr. Manley, one of the men in the choir, comes up to Mama after preaching and says, “Well, Mrs. Love, it must make you right proud to have all those bright young people sitting with you every Sunday. We can hear them singing all over the church, and as a member of the choir I'd like to invite them to sing the special next Sunday.”

When we get home Mama tells us about it, and we almost can't believe it. We've been away from each other so long we didn't know if we could still harmonize like we used to. So Virginia calls Mr. Manley and says, “Sure! We'll be glad to sing, but we'll wait until our sister, Alma, comes to visit so she can sing, too.” And he says to just let him know.

Well, one weekend about a month later, Alma comes to Norfolk with Joe's cousin who lives in Newport News, and she brings all of her kids – and we're really crowded, now! But it's good to be together again – even if half of us have to sleep on pallets.

So Mama calls Mr. Manley, and he says fine, we can sing on Sunday! So we practice a whole lot, and I'm really surprised we can sing pretty much like we used to – except now I'm a bass.

So Sunday we're up early and Mama says, “Lordy, I don't know how all of us will ever get ready with just one bathroom, and Alma yells out, “Mama, just remember we didn't even have one bathroom in Stokesland, and we all got to church on time – almost.”

So we get there before the early-birders take the pews up front, and we practice the special twice, and the piano lady, Mrs. Nock, offers to play for us if we want her to. But we're used to singing by ourselves on the front porch, so we thank her anyway.



Church begins and Dr. Meade gives out his usual really long big prayer of the day – and then it's time for us! And Alma stands up and we follow her up onto the platform and get in a line facing everybody. Then she gives us the pitch so soft probably we're the only ones can hear it.

Alma's so good at music that she probably could have been a country singer if she hadn't married Joe so young. And Virginia used to sing in all the operettas in high school. In 1939 her whole choir went to the New York World's Fair and sang for everybody up there.

So we sing the special in harmony, and we're better than we've ever been, I think – and the people listen so hard you could hear a pin drop. And even the old ladies stop whispering while we're singing – which they don't do real often.

Alma and I sing harmony and Lillian and Virginia take the melody and J.T. sings bass, and it's the first time we've sung together since the time Deanie and I went to Danville on the train when we moved back to Virginia.

I've got to say this is one of the most fun things we've ever done – just as Mama's children. The congregation looks like they're going to clap, but you don't do that in church, ever, Mama says – it wouldn't be respectful to God – even if the Psalm says to make a joyful noise before the Lord.

## HINES

The first week I walk to school I notice a white cinder-block building with a big sign up at the Five-Forks. It reads “HINES” – just HINES. Since then I’ve heard it’s a teen-age hangout, and that’s what everybody calls it – HINES. They also say it’s packed with Norview kids every night, and it’s run by Mr. Hines, who used to clean out septic tanks before the war and whose boy cleans them out now.

Well, it takes me about a month to get up nerve enough to go in – and that’s after I hear out at the smoking ring that it’s where the cheerleaders hang out. It’s Friday night and I want to see HINES from the inside, but nobody’s going to do me a favor and carry me in. So I walk natural as I can up the front walk, and I push the big red door open – and a cloud of smoke comes swooshing out like the place is on fire. Well, I step in and look around, and there’s a long counter with kids my age sitting on stools and twisting round and round. And there are tables and chairs all around the walls, and there’s a place to dance in the middle of the room.

Up against the back wall there’s a pinball machine that I’m dying to try out – and soon I hear everybody wants to beat it – but they say you can’t unless you cheat it. Dickie says you bore a hole in the side and stick a wire in to hit the bumpers and make the score go up – you can win that way. And you can win a reputation that way, too. I heard a bunch of guys putting a guy down who used the wire the other day.

Well, I don’t see anybody I know right away so I go up to the counter, and Mr. Hines is standing there watching the pinball machine, and he turns around real friendly, “Whatcha gonna have young man? You’re new here, ain’tcha?”

“Yessir, I’m Billy Martin. We just moved down on Windermere Avenue, and I’m going to Norview, and I’d like a cherry smash – small please.”

And I slide a nickel across the counter and take my drink and

sort of wander over to watch the pinball guys lose their money – because it’s obvious Mr. Hines is looking for the wire tonight, so nobody’s gonna win! Then I turn around and look to see if I know anybody, and there’s Bobby Jones who lives next door to us on Windermere. He’s in a booth with his girl who’s a cheerleader. And there are some big guys I expect are football players because they’re not drinking carbonated drinks, which the coaches don’t allow because it cuts down on your wind. And I see another guy, Norman, who won a brand-new Chevrolet sedan with a raffle ticket his Daddy gave him that cost a dollar. And he’s jitterbugging like crazy, and he’s really good! I don’t expect I’ll ever try that – not around a bunch of people like are in here tonight.

But, the smoke starts getting to me – so I head for home. Well, I like HINES a lot, and I reckon Mama won’t mind me going in there after school – or especially on weekends.

A couple of weeks later it’s Saturday night, and I’m hanging around out front of HINES. And Elwin Evans, who’s a Norview Tough, is pretty high already. He’s leaning against a pole that holds the awning up and he’s carrying on about the same crap he does at the smoking ring behind the gym. Only he’s worse when he’s sloshed, “Dammit, I’m the toughest son-of-a bitch in Norview, and anybody don’t think so we better get into it right now!”

And he punches a new fat guy real hard on his shoulder, and fatty tries to laugh it off like he’s been done a favor – and he slouches off for home to soak his arm. And a couple of guys are playing flinch where if you duck away when somebody swings at you, you’re flinching – and he gets to blast your arm as hard as he wants to.

Every time I see Elwin around he acts more like Sanford used to – he’s a carbon copy. He doesn’t ever seem to be happy about anything, and he doesn’t ever smile – and he doesn’t even grin unless he’s said something he thinks is funny. And he picks on anybody he doesn’t want to hang around with and runs him off. I think it might be his wooden leg that makes Sanford and him a lot alike – being crippled. They say Elwin got his foot cut off in an accident when he was a lot younger.

So you can't tell what either one of them is going to do the next minute. They seem to want to hurt somebody – especially if the other guy can't hurt back. Makes me wonder if Elwin has ever poked his sister's eyes out in their snapshot book.

Up to this past Saturday night, Elwin is the toughest guy in Norview – and then Robert Harris shows up out front under the awning. Robert is half-Indian, and he lives up around the curve past the high school off Sewell's Point Road on a big farm. He quit school a couple of years ago to work the farm, and he's really built. He's always tanned like an Indian, and nobody messes with him, but he doesn't bother anybody else, either.

So this night Elwin is yelling crap at every car coming down Fairview Blvd. "I'm the toughest bastard in Norview! You're chicken to step out of that crummy car and take me up on it. Come on, old man!"

But right then Robert is coming up the road in his Daddy's Dodge sedan, and he hears Elwin call him "chicken." But Elwin is too drunk to see it's Robert. And Robert cuts over real quick to the parking lot at the bowling alley across the street from HINES and slams on the brakes and walks sort of slow and heavy over to the awning.

Elwin doesn't know Robert is anywhere around, and Robert comes up behind him quiet, like an Indian, and half-whispers, "I ain't sayin' you're that tough – and I ain't sayin' ya ain't. But you gotta prove it if you gonna keep yelling that crap at me when I drive by here."

Well, Elwin turns around surprised as the dickens, and Robert stares back at him like an Indian brave does in a John Wayne movie – and Elwin doesn't say a word. But he's not afraid of Robert, or anybody else for that matter. He says, "I guess that means we gotta see who's toughest – you or me, Robert."

"Yeah, we better see, Elwin..."

"OK. Robert, OK. We'll...uh, lessee...uh...ha...how 'bout we trade licks in the stomach – that's if you're willing to trade with me." And Elwin grins at Robert.

And Robert nods to Elwin – just once.

“You take the hit first if that’s OK with you, Robert.”

And Robert nods – once.

Then he walks over to the iron post that holds the blue awning up in front of HINES and braces his back against the pole. Elwin stumbles getting to the pole, and right now he looks too drunk to even stand up straight. But he draws back his left arm and pastes Robert with a roundhouse right to the belly – hard enough to half-kill a horse.

But Robert doesn’t flinch an inch. All you can hear is a little “whisssshhhh” come out of his mouth – like air creeping out of a tire when you first slash a hole in it. He doesn’t flinch an inch but just nods once to say it’s Elwin’s turn.

And Elwin takes a deep breath and brings up a god-awful belch and lets out a fart at the same time and backs up to the post and hangs on to it to keep from falling down. And he whispers to Robert loud enough so everybody can hear it, “Listen, Robert, I’m gonna do it – I ain’t chicken – but you oughta know I’m drunk as hell. And if you hit my belly and I throw up all over you, it’s your own damn fault.”

Then he giggles out a belch right in Robert’s face.

Well, Robert doesn’t answer – not a word – he just turns around and walks slow like he came – back across Sewell’s Point to the bowling alley and gets in his Daddy’s car and spins off a mile of rubber up Sewell’s Point until he’s out of sight.

And Elwin and every other guy under that awning knows for sure now – Robert Harris is the toughest guy anywhere around HINES – and anywhere else around Norview.

Now Robert is the toughest guy around, but Elwin has got to be the meanest! He proves this one night when nothing’s going on, and he doesn’t see anybody he wants to pick on. We’re all just hanging under the awning, and he yells, “You piss-ants, come on! We’re going somewhere! I got us something t’do tonight!”

So about a half-dozen of us take off up the road, past the Big Star. It looks like we’re headed to the high school. Herby stops and pries a hubcap off Mr. Greary’s ’37 Hudson he parked out on the road. When he starts bragging about it, but Elwin cuts him down,

“Shut up! And stay shut up or I’ll shove that hubcap where the sun don’t shine.”

And we creep on up the road until we come to Mr. Epeditis’s house, which is a real big place. It’s got a brick wall around the front yard with two big brick pillars at the end of the front walk. Mr. Epeditis owns a nice restaurant in Fairmount Park. Elwin calls a huddle and whispers, “Listen, what we gonna do tonight’ll show if you’re tough or you’re justa buncha sissy-biddies oughta have your heads pinched off.”

“Listen now... Where you going, Harry? Come back here, Harry!” And Harry takes a couple of steps and stops.

“OK. Here it is! We’re gonna pull one a’ them brick columns down in front of old man Epeditis’s house – down to the ground!”

Well, I don’t see how we can do that even if we wanted to – and I don’t want to. But I don’t say anything because I’m not crazy about getting smashed up side of the head. But Harry’s got guts where his sense ought to be, and he says, “I don’t want no part of that crap!” and heads back down to HINES.

Then Richard chimes in acting like he’s with it, “Listen, Elwin! Listen, buddy! If you say we’re gonna push them things over, I’m for it – but I don’t see how we’re gonna do it with our bare-hands!”

And that makes Elwin mad, and he starts cussing again, and he’s really steamed because Cecil has gone walking down the road now, too, mumbling, “Hell, we can’t push that thing over!” And the other guys are hanging back – waiting for something to happen, to see who wins.

And then Elwin jumps over to one of the columns and wraps his arms around it – and he’s pulling on it this way and shoving it that way – and he gets red in the face. The column is taller than he is and about twice as thick. And he grabs Richard by the neck and shoves him up against it, and he starts after Harry, but Harry’s fifty yards down the road by now.

Elwin grabs the column again and is sweating like a Turk, and he’s whispering so loud I’m afraid he’s going to wake Mr. Epeditis up, “If you’re just gonna stand round out there on the sidewalk actin’ like assholes, I’m goin’ home.”

Well, nobody’s ready to see the evening choked to death like

this, so we run up to the column and start pulling on it and shoving it – and he’s cussing and shoving us around like he’s crazy, like a mad-man.

And all at once that stack of bricks starts moving. One corner comes up off the ground, and it’s swaying and rocking this way and that!

And he’s yelling, “Push, dammit! Push, dammit! Push, dammit!”

And we give it one big final GRUNT! and PUSH!

And right then the whole damn thing falls over on its side and smashes in a crumbled mess on the sidewalk – and the cement ball that was on top rolls down the street like a bowling ball!

And Elwin’s so excited he’s dancing like a little kid and yelling too loud, “We did it, dammit! We did it, dammit!”

And right then the porch light snaps on, and the front door bangs open against the house like a gunshot! Mr. Epiditis pokes his head out of the dark and yells, “What the hell’s going on out there? Who’s that out there? You hear me? Who’s that out there?”

So we take off flying down the street toward HINES. Elwin is keeping up with us on his wooden leg – until halfway home – and then he steps in a big pothole. His foot gets stuck and won’t come loose – and he jerks it real hard to loosen it, and his wooden ankle snaps in two. And then his foot pops loose from the pothole – and his foot is holding on to his leg by just his sock and garter.

And he gets up and starts running down the street trying to catch up with us. He’s running on his stump with his foot flapping up and down on the road making a heck-of-a-lot of clatter. He can’t keep up with the rest of us, and he’s yelling, “Wait for me, dammit! You better wait for me or I’m gonna kick every one of your chicken asses!”

But nobody’s waiting around for Elwin. We run like hell back to HINES and walk in and go over to the pinball machine and act like we’ve been there all evening.

And Elwin never does come – so we figure he must have gone on home – which I would’ve done if I’d broken my foot off.

## Hard labor

I haven't thought about skipping school since we lived in Stokesland, but plenty of guys skip a class and go across the road to BLADE'S, which is sort of a grocery store and hangout. I've skipped over there third period a couple of times when I'm sure Miss Eustice won't call roll.

Then one day last week Frontis had to go downtown on business, and I figure it would be fun to go with him, so I just up and tell him I've got the day off and everybody's out of school. So we catch the streetcar and spend the whole day having fun and going to the war-surplus store looking for a machete and doing some business he needs to do.

Well, who would have thought Miss Midyette would ever call home to check up on ME! She's the senior English teacher, and she checks up on people now and then just to make sure they're not skipping. So she calls Mama, who's got her sewing shop at home now, and asks her if I'm sick, and she says, "No, Miss Midyette, not that I know of...but...uh...he could be sick and staying over at his sister Virginia's house." And she's trying to explain things for me because she always thinks I wouldn't do anything wrong.

So Miss Midyette calls Virginia's, but of course I'm not there – and Virginia surely doesn't know I went with Frontis. I'm smart enough to plan it so I get home about the time school lets out. But the minute I hit the front door Mama says, "Billy, where've you been all day?"

And I just can't lie to her about that – maybe some things – but not about that! "I went to town with Frontis."

And I can tell by now that Miss Midyette has called and put Mama on the spot, so I own up to it, and she doesn't even get mad at me, "Well, Son, you've got to take your medicine!"

And that's all she says – and I'm kind of surprised – but she's treated me like a grown-up for a couple of years now, which is harder to take sometimes than getting fussed at.



So, the next day I get to school and Miss Kierstead, who's my homeroom teacher, says I'm supposed to go to the office because I missed yesterday, and she doesn't even give me a funny look. So I walk up the hall slow as I can – without looking like I'm sick – to see Mrs. Chittum, who handles discipline for Mr. Chittum when he's too busy. She asks me if I skipped school yesterday, and by this time I'm plenty sorry I did because they're making it such a big deal!

So I own up! And she gives me six hours hard labor cutting grass, and I can't think of anything smart to say but, "Yes, Ma'am, I'm sorry."

Right now I'm really put out with myself! So I stop off at the boys' room for a quick Camel, and I'm lighted up and I feel better – for a minute or two – until Mr. Leidy walks in! And man! You don't want to get caught smoking by a coach, 'specially Mr. Leidy! I'm really sunk because he smells it, and he asks, "Billy, are you smoking in here?"

And I can't lie out of it because you can see the smoke going out of a crack in the window. So he gives me four hours hard labor for smoking on school premises, and that really aggravates the dickens out of me.

Then I go to my first-period class, which is Biology with Miss Callahan, who's from Danville and is the prettiest teacher in Norview. She lets me read her novels in class, which is where I got hold of *God's Little Acre* for the first time. She wants to know why I'm late, and like a nut I tell her everything because she's from Danville, and she almost busts a gut laughing – so I come back at her, "Oh shut up! It's not funny!"

And I'm a dumb ass again for saying that to her, because she gives me two hours hard labor for sassing her! And now I've gotten ten hours in one morning, and I didn't have half that much fun in town! So I'd say I've skipped for the last time – it really wasn't as much fun as it was when we were little and we got kicked off the bus for shooting bottle-caps. Besides, I'm on the annual staff now, and I can go to town and sell ads for the yearbook if I really want to take a day off – and nobody's going to give a damn about that.

## Sparklers

Well, it's Halloween again, and nobody has figured out anything special to do at HINES, so Jay yells he'll go up to the Amoco station and get sparklers if everybody chips in. He gets almost a dollar, which is enough for four packs, and he's back in a flip because he's an end on the varsity football team and he runs everywhere he goes. And worrywart Harry sticks his butt in, "Listen, Mr. Hines won't like us messing with sparklers on his property!"

And Jay yells, "Last Halloween I heard Mr. Hines talking about giving a sparkler to his four-year-old grand-baby – and he didn't get hurt."

So we light up, and two of the guys do some sword fighting to start off the celebration. And right then Janet Garber sticks her head out the front door to call Norman, but she sees the sparklers, and she ducks back in and runs back to the girls and says, "Well, he can rot out there if he wants to! I wouldn't stick my head out there and let some crazy throw a sparkler in my hair for a thousand dollars!"

Jay starts pitching them up in the air and making like they're rockets, and he bombs a car driving by – which turns out to be really dumb because the old guy stops and goes inside and tells Mr. Hines what's going on – and Mr. Hines comes out and chases us over to the bowling alley parking lot where Robert always parks.

And right then Elwin staggers out the door without his girlfriend, Beba – it looks like they've had a fuss – and he staggers over to the bowling alley. You can tell he's just mad at everybody in the world. "You guys're chicken-crap letting old man Hines run you off public property like that. He don't own that public property next to the road!"

And Jay starts sucking up, "Aw, come on, Elwin, you shoulda seen what we did to that car from Carolina right before you came out! It was filled-up with old biddies, and they almost crashed the light-pole dodging these things – man! Everybody unloaded on

'em!"

"Oh yeah, Jay? Oh yeah! Listen, I don't want to hear nothing you got to say, Jay-ass. Where were you? Who was you messing around with Saturday night when we wrecked old-man Epiditis's wall? You couldn't make it, huh? I guess you heard what we did?"

Well, Jay's a big guy for a tenth grader, but he's got more sense than to argue with Elwin, so he changes the subject quick. "Hell, Elwin, let's go find something to do now, huh? Let's do something tonight, huh? Come on, you wanna do something or not?"

Well, about that time Drunk Eddie staggers around the corner of the bowling alley, and he's too sloshed to see the gang moving over to his side of the road. He stumbles and falls down on the cinders and crawls like a baby over to the side of the building and pulls up and leans hard against it. That's how you usually find Drunk Eddie – leaning up against a wall somewhere – falling-down drunk – alone.

Nobody at HINES wants a thing to do with him because he's old and he smells bad, and he picks up your butt and smokes it, and he's always begging for beer money until you push him away. So he does his usual bit and sinks down the wall real slow into a pothole of water.

Well, Elwin is hard-up for action, and Drunk Eddie looks like a possibility, so he motions to Jay, who jumps-to because he's glad to be picked out. So Elwin lights a sparkler and runs it toward Drunk Eddie and waves it in his face – and Drunk Eddie wakes up and starts screaming like a little scared girl and yanks his ratty hat down over his eyes.

And Jason, who got a lot fatter this past summer working at the Big Dipper and eating all that leftover stuff, lights a sparkler and runs over and pulls Drunk Eddie's hat off. Drunk Eddie's always been just about bald, and what hair he's got left looks like a bunch of cobwebs. By now a new guy at HINES named Lewis wants a part of what's going on, so he gets on the other side of Drunk Eddie and hems him in and waves a sparkler at his fuzzy head. Then Drunk Eddie falls down on the ground and starts crying. Two other guys rush him with sparklers, and Drunk Eddie jerks his hat down over his face and curls up like a baby.

But Elwin sees an opening, and he hobbles over on his new an-

## Billy

kle and rushes Drunk Eddie, who is kicking and screaming – and he yanks Drunk Eddie’s hat off and jams a burning sparkler in it and crams it down over Drunk Eddie’s head. And Drunk Eddie screams like a stuck pig at hog-killing time and finally pulls his hat off and goes crawling away in the dark. You can see his hair still bright until it turns to ashes and falls onto the ground.

## Pulling the trolley

Well, we won't be taking the streetcar downtown anymore. They're going to yank up the tracks and give us buses to ride to town in – which are a heck-of-a-lot more comfortable, and they go down the street instead of us having to walk across Fairview Boulevard to the tracks. I read in the paper that the trolleys will make their last run to Ocean View Tuesday night, so I call up my buddies to make the final ride together.

Tuesday night about 10:30 the last trolley-run comes along in front of our house, where Raymond and Harry and I are waiting to jump on, and we pull out a dime to pay for the last time. But the motorman is by himself and says it's free to Ocean View for the last ride, so we swing up the steps and run to the back where guys always sit.

And the motorman tools along pretty fast like he's enjoying it, and he picks up a couple of people up the track, and there isn't much to do – so we sing some of our songs like we're on the team bus. And then Raymond gets a silly look on his face, and he's grinning, "Why don't we pull the trolley for the last time?"

See, all you do is pull a rope that's outside the back window, and you pull the trolley wheel off the electric cable and the trolley stops dead. Guys are always doing it, especially late at night, and it really makes the motorman mad – but we don't care tonight because this is the last time we can ever pull it!

So when we get close to the next stop we pull the rope and jump off and run like a bat-outta-hell up the tracks toward Ocean View, and by the time he gets the wheel back on the wire, we're waiting for him at the next stop. He slows down and sees it's us, but he stops anyway – which pretty near surprises us to death. But we climb on and act like we're getting on board for the first time. Then Harry asks how much the fare is, and he says, "It's free tonight – last run!" And he's grinning by now.

So we go to the back and ride up another half-mile or so, and

Harry yanks the rope – and old trolley dies dead! And we jump off and run, and the motorman puts the trolley back on the wire and goes on down the track to Ocean View. Well, by now we're not sure when he's going to give us hell and keep us off, but we're waiting at the next stop, where he sees us – and he goes on a couple of first-downs past the stop – and then he slams on the brakes. And we climb on and act like it's our first ride tonight again – and he's really grinning, just playing with us.

So we wait about a mile before we pull it again to give him a rest – and we can tell he thinks it's a pretty fun thing to do for the last ride, so we keep on pulling it and getting back on until we get to Ocean View. Well, now we're a couple of miles from Harry's car, so we ask where he's going next, and he says, "Gentlemen, I'm making my last run ever back to the car-barn. Would you like a ride back to your '29 Buick? I saw it parked where you got on!"

And we yell like we've just whipped Granby's rear-end 66-0! "Whooppee, let's go Norview!" And we hop on, and we've pulled enough trolleys for one night – even if it is the last time. So we ride on down to my house, and we sing him a few songs, and he clangs the bell all the way home. He's saying goodbye to his old trolley once and for all, and we've been part of the party!

## Our last fight

It's really crowded with all of us living in Mama's little house, but we get by because everybody chips in for expenses and helps with housework, and we get along pretty well – except for a fight J.T. and I had last week. We got in a discussion at the supper table where he was acting like he knows it all – and then he tried to make me look stupid. We started arguing, and we got to yelling – but everybody at the table just sat there and let us alone.

And then he challenged me like he used to when I was little, and I'd back down. But I didn't back down this time, and Frontis told us to go outside to argue. So we went out to the garage and were yelling louder and louder, and he couldn't take it and got really upset and hit me in the face!

And we stumbled out in the backyard, and we hit each other like we used to when we were kids, but he's a lot bigger than I am now – he filled out in the Navy, Mama says. So he got the best of me and got me down on the ground, and he beat the hell out of me – I was even bleeding.

And right then Frontis ran out and dragged him off of me and grabbed his shirt collar, and stuck his face down real close to J.T.'s face. Then he almost whispered, "J.T. if you ever beat up on Billy like this again, I'm gonna beat the living daylights out of you myself. That's a promise!"

So I backed away from everybody, hurt and embarrassed to have gotten beat up in front of all the family since we're grown up – after all, I'm sixteen now. Then I start yelling at him, and I'm hacked, and I'm hurt – and I'm damn mad, "I'm telling you one thing, you bastard – if you ever hit me again, I'm not gonna lose the fight! I'm gonna pick up something and kill you with it – I promise you that! If you ever hit me again...you're dead!" And it scared me to say that because I meant every word of it, and it made me sadder because I don't look up to him anymore.

### **Robert gets drunk**

One night Lillian is up at HINES, and she sees Robert Harris there, and he sees her looking at him, and he walks over, and they start talking. He takes a shine to her right away, which he should because she's grown up and pretty now – and not nearly as skinny as she used to be.

She went to Averett College in Danville for two years, where she had to work all the time because she didn't have pretty clothes like the other girls had. So she wore her good coat in class no matter how hot it was, so nobody would see she always wore the same dress. But now she's got a real good job down in Fairmount Park, and she lives with a girlfriend.

So Robert starts going up to HINES every night to see if she's there, and one night he asks her for a date. She says he can come over and sit on the porch and talk – and that's fine with him.

And now since he comes to see Lillian, he's taken a shine to me, so when I'm up at HINES he calls me over to sit with him. And when we're outside he stands next to me – and I've got to admit I like being important to the toughest guy at HINES. But the truth is, I think sometimes he's ashamed of me because I'm just a hanger-on. I don't ever get in fights, and I don't go on raids down to Fairmount Park or Brambleton to get even with the cruds over there.

And then last Saturday night I find out something is really bothering him, even if he's been acting so chummy lately. He comes up to HINES sloshy-drunk, and I'm inside trying to make time with Jane, who's a sophomore, too. He walks in, spots me and gets a frown on his face. Then he motions me to come outside, which doesn't make me very happy right then. But I make up an excuse and hurry outside, where he's waiting under the awning like he's got to go someplace else – like he's got to take a leak.

He takes me by my elbow like Miss Moore used to do in the fourth grade, and he guides me out back and over to a pile of dirt left over from widening Sewell's Point Road. Then he grabs my



shoulders and turns me around so I've got to look at him, and he blurts out, "Billy, you gotta learn t' be tough! You gotta learn how t' fight! Trouble is, you 'fraid to fight. Hell, you don't never fight nobody, do you, Billy?"

Well, I'm about to tell him how I used to fight J.T. all the time, but I can see he doesn't want me to talk because he's soused to the gills. He must have had a bad time with Lillian tonight – and now he's going to take it out on me – and I start leaking in my pants.

"Billy, I'm gonna make a man outta you – righ' now! T'night! I'm gonna teach you how t' fight, RIGH' NOW!"

"Uh...I don't know Robert...That's OK. You don't need to show me...right now...tonight, OK? Maybe later...OK?"

And he takes a step toward me and stumbles and almost falls off the dirt-pile. Then he grabs my shoulder to get steady – and then he gives me a hug like maybe I'm his little brother. He mumbles, "Billy, you know I like you a lot, and I like Lillian a lot, and it's my r'spons'bil'ty t' help you be a man! I think Lillian'd like that, don'choo?"

"Robert, you're right! But I'm not sure now's the right time. Maybe now's not the right time to make a man out of me."

"Billy, I tell ya, you just gotta learn to fight. You're gonna have t' figh' me 'cause thas' the only way to learn, hear? Tha's all there is to it, you're gonna have t' beat me up – and make a man outta yourself! Tha's all there is to it!"

"Robert, I can't fight you. I'm not even mad at you! I really like you, Robert...besides, if I fight you, you'll kill me!"

"I won't either! You gotta learn to fight for yourself, Billy. I'm gonna make a man outta you. OK! Now take a punch at my head...knock me down this red-dirt bank...right now – or I'm gonna whup your ass!"

"Robert, you know I can't hit you!"

"You hit me and I won't hurt ya. Now hit me! I won't hurtcha if you hit me! C'mon, Billy, here's my head. Now do it! I won't hurt ya!"

"Yes you will! If I hit you, you'll just beat me up! I know that! And you know it too, Robert!"

"What? You contradictin' me, ain'tcha? You contradictin' me,

Billy? You callin' me a liar, Billy? You call me a liar an' I'll whup your ass!"

"Robert, I'm not calling you a liar – I just don't agree with you!"

"Billy, knock me down this bank righ' this second or I'm gon' beat you up – righ' now, you hear? I'm gon' make a man outta you Billy, tonight."

"Robert, I don't know how to say this – you're gonna get mad...you're already mad! Dammit, Robert, you're gonna kill me if I do...so I'm not going to! I can't fight you! And I gotta go. I gotta go home...right now!"

And he just stands there. He's confused because I've got to go! He's stumped. He believes he's taking care of me for Lillian – I know! He's not mean – he's not even mean to his dumb animals on his farm. So he just stands there.

I turn around and walk down the pile of red dirt and walk away from him real slow, and away from HINES.

## The water tank

Well, J.T. and I are getting along better now – maybe because he knows he can't push me around like he used to, so when Joe Mitchell calls to tell us that Alma is real sick, we decide to hitchhike to Chatham.

We start out after lunch and get good rides out Route 58 till about forty miles from Danville – and then we have to walk a good ways. We're in Danville by dark, but we know we can't get a ride that late, so we decide to spend the night in Schoolfield.

We planned maybe to stay with Marvin and Tootie, but we got there too late – and anyway, that would put us off the road to Chatham. So we end up at the 'Y' looking for a bed, but they're full-up, and we're bushed from a long day, so he says we better sleep in the park and be done with it. Well, I don't have a better idea, so I agree.

J.T. knows a lot about this part of Danville, and he says some of the hoboes sleep up against a water tank in the park that's always warmer than the air, which has something to do with science. But I stop him before he gets into the science part because I remember what he told me about the airplanes that time in Stokesland.

So we slip into the 'Y' and dig some newspapers out of the trash and head over to the water tank, which really is kind of warm, and there's a ledge all around it we can sleep on. So we lie down together like two spoons – like Mama would tell us to do when it was cold when we were little – and he puts a couple of newspaper pages over us, and we're warm as we need to be for a night in October. And it especially feels good being with him and having him look after me some.

## The real Billy Martin

1946

I always thought I was pretty good at sports until I get to Norview, but here everybody is twice as big as I am. Dickie and I go to the first football game, where it looks like they're going to kill each other. I'd never seen a real game before, and I've never even had a football to play with until now. But I'm learning how to pass it and catch it with Dickie. He can really sling that thing.

Well, they play on a real dusty field behind the school which hasn't got much more grass on it than Cummins School had on the playground. Bobby Jones plays end because he's really good at catching passes and tackling the other guys.

Some of the players look a lot older than the rest of them. Dickie says it's because they're veterans, and they can play because they missed high school while they were fighting for us overseas. One of them has a limp from a war injury, but he says it doesn't hurt to play on it – it just makes one of his legs shorter than the other one. But he sure looks funny when he runs after the other team – it always looks like it hurts him.

This is my second fall at Norview, and I've gone out for football. I'm on the JV team as an end, and I've put on fifteen pounds since last fall – I weigh 110 pounds. Mr. Rouse is our new coach, and I'm not too good at catching passes – which ends are supposed to do – because I've never played with a football before. But in our third game I'm running a pass-pattern long, and our other end, Teddy, is going for the ball too, and he hits it and knocks it up in the air, and I catch it and run with it. But they tackle me before I have a chance to score a touchdown. That's the only pass I catch all season because Bootsy doesn't ever throw to me.

Basketball starts right after football is done. There I'm on the JV, too. I'm taller now, almost six feet, and I'm not half-bad, so I'm a starter. We play the same teams the varsity plays, and we play right before they do except when the girls' team wants to play before

them at home. Sometimes we have games just for us, but we don't get as many people coming to watch like they do the Varsity and the girl's team.

I usually make some baskets in the game, but I'm better as a rebounder because I'm so new at basketball. Mr. Hansen told me to keep on practicing, and I'll play a lot of basketball next year on the varsity. I'm going to try to put on some more weight so big guys can't push me around under the basket.

I think I'll play a lot of baseball this spring since I was about as good at stickball as anybody on the playground at Cummins – except for Tex. I played catch a whole lot with Tony, and we went to some Knot-hole games one year – so I try out for the baseball team with Raymond and Harry, and I guess I don't know as much about it as I thought I did, because I can't hit the ball – at all. I try to figure it out, but I can't!

I don't know what position to try out for – so I try for second base. Everybody makes the team who comes out, and everybody but me gets a new uniform, though Mr. Leidy gives me one from last year. And my cap is from last year, and you can tell it's darker than the new ones.

I go out to practice every day, and Mr. Leidy sends me to shag balls in the outfield, even though I want to be a second baseman like the real Billy Martin of the Yankees is. In the first game Mr. Leidy tells me to go out to right field, but before I go I should slip my glove under the bench so nobody can steal it. And I ask him why, and he says, "Martin, you're gonna be our official scoreboard keeper today!"

Well, OK! At least I'm on the team, and I put up the little cardboard numbers on the scoreboard off the right field line, and I'm expecting to get called to go in at second base at the end of the game even if I haven't had a chance to play that in practice. I've just shagged balls in the outfield so far. But the game ends and I'm still out at the scoreboard, and I don't ever get into the game.

But that's OK because I get to practice, and I get to go to away games even though I don't have to keep the scoreboard there. Sometimes when we're really getting pasted – like by Granby High School – I expect Mr. Leidy to put me in and give me a new hat.

But one day when we're at practice I'm taking grounders at second base, and I must have missed too many, and Mr. Leidy yells out, "Hey, somebody get that clown off the field!" And he's talking about me! And he's not making a joke – and I feel like crap in front of Raymond and Harry and the guys.

Snookie Hollowell is our best player. He can pitch and play third, and he has a real high batting average. One practice he says he can teach me to hit the ball. So I get a bat and go to the plate, and he starts pitching to me, and I swing under every single pitch. He tries to help me do it right, and Raymond shows me how he does it, and I still swing under it. And everybody is standing around watching to see if I'll ever hit a ball – and I don't hit a single pitch! So I guess I'm not a baseball player. I expect you just don't need a good eye to hit a rubber ball over the fence with a broomstick.

## Making the tennis team

Mr. Taylor is the new Government teacher this year. He played tennis in college, so he put an announcement on the bulletin board that he'll start a tennis team this spring. I guess I'll go out for that instead of baseball. He calls a meeting and about twenty guys show up, and he asks us about our experience – and he's really surprised that nobody has ever played tennis before – but he says we can learn!

And the first thing we're going to do is get in shape, and we're getting in shape by building Norview's new tennis courts because Norfolk County doesn't have the money to build them. So when the meeting ends, everybody leaves except six of us, and he says, "I hope all of you want to play tennis and don't quit on me – we need six men just to field a team."

Well, I'm not going to quit! I've never quit a team in my life – not even Mr. Leidy's baseball team! So every day after school we go by the furnace room and get picks and shovels and head over behind the elementary school and work like dogs leveling the ground off. We need three courts, and we need a wire backstop and nets and posts and out-of-bounds lines and some other stuff.

The second day I'm sweating like a pig, and I've got blisters all over my hands – and I realize I don't even know if I'll like playing tennis! Neuland's daddy says the county could bring in a scraper and level the ground off if they wanted to, but Mr. Taylor says it's no use complaining; this is what we've got to pay to play. So I'm not complaining any more, but I'm plenty happy to hit my bed at night!

Tuesday, Mr. Taylor takes Dexter and me over to the Army-Navy surplus store on Granby Street, and we buy a whole bushel-basket of cloth-tape they used for making tents in the war. We use it to lay out the boundary lines, and we nail the tape down with twenty-penny nails. It's not going to come up for a long time. The ground is so hard the nails stick like you were nailing them into an oak tree.

Mr. Cale lends us a truck, and we cut down 18 cedar trees which won't rot, and in a couple of days we've got blisters, but also net-posts that work just fine. And when Mr. Taylor asks the county to dig the holes for the back fences, which will be about three feet deep, they won't hear of it – so we dig them! So we get some more cedar logs and some pig wire – and we're ready to play tennis – if we just knew how to!

My biggest trouble is I don't have \$5 for a new racquet! And then last Saturday I'm telling Mrs. Summers about it in front of Mrs. Humphries, and an hour later Mrs. Humphries comes back to the store with a real nice racquet she used in college – she says that was long before I was born – and she just hands it to me – it's mine!

So the next day I'm trying to hit balls up against the side of the school out in the play-yard to get the feel of things. Well, it's not any easier to hit a tennis ball than it is to hit a baseball when it bounces back at you real fast, but I'm going to figure it out if it kills me!

Finally, I get a little better, and I've hit about a dozen balls back against the wall, and when I swing at the next one it feels like I miss it completely – and I made a good level stroke right in the middle of the racquet. When I turn around to look, the ball is headed over to the outdoor basketball courts behind me. That's when I realize these old cat-gut strings have been lying around in an attic so long they're rotten. The ball shattered the cat-gut without a sound.

So Monday I thumb over to Portsmouth with the \$2 I made Saturday, and I'm lucky because the man at the shop strings it while I wait. Now I'm ready to play some tennis!

Of course, nobody on the team is really any good, but that's what we expected. Still, Mr. Taylor keeps pumping us up and telling us we'll be good in no time if we work hard! That isn't true so far because the season has started, and we've played Maury and Granby and Suffolk, and we haven't won a single match. Mr. Taylor just smiles at us a lot and helps us any way he can – and we keep losing – and having a little bit of fun sometimes.

I don't even win a set, much less a match. I play the number 6 spot against the worst player on the other teams, and I still can't whip anybody. One day at practice Mr. Taylor says I'd probably win



once in a while if I got some new shoes. He's always kidding me because mine have got holes in the tops. But I've been wearing these shoes for basketball and tennis and gym ever since I came to Norview, and it's a matter of principle. I'm wearing them until they fall off my feet. So I wrap a lot of Sanford's electric tape around them, which is a sight better than spending \$3 for new ones – because I really don't have \$3, and Mama doesn't either.

I may not win anything, but you can bet it's a lot better than putting up the scorecards for Mr. Leidy.

## Offensive play

Fall has rolled around again – like Raymond says – and I’m a junior. Mr. Leidy is the line coach in football, and I’m on the varsity this year. He barks at everybody all the time, but we don’t pay much attention to it. Sometimes I think maybe he wasn’t picking on me on the baseball team – calling me a clown and all – he just talks that way naturally. But it’s not easy to take a lot of guff when you’re not very good to start with.

We start practicing in the middle of August, which has got to be the hottest August they’ve ever had in Norfolk County. Every morning it’s kind of cool early on, but by eleven it’s over 90 degrees, and we have to wear an old wool jersey and canvas pants. Nothing could be hotter, except for maybe hell itself. Truth is, half the time I get so I can’t breathe, and I have to fall down on my knees and try to gulp some air before I go back in for another play on defense. We practice on the infield of the baseball diamond where there’s not a blade of grass. And the worst part is they won’t let us have a single sip of water during practice – not until everything is over with. They say drinking water will make us throw up and maybe have spells of some kind.

But I guess I’m not really good at football either, though I try hard every play they run around my end in practice. I’m up to 130 pounds, and the Bray twins don’t weigh but 155, and they start on offense every game even if they’re not the biggest ends we’ve got. I’m not sure why they play so much, but I may have it figured out. The coaches let both of them play because nobody can tell them apart – and this way they don’t have to know the difference if they’re both in the game.

This year the team gets new uniforms with bright blue pants made out of a real shiny material. Mr. Rouse says it’s something new called nylon that they used in the war for parachute material. And they’ve got new helmets made out of that new plastic stuff, and eve-

rybody gets a new jersey because the Booster Club raised the money to pay for them – so we'll look as good as Granby when we're playing them this year. But I'm the last one to get outfitted because I'm late, and I end up with old canvas pants and a leather helmet from last year. I guess they ran out of everything except for jerseys. Even Borroughs, who's taller than I am and skinnier than I am, gets new pants.

I never miss practice, and I usually get in on the action every play the first string runs against us. I'm part of the bunch that runs the other team's plays – like we're next Friday's enemies. Maybe next year I'll weigh a lot more because I'm lifting weights at home. They don't have weights here at Norview like we had at C. C. Cummins, so Frontis brought me a cinder block from off the job. I pretend it's a barbell, and I can heft it over my head maybe 75 times before I have to stop. Then I lie on my back with a sofa cushion under my head and lift the block up another 75 times. And I do push-ups and deep-knee bends holding the cinder block, and I'm up to about forty pushups and a hundred deep-knee bends and a hundred sit-ups every night after supper. I'm getting a lot stronger, but I don't weigh any more than I did before I started it all.

The other night J.T. comes in the living room when I'm doing my weights, and he's standing there just watching like he does sometimes, and he's got a smirk on his face like he doesn't believe I'm any stronger now. And he says, "I bet a nickel I could do more of that stuff than you can."

I know he can't because he doesn't work out, even if he outweighs me by thirty pounds. So I take him up on it, "OK, you're on! Go ahead!"

"Naw, you're already warmed up – you first."

"OK, I've already done some, but I'll do many as I can, and you got to beat whatever I do. Virginia, you write down how many I do, OK?"

So I do 55 pushups and 60 deep-knee bends, and a few more sit-ups than I've ever done before – about 75 – and I'm so tired I can't sit up, so I crawl over and prop up against the wall where I'm barely able to get a breath of air.

“OK, J.T., now show me whatcha made out of! You couldn’t do that many in a month of Sundays! You don’t take care of yourself! Go ahead! Beat me!”

And he looks down at me on the floor and starts to smile that half-smile he’s got where one side of his mouth is up and the other side is down, which means he’s lying or something. And he takes a step over to me where I’m propped up like a lump on the wall. I’m just getting so I can breathe again, and he reaches in his pocket and says, “OK, Billy, you win! I can’t beat you! So...here’s a nickel.” Then he flips it down on my lap and prances out the front door like he’s just won WW II! I’m so tired and disgusted because I let him get me again! But I’ve got to admit he got me good this time.

Three weeks ago at football practice I’m playing defensive end like I’m from Craddock, and Red Wade is running interference for the halfback, and I’ve got to take one of them out. So I go for a block on Red, and I run right smack into his hand with my nose, which knocks me down. I get up ready for the next play, but my nose is bleeding so bad I yell to come out. I’m sitting on the bench, and Maynard looks at me real hard. He’s not kidding when he says, “Billy, your nose looks funny as hell. Something’s wrong with it!”

But it doesn’t hurt any more than the time we were pitching the golf ball as high as we could and I missed it and it broke my nose. So I run my fingers across my nose to test it, and it isn’t where it’s supposed to be. It’s over on the side of my face – it’s just lying on the side of my face! So I go over to Mr. Perdue, and he looks at me, and he says, “Boy, your nose is broken! Practice is over for you today. You go up and see Doctor Taylor. He’ll fix it for you.”

Well, Mr. Perdue played for Duke and the Detroit Lions, so he knows a broken nose when he sees one, so if he says it’s broken – it’s broken. I go on down Sewell’s Point Road to see Doctor Taylor, who just came here from the navy, and he says it’s broken right bad. He takes his hand and pushes it back up straight and stuffs it with cotton to hold it straight and slaps a wide piece of adhesive tape over it and sends me home.

When Mama sees my nose all taped up and my eyes starting to turn black all around them, she says, “That’s enough football for

you! You ought not to be playing football as skinny as you are and as big as some of those Broad Creek boys are!”

I try to convince her I’m OK, but she’s almost crying. My eyes are black, and when I look in the mirror my nose is about twice as big as it usually is! And it hurts like the dickens! Then I get the dumbest thought I’ve ever had creep in my mind because I’m thinking: “What would stupid old Humphrey from Cincinnati say if he could see how big my nose is right now!”

So I don’t practice for two weeks, and then I’m back playing on the visiting-team-squad like always, and Mr. Hansen finds me a helmet with a nose-guard bolted on. Mama gives in and says it’s OK to play if I’ll wear it all the time. Sometimes I feel special because my nose-guard is the only one Raymond or Harry or anybody has ever seen. But practice changes for me a whole lot when the other guys find out how good it is for grabbing me on defense. Every time they call a run around my end Corbett just reaches up and grabs it like it’s a handle – and pushes me down to the ground, and they run right around my end.

I’ll tell you, I want to play football, but I’m getting tired of that stuff. Mr. Leidy should notice what’s happening and stop it, because it’s not fair since I’m the only guy wearing one of these things. But a lot of things are unfair if you think about it, since one guy weighs 195 and he plays against a 130-pounder.

When you’re on the second-string, you always play defense against the big guys, and you run the other team’s plays in practice – so most of us don’t learn how to run our own plays. A couple of weeks after I’m back, we’re playing Warwick. We’re getting killed when one of the twins misses a pass, and Maynard yells out, “Billy Martin wouldn’ta missed that one, I’m tellin’ ya!”

And Mr. Leidy looks at me sitting on my usual spot on the bench, and he figures I can’t do any worse, so he calls me up to the sideline – and I get in my first varsity game! Billy Carter calls a pass play, and I line up at end, and the ball is snapped, but I don’t know where to run because I’ve never run an offensive play in practice. So Mr. Leidy puts the twin back in. I got my chance, and I messed up.

## Seeing red

One of the best things about being on a team is singing on the bus coming home – especially when we win because nobody feels much like singing if we lose. Raymond and Harry and Jay and I have had a quartet for over a year, and we’re always singing at school, especially in the hallway under the stairs where it sounds the best. We’ve learned some quartet songs, and we’ve figured out pretty much who sings what part, and it gets to be more fun every game we go to.

We had one problem, but we’ve solved it. See, all four of us have deep voices – we’re all basses – so to get a tenor, somebody has got to sing falsetto – which Harry says is Italian for “a boy singing like a girl.” But Jay has a good girl’s voice that sounds like a tenor when he tries, and we can sing four or five numbers in good close harmony. It’s so much fun, we’ll sing “at the drop of a hat,” Jay says.

One day we’re doing “Sweet Adeline” in the boy’s room on the first floor when Mr. Turner walks in and says he can hear us from down at the end of the hall. I figure he’ll send us to see Mrs. Chittum, but he doesn’t! He asks us to sing it again! And then he offers to let us sing in the Variety Show in December – and we jump at that!

We’re nervous when the time comes, but we sing “Sweet Adeline” for our opener and the audience claps so long we sing another one, “If You Knew Susie Like I Know Susie.” Of course, Mr. Turner told us to have an encore ready, and a bunch of guys from the team bus are sitting up front to make sure we get enough clapping. But we think we’re pretty good, and we deserve the encore, anyway.

Katherine Barnes’s father sees the show, too. He’s a member of the Elks Lodge downtown. They’re having a dinner dance next month, and they’re looking for entertainment during the meal, so he asks us to sing for them – and you can bet your bottom dollar we

jump at it!

Like Mama says, “If you’ve got one-eye-and-a-half sense you’ll jump at it!”

They are paying us five dollars each just for singing. We’ve never even thought about getting paid. It’s fun singing for the Variety Show and coming home from games when we win. Mr. Turner says we need matching coats like professional musicians wear, so we go to the Spring Bargain Store. We stay away from The Hub after I tell them how expensive it was for me that time. We all get dark red coats, and the salesman makes sure they fit right, and we look sharp as a tack – all for \$5 each, which Mama says is a bargain with all that service. So we just about break even, but frankly I can’t figure where else I’d wear my red coat. Mama says it’s too loud for church, and I’ve never worn a coat on a date except my heavy jacket in the winter.

Saturday night a couple of weeks ago, I didn’t have a date, and I hadn’t thought much about getting one until five-thirty when I got home from Summers. So I call up Mercy, who used to date a couple of football players, and I ask her to go to the movies.

“Hey, Mercy! Hey! Whatcha got cooking tonight? ’Bout 7:30? Wanna see the flick at the Norview? Oh...you have? That’s nice...have fun. Sure, and I’ll call earlier next time. Bye now.”

So I call Dorothy, who I’ve dated once before, which wasn’t too hot – but OK. “Hey, Dorothy, whatcha doing tonight ’bout 7:30? How ’bout the Teen-age Club?”

“Oh? That’s a nice thing to do. Have a good time. Call you again, OK? Bye now.”

So I call up the Martin girl across the street and down a few houses who’s a freshman. “Hey Mary, whatcha doing tonight ’bout 7:30? They got a good movie at the Norview! Wanna go?”

“Gosh, ...Yeah, I’ll call when they’re home. Yeah, me too. Bye now.”

So I call two or three other girls – I forget who – and then I think about Phyllis, who I wouldn’t usually be seen with on a date – but she’s a good friend, and we work together on the annual.

“Hey, Phyllis, whatcha doing tonight ’bout 7:30? Wanna hit the

Billy

Teen-age Club?

“Oh! Well, damn, Phyllis! I’ve called everybody I know, and they’re all busy or sick – and now you, too!”

And she hangs up on me!



## Speaking out

I'm going to be a newspaper reporter when I get out of college, but I haven't figured out how to get to college because I'm sure not good enough to get a football scholarship like Raymond and them will. But I'm taking typing because I'll need it as a reporter.

I've been in typing class over a week, but we don't have enough typewriters for everybody, so we have to take turns practicing. Mrs. Smith decides girls need typing to make a living as secretaries, so she tells two of us guys we can't stay in the class.

But I object. "Miss Smith, I'm going to be a reporter, and they have to type as much as secretaries do. Besides, girls get married and stay home, and they probably won't even use typing half as much as I will as a reporter."

She says I have to leave anyway, so I go to see Mr. Chittum. I get to his office, and I'm all ready to make my case like I do on the debate team, and I'm just getting started, and he says, "Well, Billy, I think you need typing, too, so I'll talk to Mrs. Smith and see what we can arrange."

And the next day Mrs. Smith sees me in the hall and tells me to come to typing fifth period, so I get my schedule changed back at the office, and I'm in typing again. It's plain to see she doesn't want me in her class, but I go on and do my best, and I'm typing about twenty-five words a minute by the end of the first six weeks. But when report cards come out, I only get a B+ in typing, but I'm as fast as anybody, and I don't make but a couple of errors on anything I type. So I go to see her, and she says I don't have the right attitude in class. But I can't help it – sometimes she picks on me. So I go see Miss Scott, who's the guidance counselor, and she tells Mr. Chittum, and the next day he sees me in the hall and says to just let it be – and everything will come out all right at the end of the semester.

Really, I don't think I'm the principal's pet like Charlie says I am, but it's good to have him on my side when I'm right.

I really use typing as editor of the *Co-Pilot*, and I probably couldn't do a good job if I hadn't kept it up. I have to write a lot of the articles and almost all the editorials, and the printers wouldn't be able to read half of what I write if I hadn't stayed in the class.

I wrote a really important editorial around Thanksgiving-time when the Senior Class Sponsor, Miss Midyette, decided our senior class is too big to have everybody at class meetings – because when Broad Creek Village joined our school everything about doubled. But some of us seniors don't think this is a good idea, and it's not right for us not to have class meetings like we always have. But Miss Midyette goes ahead and has each homeroom elect a representative, and we seniors don't have anything to say about it.

So I'm down at the printers getting the paper ready to go to press, and Janie mentions she heard one of the senior homerooms didn't even elect their representative. She says Miss Midyette appointed the person. Well, real quick I borrow a typewriter from the printer's secretary, and I write a hot editorial telling how we don't have a true Senior Class Representative Governing Board like the school says we do.

And when we finish at the printers and haul the paper back to school, it's already after lunch, so we decide to wait until the first thing next day to put them out. We take copies to the office for the teachers' mailboxes, and I go on over to chorus practice in the music building behind the gym.

Halfway through practice I happen to look out toward the outdoor basketball courts, and Miss Midyette and Miss Hoffman are walking really fast over to our building. They walk right in the choir room without knocking and ask for me, and I go with them up to Miss Midyette's office. And boy, they really lay me low. They say I printed something that isn't true. They say the representatives were elected like they should have been.

And to set the record straight, the next morning Miss Midyette asks all the homeroom representatives to meet with her – and I have to be there, too. She states that there has been a misrepresentation of the facts in the school paper, and she would like an apology from me for what I've done – an apology in front of everybody.

So I tell them what somebody told me – that one of the representatives wasn't elected in his homeroom, and I printed what I'd been told. But Miss Midyette says it's irresponsible of me not to check it out with her. I'm beginning to feel pretty low because she's a good teacher – especially for Advanced Composition and Grammar, which I'm taking now.

Then the other Harry stands up and says he's the representative from his homeroom, and he wasn't elected! He says they didn't have time to vote that first morning, so somehow he got appointed and not elected, and he's the representative from Miss Midyette's homeroom – but Miss Midyette didn't know anything about it happening that way.

So the next week we have our only full Senior Class meeting in the auditorium, and after that we go back to the Home-Room-Representatives deal. Miss Midyette never seemed to hold it against me, and frankly I think she's the best teacher I had in my four years at Norview.

## Helen

We call Deanie by her real name now, which is Helen – Dorothy Helen Martin. We changed it pretty much after we moved back to Virginia when she was in the second grade at Norview Elementary School – which is right behind the high school. The teachers didn't know she was Deanie, so they all called her Helen, and after a while it stuck, so we did, too.

Well, Helen and I are walking up Fairview Boulevard to school the other day, and a couple of grownups are staring at how she's walking, and one of the idiots points at her and says, "She's too little to be drunk, huh?" And he busts out laughing. But she's walking that way because she inherited it from the grandfathers a long time ago – just like Sanford did – the doctors told Mama. I get so mad at the two S.O.B.'s I've just got to yell at them, "What are you starin' at, you damn fools?"

And we go on up to school – and we never talk about it again, at all. I think she's used to people pointing it out and talking about it, but we just don't do that at home. When she was about six years old Mama took her to a foot doctor, and he gave her a prescription for shoes to help her walk. I'd never heard of "prescription shoes," but we got them for her. Trouble is, they're real stiff, and she says that's what makes her walk funny. She refuses to wear them some days at all. I don't know what's going to happen to her when she's grown – whether she'll be crippled like Sanford or not.

## Acting good

I guess I'm the best debater on our team this year since it's my second year. The topic is "Resolved that Compulsory Arbitration is Necessary in Contract Disputes." Last year the topic was "Resolved that the United Nations Become a World Order." The guys in our quartet don't even know what that means. We've got two teams with two on a team, and we have practice debates in front of Miss Midyette's English class, and we have one for a school assembly. But everybody looks like they're going to sleep, and I guess they don't understand the topic any better than the guys do, so I can't blame them.

We debated Craddock a month ago, and we won according to the judges. And we debated Churchland and Oceana just for practice, because the main thing we're after is getting as good as we can be and winning the State Forensics competition in Charlottesville this spring.

So we go to the Tidewater District debates to decide who goes to Charlottesville, and we win, which puts us going to the state for the first time ever at Norview. Mr. Bruder takes a carload of us to Charlottesville, and there are two full days of debating where if you lose once you go home. One session I have to switch sides and debate the negative because our negative guy gets sick. But I've switched like that a couple of times in the past two years, and it's not too hard to do since you've got to know both sides to be prepared to whip the other side, anyway.

Well, we win every debate! Norview wins the state debate contest! And I'm picked the best debater for the affirmative side! That's the best honor I've ever had!

I figure it this way: I've had to argue with J.T. all my life, and I've had to think faster than a lot of my teachers to stay out of detention hall, and I'm used to picking a side and trying to win my point – so for me debating is sort of like water running off a duck's back.

I could see making my living as a speaker and trying to convince

people to think a certain way – maybe like a lawyer or a politician. But nah! I wouldn't want to be a politician. People say some pretty awful things about them just to defeat them – and half the time they're lying. I think debating is more like being an actor – I could have a lot of fun being an actor for a living.

When you're going steady, you can't wait for class to be over so you can get to her last class and wait for her and walk her to her next one – so sometimes she meets you because your teacher talks too long. Of course, some guys have a new girlfriend every couple of weeks, and it's fun to watch outside the door to see who somebody will be walking with this week.

I'm a senior now, and I've been seeing Barbara every day for over a month. I meet her most of the time before she gets to the door to leave, but it's hard to do after some classes, so then she meets me outside my door. We get to see each other a lot that way.

Mr. Chittum won't allow any smooching in the hallways, but some couples have worked it out so they duck inside the door the girl is going to and make sure the teacher's not there – and sneak a little peck. I'd like to do that but Barbara is kind of shy, so I don't push it. I'm just happy to have a girlfriend my senior year since I don't have a car.

I guess everybody in our class is extra-careful about being sweethearts after two of the best people in school went too far in the tenth grade and had to quit school and get married. That's the only time it's happened since I've been here that I know of. It makes me sad that we don't get to see them any more. A couple of girls supposedly went to North Carolina and had abortions, but nobody ever proved anything, so it probably never happened.

But now guess what! One of our guys fell in love with a teacher and got married, so he had to drop out of school before the wedding.

## Thanks Hank

Miss Scott is our guidance counselor. She helps seniors make plans for college. I had my appointment about a month ago, and she asked where I was thinking about going to college. I've been talking to Mr. Wade, who went to Randolph-Macon College, and I'd about decided on that when I went in to talk to her. Before Richard had to leave I probably could have gone there, but Miss Scott says it costs about \$600 a year for everything, and I know I'll never get that much money from anybody. So we talk about the Norfolk Division of the College of William and Mary-VPI for my first two years.

She sends me to talk to Mr. Chittum to see if he knows where I can get help on the \$125 tuition. He says he doesn't have any resources left for this year, but since I skipped the ninth grade, I could come back next year, and he'll make sure I get some help to pay for The Division then.

Well, that's not so hot, coming back with all those younger guys – I'll be close to eighteen when I graduate now – and I'd have to hang around with guys a class behind me. But yesterday Raymond tells me he's coming back for another year to play football so he can get a better scholarship – and that's about what I'm going to do, too!

And, boy! Now Harry says he's coming back!

Well, Mr. Chittum and Mr. Purdue must have talked to a lot of people, because now there are a dozen guys going to play an extra year for Norview – so it won't be so strange with all those guys coming back.

Something really weird happened last week when I called Mrs. Summers to see if I could work just Saturdays since I'm playing tennis this spring. She said, "No Billy, I really need a boy who can work every afternoon and Saturdays. If you can do that, that's just fine, but if you can't I'll have to see about somebody else." Well, I've been there over two years, and I've got to work Saturdays if I

want any money at all, so now I've got to get another job, and it's got to be at night.

On my way to the movies Saturday I see a new store they call a delicatessen that's opened up where JOE'S used to be. It's called HANK'S. So I go in to get a coke and see who runs it, and there's a big redheaded guy behind the counter talking real loud, and a lot of Norview kids are there – but not many I know. So I get a coke in a paper cup and he says, "That'll cost you an extra penny, fella." Well, that's not the way Mr. Hines does things, but I give him six cents and sit down at the counter and finish my Coke, and I take my cup with me because I paid for it.

A couple of days later I go back in and he's not busy, so I ask if I can talk with him, and he says sure and comes around the counter and sits down on one of the stools. I just flat-out ask him, "Do you need any help right now?"

"Are you talking about yourself or a friend of yours? And what's your name, young fella?"

"I'm Billy Martin, and I'm going to be a senior this year. I used to cut meat down at Summers' Grocery, but I'm not going to do that now – and I'm looking for a job."

"Well, Billy, let's talk about that for a while."

So we talk about his store and about my family, and he tells me he's from Louisville, and I tell him I used to live there, and he really smiles at that. And he says, "Well, Billy, let's have a try at you working with me in my store, OK?"

"Sure, and what do I call you – Mr. Bachmann?"

"Hell no, everybody calls me Hank! You call me Hank. I'll call you Billy, OK? And let's say you start right now!"

"Sure, Hank. I'm ready to start any time – right now's good!"

And we work out I'll get thirty-five cents an hour, which must be a lot more than Mrs. Summers ever paid me. Besides, I reckon I'll get something good to eat whenever I want it here.

"And if you want anything to eat, you pay for it, right?" Hank must be a mind-reader.

"Uh, oh yeah. I see, Hank."

I think things will be a lot different here from what it was down at Summers', I think I'll like it better because a lot of Norview kids



come in – and the odds say a lot of them have got to be girls!

Hank is fun to work for – and he’s real smart about how to run a business. For instance, he charged me a penny for my paper cup when I came in the other day, but he charges everybody extra for anything in a paper cup, and some people get ticked-off at him for being so stingy. Tuesday a man tried to get him to forget the penny – on principle, he said, and Hank said, “I’m charging you a penny, but it’s all principle and no interest.” And he laughed.

But the man didn’t laugh. He just turned around and walked out and yelled he wasn’t coming back! Somebody does that every once in a while, but that doesn’t bother Hank. Sometimes it seems like he wants to make some people mad – just to get them out of there – and he said as much the other day.

Well, he’s sure different from Mr. Summers.

Hank asks me the first night I’m working how I like his teeth, “Well, they’re nice looking, but I don’t know much about teeth. But they’re good looking!” And I don’t know what else to say.

And he says, “Well, nobody’s ever been able to tell it – but I’ve got false teeth! I had these when I was inducted into the Air Force, and they gave me a complete physical and nobody could tell they’re false. I’ve had them since I was in high school. They really look real, don’t they?”

“Yeah, they sure do.”

“Well, seriously speaking, they wouldn’t have taken me in the Air Force if they’d known it. They’ll take you in the Army with false teeth but not in the Air Force. They’re real beauties, aren’t they? I paid a fortune for these beauties!”

“Yeah, they’re really good looking, Hank, and I really can’t tell the difference. You’re lucky you could get in the Air Force with them!”

About a week later he brings me a book called *The Chinese Room*. He says I ought to read it because it will help me grow up and understand things people don’t talk about very much. So I take it home and read some of it – and boy, I’m glad I didn’t tell Mama he lent it to me! It’s about a guy who’s fourteen, and he likes sports

and boy's stuff, and then he goes to the beach one day. He's walking down to the water to take a dip, and he sees another guy in bathing trunks – and he just happens to look down at the guy's crotch.

He starts to get funny feelings in his own crotch – like he gets when he looks at a girl! And he's not sure what's happening to him, and it worries him a lot because he's supposed to like looking at girls. And he's getting messed up in his head, which is a lot of crap! So he goes on home, and he can't get it out of his mind, and all the next week when he sees another guy at school he's afraid he'll feel the same thing in his crotch – and he doesn't know what to do.

And sometimes if the guy is good-looking, that feeling comes back like it does with girls. And he's getting really mixed up, and he doesn't know what to do, and there isn't anybody he can talk to – so he just doesn't go to the beach anymore because he's afraid to look at guys – because he's afraid he's changing into a girl.

And boy! For a week or so I get so I don't want to look at guys in school, even Raymond and Harry. I'm afraid I might get the feeling I always get when I look at girls – so I just stop reading the damn thing, and I throw it in the trash at school the next morning.

About a month ago Hank is up in the air about how skinny I am, and how I need to gain weight if I'm going to be an athlete. He played football in Louisville, but he's what you would call fat right now. He's a good-looking guy, and he's got a good build except for his middle, which looks like he's expecting a good-sized baby any day.

So last night he's mopping the floor and I stay around to talk, and he bets me if I take a half-dozen sugar-buns and a quart of milk home with me and eat them before I go to bed every night, it will put weight on me. He says it's got to! “That's how I got my extra pounds!”

So I've been doing it. The buns are really good because they're fresh every day from the bakery next door. It might not make me heavier, but it's sure good tasting – and I pay half-price because the buns won't be any good the next day. But to tell you the truth – now it's been almost a month, and I haven't put on a single pound according to our bathroom scales, which are pretty accurate.

## Keeping the profits

One day in homeroom this past May, Mr. Chittum sends Miss Callahan a note for me to come see him. Well, I know I haven't messed up anywhere recently, so I go up third period instead of going to typing where I'm way ahead of all the girls.

He tells me about a job coming up at the new Post Office Substation down on Sewell's Point Road. Mr. Haley, the Post Office Superintendent, called him and asked if he knew a boy who needed a good part-time job, and Mr. Chittum says he did – so I guess he heard I lost my job at Summers', and he doesn't know I've got one at HANK'S. But heck, the Post Office job is at 6 o'clock every morning, and HANK'S is every day after practice – so I can do both.

I go see the Superintendent and he shows me around. It's not a thing like people think it is behind the window where you buy stamps. There's one big room that takes up most of the building. The postmen have tall desks with slots where they sort the mail for their routes, and there's a big place in the back where they store mail until the next truck takes it out.

And then there's this weird place that's so secret I have to get the key from Mr. Haley to go up there to clean it. It's up a stairway in back of the big room, and when you get to the top there's a hall that goes all the way around inside the building. From up there post office officials can look out tiny window slits and spy on the carriers to make sure nobody steals the mail. And the officials have got their own private door so they can come in from the outside – at least that's what I figure it's for, but Mr. Haley doesn't tell me all of that.

He just says I have to keep it clean as a hound's tooth – and it can't have any cobwebs or dust on the window slits upstairs – which are like the windows in an army tank. So I tell him I'd like to work there, and he says he'll let me know. Two days later I get a letter on official US Postal stationery telling me I'm the part-time custodian at the Norview Substation of the United States Postal

Service! That makes me really happy because I'm going to have more money than I've ever had in my whole life!

I'll work at HANK'S full-time this summer and at the post office in the mornings – and a little at closing time to bring in the flag. I won't have to ask Mama for money anymore – not even that extra penny – and I can buy my own clothes and stuff.

Charlie comes up with a really smart remark when I tell him about my new job, "Billy's a government-man, now...he really cleans up." When I take a swing at him, he flinches so I get two licks!

The other night I'm staying over to keep Hank company again, and he's telling me what a ladies' man he was before he got married, and how when he had his own car he could get any girl he wanted in Louisville. He says it didn't hurt his reputation that he went to school with Victor Mature, who was a friend of his, and that he was probably more popular than Victor Mature was.

And he says, "One night I've got a date with a good-looking doll, and I'm trying to go far as I can with her, but she doesn't wanna go all the way 'cause she's Catholic, but she says she'll do the other thing if I want her to – and I know what she means! And I come back, 'Well, girl, you've got the wrong man if you think I'd do that. That stuff's for queers – not for me! So you get outta my car and walk home!'

"And I left her right there in the middle of nowhere." And he's really mad about whatever she meant – and I don't know what it was – but I'm not going to ask him right now!

Hank does some weird stuff in the store, especially how he waits on customers. At Summers' Grocery I knew all the people, except maybe for a stranger a day, and I always said "Hi, Mrs. So-and-So." But he says I've got to speak right up to everybody – whether I know them or not! And I've got to say, "Hello, how're you today?" or "It's a nice day outside, isn't it? Can I help you?"

Frankly, I feel like a nut being friendly to somebody I've never seen before, but I've watched him do it, and he doesn't mind who it is – even if it's a black man. So I figure I'll do it if it kills me – which

it hasn't so far – and it seems to work pretty well.

He goes home every day for a nap when I'm there all day – like Saturdays and Sundays – and then I get to finish what's left over from every milkshake. See, we make them on the mixer in a metal cup and pour them in a large Coke glass, but there's usually a little left over – especially if I want there to be. Anyway, I finish that off, and I'm not costing anybody anything, I figure.

The second time he does that and goes home, there aren't many customers, so when nobody is in the store I knock down 60 cents from the change I've been putting on top of the cash-register drawer to save time. I'm not real proud of doing that, but I work hard, and I stay over at night to keep him company – and I figure he won't ever miss a cent of it. But I don't think I'll do it again because I felt bad the rest of the evening. I just may put it back when I get some ahead.

Of course, I guess there's no harm in having a little ice cream, too, when nobody's in the store. I can scoop out a glob and watch the door and eat it quick. The other night I'm feeling guilty about both things, the money and the milk shakes, so I offer to mop the floor. Then he looks at me like I'm crazy and bellows out, "Billy, this is my store! I make the rules! I keep the profits! And I'll keep it clean, OK? But, thanks, anyway."

So now I still feel guilty, dammit!

### **Jack-the-rabbit**

After Richard had to leave home, us men in the family turned our garage into another room – with a window and a door in the front and a really nice inside with an inlaid-linoleum floor – so now Mama uses it for her sewing shop. She stopped going to town to work at the ladies' clothes shop so she can be home all day and work, too.

She gets business from people at Norview Baptist, and some of her old customers from downtown who live out our way. They come by because “nobody can sew like she can.” Everybody says that! And besides, she can make more money at home than she could in town.

The Baumgartners are good friends of Mama's and Richard's from when we lived on Windermere. One day Mrs. Baumgartner brings Mama a baby rabbit for a pet. Frankly, I think that's kind of a weird pet since I used to hunt them back in Stokesland – even if I never got one except for the one that froze solid in the trap that winter. But little Jack-the-rabbit likes our home, and he especially likes Mama. He hops up in her lap when she's working at her sewing machine. She says it's like having a kitten.

I like to draw a lot, and I'm always drawing fancy letters in my notebook at school. I figure Mama will make more money if she gets more customers, so I paint her a sign about ten-by-ten inches and put it in the front yard. She says people mention it right often, and it helps her get customers. She says she can satisfy anybody if she has a chance, and she's not bragging.

Then one day Mr. Morehead from next door comes over and knocks on the shop door and says, “Good day, Mrs. Love, I'd like to speak to you about something if you have the time. Mrs. Love, I'm sure you're not aware that you're breaking the law with that advertising in your front yard. But, as Secretary of the Civic League, you must know that you can't have a sign advertising a business on our street.”

And he turns around and goes back home to supper.

At supper Mama tells us all about it, and she's as sad as I've seen her in a long time. She says, "Well, I can still make a living without the sign, but it surely seemed to help. Lord knows I'm not trying to do anything illegal. Heavens! I'm the Secretary of the Civic League! I'm embarrassed I've broken the law"

So I jerk the sign out of the ground and tack it on the wall inside the shop where she can see it every day.

Then, two days later Don Meadows, my Sunday school teacher, who lives in the next block, is walking up to the store, and he notices the sign is gone. I'm out in the yard, and he comes over and says, "Sorry to see that Mrs. Love has stopped her business here. Has she gone back downtown?"

I tell Mr. Meadows everything about the sign and Mr. Morehead, and what he said, and how upset Mama is over it, especially when he made like she's done something against the law. And I haven't even finished before Mr. Meadows turns around and storms over to Mr. Morehead's house and bangs on his front door. Mr. Meadows used to be a really tough man when he drank and gambled like he told us in Sunday school. And I hear him tear into Mr. Morehead.

"Listen, you nosey son-of-a-bitch, you've stuck your nose in the wrong place this time! That poor widow-lady is trying to take care of a passel of kids and make a living and stay home and be mama and papa to them all! She works hard as a person can work! And you come over and tell her she's doing something wrong?!

"Let me tell you one thing! You'd better *never* say another contrary word to that dear woman about anything that goes on at her house – 'cause if you do, I'll knock your blasted head off and you'll never know what hit you! Do you understand me, you son-of-a-bitch?" Mr. Meadows doesn't wait for him to answer. He just runs back to his house, and I can hear the front door slam!

I don't know if Mr. Morehead was rotten enough to do what happened next. I know Sanford is – because I'm certain now he's the one who wrung Coo-Coo's neck. Well, Mr. Morehead never paid attention to Jack-the-rabbit except to shoo him away when he was trying to jump up in his lap. But less than a week after Don

Billy

Meadows cusses out Mr. Morehead, I go out in our back yard where Jack-the-rabbit plays, and I find him dead as a doornail. His head is bent over to one side like his neck has been wrung.



## Joy rides

Charlie had a date with Marilyn last weekend, and me with Barbara, so he gets his daddy's '46 Hudson, and we pick up the girls and take off to the drive-in down on Shore Drive where we do some pretty good necking. Then they say they want something to eat at Schoe's, so we drive by. Nobody's there but a bunch of goons from Maury and Granby, and we don't want to get in a hassle with any of them. So we head out down Virginia Beach Boulevard and over to Kempsville because that's the loneliest stretch of road left in Tidewater, everybody says. And we find a good stretch where we can park at the edge of the woods, and we pick up where we left off at the movie.

Later, when we're backing out to the hard-surface road, Charlie's rear wheel slides down in the ditch and we do everything we can, but the old Hudson won't budge. Luckily, right across the road there's a farmhouse, but the lights are kind of dim inside. It's all Mennonite country around this part of Princess Anne County, so we don't know if they're in bed since it's almost 11 o'clock, and Mennonites are usually farmers.

But we're desperate! So I go on up and knock and after a minute a Mennonite comes to the door. It's the first time I've ever seen one in person. He's got on different overalls from what we used to wear, and he's got a beard like Abraham Lincoln, and he's wearing suspenders and huge clodhoppers like grownups used to wear back in Stokesland.

"I'm sorry to be disturbing you so late at night, but we've got our car in the ditch in front of your house and we can't get out. I wonder if you've got any way you could help us get out. Again, I'm really sorry to ask you so late."

And he says, "Well, you'd be surprised how often this happens out front there with that new ditch the county put in. Sure, I'll help you. Let me get my tractor out of the barn. I'll be down there in ten minutes, OK?"

“We sure do appreciate you doing this, really!”

So he chugs out of his barn and down his driveway and hooks a heavy chain up to the Hudson and puts his tractor in a real low gear, which sounds like it’s going to tear everything to pieces. It doesn’t take him five minutes to pull us out, and there’s nothing but a little mud on the rear fender to show we’ve been in a ditch.

Charlie asks the Mennonite, “How much do we owe you, Sir?”

And he says, “Were you out tonight on business or pleasure?”

Charlie says, “We’re out on pleasure after we went to the drive-in movie.”

And he says, “Well, had you been doing business, I wouldn’t charge you – but since you were out for pleasure, I feel it’s right to charge you two dollars for my time and my tractor.”

We pay him, and we split it, and we’re glad to – even if two dollars is pretty much what we usually spend on a whole date. But I’ve got as much money as I need now working two jobs. And Charlie’s father is a retired Navy Commander, so he can afford it. Then we take the girls home and wash the car off at my house, and Charlie says the next day his father didn’t find out a thing about it – and he won’t until he’s old and gray!

A couple of Saturdays after we get stuck, Charlie gets the car again – which I bet he wouldn’t have if his Daddy knew about the ditch. And we decide to go up to Williamsburg to see what it looks like because they say John D. Rockefeller has spent a million dollars making it look old again. Charlie says, “Why don’t we take dates and a picnic; lots of people do that. At least that’s what it said in the paper. We can ask Marilyn and Barbara. They know how to have a good time.”

We pick them up early and take off downtown to the ferry slip at lower Hampton Blvd. and take the ferry to Newport News. It’s about 45 minutes to get across the water, and then we head up Route 60 to Williamsburg. It’s a nice drive, especially with Charlie driving, because I’ve never driven anything but the Model A with the guy down on Windermere Avenue. But I’m in Driver’s Ed. now, and it’s going really well, so I figure I’ll probably get a summer job driving something or other so I can get some experience.

We park the Hudson and walk around Williamsburg where they've restored some of the old buildings, like the Governor's Palace and some of the houses people have lived in since the American Revolution. And there's a neat place behind the Governor's Palace, a maze, which is a big garden where they've grown a hedge that's set out in all different directions, so if you go down the wrong path you come to a dead end, and the idea is to find your way to the middle.

We have a ball playing around in it, and when Barbara and I get stuck on one end and Charlie and Marilyn can't find us, we just play like we're back in Princess Anne County down that dirt road before we got stuck.

We walk over a lot of the town and see the Powder-something-or-other where they've got guns from the American Revolution, and where the colonists stored the gunpowder to keep it away from the English. We studied it in American History last year, which really made it special!

We have a really good time in Williamsburg, but not half as good as going home. Barbara and I decide to see if we can kiss all the way to the ferry slip. I really mean it – we're going to see if we can hold one kiss all the way from Williamsburg to Newport News!

Well, I'm here to tell you we did it! But I'm glad we didn't have school the next day because my lips were chapped to pieces, and I had to talk with my hand in front of my mouth so I won't have to explain to Mama – like the time I got poison-oak on my privates. That was the best trip I've ever had – and I don't know which part was the best, but kissing for an hour can't be the worst part.

Too bad Charlie had to drive back!

### Car sick

This spring I'm taking Driver's Ed. so I can get my license. Mr. Mueller is the first Driver's Ed. teacher we've had, and he's really patient and doesn't yell a lot when you make a mistake – usually.

I made a pretty big goof Tuesday when I was driving up Sewell's Point Road. Up there three roads cross at the same spot with a stop sign, and I don't see the stop sign ahead. I'm about to barrel right into the side of a '39 Buick coming on my left. Luckily, Mr. Mueller has brakes on his side of the floorboards, so he slams his foot down, and we stop on a dime, and he saves our necks.

He's really good at this. He doesn't yell, and he doesn't laugh at me – he just says real quietly, "Billy, that's why we have this class – to teach you how to drive safely. Anybody can drive a car, but it takes practice to drive safely." Well, that's about the nicest correction I've ever had for doing something so dumb.

Three weeks ago J.T. and his new wife, Velma, are driving to Danville in their new '46 Pontiac they bought used, and they give Mama and Deanie and me a ride with them. Route 58 is pretty straight, and it goes up one hill and down the other and up another hill all the way from here to there. J.T. gets tired, and I've got my new driver's license in my pocket, so he says, "Billy, you want to spell me for a few miles and use your new license?"

Well, darn, I've been waiting for him to ask me! What else is my license good for? He even joked about how it must be good because it's shiny new. He pulls over on the shoulder and lets me in the driver's seat, and I take off without too much trouble with the clutch.

We're tooling along, and I'm looking straight ahead so much that Mr. Mueller would be proud of me. And I don't try to pass anybody on the steep hills, and I'm having a ball! But evidently, I've been a little reckless because about a half-hour later J.T. nudges my leg and says, "Uh, Billy, uh, I think it's time for me to take over the wheel.

Don't you think so?"

"Heck no, J.T., I'm just warming up! I could drive all night! This is the first time I've had a chance to go up and down hills in real traffic. I'll let you know if I get tired."

"Well, you'd better let me take the wheel for a while – Velma's getting car-sick from you driving so close to the cars in front of us. She can't take any more. She doesn't feel good. Pull over and let me drive."

So I pull over at the next driveway and change places with him, and I feel embarrassed about the whole thing. I'll just wait until I get some kind of job driving a truck this summer so I can get my practice in.

### Recording stars

Well, I've been on the fence about singing in the Chorus this year – even if Mrs. McDermott is the most gorgeous teacher I've ever seen. The quartet has been in the Variety Show and sung for the Elks Club, and everybody on the team knows how good we are, so we figure we might as well support the Chorus. So Jay and Raymond and I sign up, but Harry doesn't have time. We've got Chorus every day second period over in the Band Building on the other side of the gym.

We're singing some good harmony, even better than what we've worked up for the quartet – especially "Madam Jeanette," which we've got down pretty well already. Mizz Mac – which is what everybody calls her – says we sing that as well as she's ever heard it – and she's even heard it in France. I expect she's got one of the best bass sections now that she's ever had in a choir!

One day we're rehearsing for the Christmas Assembly, and us guys in the bass section are cutting up a bit. Everybody is standing up during the number. Then Raymond looks over at Jay and me and winks, and he climbs up on the seat of his chair and sits on the back of it – then Jay and I do the same thing. And when the number is over Mizz Mac motions us to sit, and everybody does – only the three of us Musketeers are still tall because we're sitting on the backs of our chairs. She looks at us like she doesn't know what's happening, and why we're not sitting as low as everybody else. And then she sees where we're sitting. She knows it isn't proper, so she won't laugh. But then she starts to, and she cackles out loud at us. When the rest of the Chorus turns around and sees us, everybody ends up laughing their heads off. And then we sit down – we know that's enough – because Mizz Mac doesn't take foolishness for long in Chorus.

About the first of May she announces she'll soon choose the soloist for the graduation program. I'd really like to sing it because I especially like this solo. The words come from Rudyard Kipling and

go something like this:

“The tumult and the shouting die,  
The captains and the kings depart,  
Still stands thine ancient sacrifice,  
A humble and a contrite heart...”

The only thing is, the solo is right high – too high for most basses – but I know I can do it because lots of times I switch from bass to tenor in the quartet when we’re messing around. So Mizz Mac says she’ll give anybody who wants to try for it an audition. And each one of us goes in to sing for her, and I know Jay is going to try out, and Bobby Truitt – who’s a real tenor and doesn’t have any trouble singing high.

So we all sing for her one afternoon, and I don’t do too bad a job except I’m nervous because I’ve never had to sing a solo before. And I don’t know exactly how to, so my voice breaks a couple of times – but I know the people in the stands will be able to hear me on graduation day.

Then, a week after the tryouts, she announces Truitt has the solo because he’s a real tenor, and it will be easier for a tenor to sing it than for a bass to strain to sing it, and that’s sensible. So I tell the guys I don’t care that much – but, man, I’m lying through my teeth!

One night we’re out looking for some fun, and we’re singing our stuff parked near Raymond’s house in Harry’s Dodge – and Jay pipes up, “You know, I think we’re pretty good now, maybe good enough to be recording stars – we’re really professionals! Hell, we got paid to sing for the Elks Club, and we sang in the Variety Show. What do you guys think about making a record?”

Well, nobody’s got any objections to that!

And Jay keeps on, “I read in the paper last night about a new recording studio on Granby Street that will record your band or your choir or just you if you want to sing yourself a solo. How about going down there and making a record of our best stuff?”

And still nobody’s got any objections!

So we tool down Granby to Main, where the sailors hang out,

and I guess they make a lot of records to send home. The studio is just a hole-in-the-wall next to a tattoo parlor, but we talk to the man who does the recording, and he says he can record whatever we want – and right now – we’re warmed up and ready from singing all the way down town.

We practice a couple of songs, and the man sets the balance, as he calls it, so he can give us a really good sound on the recording. And we record “I Had a Dream Dear” and “Give Me a Kitchen Mechanic,” which is really funny. And he plays them back for us, and they’re close to being as good as we hear on the radio. And we get a record for each one of us which costs a dollar-fifty each – which really isn’t too much to pay to be recording stars.



## Severance bonus

Well, summer is here and I've got to have a full-time job, so I call Mrs. Summers again, and she's got another Billy taking my place who lives on Windermere Avenue like I did. So I start looking in the want-ads, and there's an automobile tire-store looking for a mechanic. I call them up, and they don't ask many questions except if I've finished school – and I tell a white lie and say I've finished eleventh-grade at Norview.

So the next morning I show up at 8 o'clock for my first day at the Brady Auto Tire Store down on Granby Street. There are two guys about my age already at work, and they look like they might have just walked in from Kentucky to work in a war plant – but they've been here almost a month. They deliver tires and do road-service, and the shorter one drives the truck. We're supposed to deliver to service stations and garages, and I'll have to drive half the time. I start feeling nervous, so I tell them I can drive but I'm not ready to drive a truck yet.

Well, the first thing we do is go in the warehouse and move about a hundred tires over to a corner. They're used tires that are going to be made into retreads. Well, crap! This is about as hard as a guy can work – throwing dirty tires all over a warehouse – and after an hour of that we get a call to take a tire to a service station and mount it for a man.

So we buzz out to Wards Corner, and I carry all the tools and stuff. I watch them do the work because I've never changed a tire on anything – not even on the bike Richard gave me in Louisville. They're not real happy with me because I don't pitch in, but I don't know how. Then they tell me to load the old tire on the truck and throw the tools in the back and get a broom and sweep up the mess out in the street – so I do all the crap while they take a smoke.

Then they decide I'm going to drive back to the shop, and I tell them I'll probably wreck the thing. But they think I'm just lazy and don't want to – but I can't tell them the truth. So the older one

drives, and on the way back I tell them how I've worked hard all my life, and I used to work in tobacco, and I worked in a war plant in Cincinnati – and that sort of shuts them up for a while. And when we get back to the store, we take a smoking break – which I'm back to doing because school is out.

And then they say it's lunchtime, and they drag out their bags and start eating, and they don't offer me a thing – which doesn't surprise me. And I say, "I've got to find a restaurant because I didn't know to bring my lunch." And I walk out of the building like I'm not in a hurry – and soon as I'm out of sight, I start walking fast. Then I start running like a bat-out-of-hell up Granby Street toward Norview until I hitch a ride!

But I still need work – and money! So next day I mosey downtown to the Virginia Employment Service and get them to help me find a job I might actually be good at. And they ask if I can type, and if I can write a good sentence, and if I can answer a phone – and I say, "Yes, I can!" So they send me over to Thurston Motor Lines at Twenty-First and Granby for a job interview.

The terminal manager and I talk, and I type a letter for him like we learned in class – and he tells me right off he's pretty surprised at my good grammar. So he gives me the job right there as station-clerk for Thurston Motor Lines – a full-time job.

Of course, I don't tell him the truth, either, but I can't tell everybody I'm going back to school or I'll never get a decent job. I tell him I was a senior at Norview this past year – and that's the truth – just not the whole the truth. When I tell Mama about all those white lies, she says it's not good. I say I can make up for it by being a really good station-clerk this summer, but I can tell she doesn't really know what to say about lying when I need a decent job.

My job has a lot of phone-answering to it – which is easy. And I type up a bill-of-lading for everything that comes into the terminal and goes out on a truck. I also make sure the drivers get a bill-of-lading for every box that comes off their trucks. And I've got to keep up with the details for all the trucks coming and going all over the eastern United States.

I'm doing a pretty good job, and I like having responsibility and

having to talk to people about important matters, and keeping track of things that cost thousands of dollars. I call long distance and trace things that haven't arrived at the terminal when the bill-of-lading is here and the item isn't. Things like that are exciting to do, even if I don't know exactly what I'm doing a lot of the time.

The Station Manager is a nice guy. He's tall and has a huge beer-belly and a red face which gets redder when a trailer comes in and he sees that I don't know whether to route it to some other state or keep it here. Because to tell the truth, I don't understand the business part of trucking at all. Some drivers try to help me out, and some seem to have fun seeing me confused. They laugh when they're leaving the office and I'm trying to go in ten directions at once when I don't even know one way to go.

So after five weeks at Thurston Motor Lines of Wilson, North Carolina, the station manager tells me on Friday that he's sorry but I'll have to find another job. He says he's sure I'll make a really good worker some place where I know what I'm doing, and am I ever happy to agree with him! He gives me a \$10 severance bonus with my last week's paycheck – which is \$35.

So I've had a couple of good jobs – counting the war plant and this one – but I wouldn't want to spend my life in either one – no, sirree!

## Butchering

About two weeks after I get fired – though Mama says I shouldn't say I got fired, I just didn't fit the job (but I'm glad they fired me because it just wasn't my kind of life) – well, Mrs. Summers calls. She's lost her butcher and the other Billy can't cut meat, and she hears I'm not working now so she asks me to come back to the store. We talk and figure out I can work every day and Saturdays, and she'll pay me \$20 a week, which is the first time I've ever known what I make there. Mama is real happy and she hugs me and tells me, "Good things come to those who love and trust the Lord."

But I've pretty much stopped going to church except for Sunday school with Don Meadows because I can't stand the way they treated Dr. Meade. They had a meeting of the Board of Deacons one night and told him he had to retire – they just kicked him out of his church! I don't think that's right at all – so I don't sing in the choir or do anything except go to Mr. Meadows' class sometimes.

I've been back behind the meat counter for almost a month, and it's really nice knowing everybody who comes in. They're glad to see me – if they even notice I've been gone – and some don't act like I've been anywhere but cutting meat for them like always. So I'm back as the regular butcher, which means I can get more beef filet for Mama and us. Mrs. Summer's says the law won't allow us to sell it as beef filet, so sometimes she takes the filet home for them, too.

Now, round-steak costs 60 cents a pound, and sirloin 70 cents, and T-bone 80 cents, and stew-beef 35 cents. And since we can't sell the filet to anybody, when Mrs. Summers doesn't take it, I just cut it up in small pieces and sell it to myself for 35 cents a pound – as stew-beef. We have it half-a-dozen times a month. Mama loves it because she's got false teeth, and filet is the tenderest beef you can buy – outside of hamburger.

Of course, I'll have to quit the middle of August because I'm going to play a lot of football this year – on the varsity! Last year I

overheard Mr. Perdue say, “That boy’s gonna play some football next year, I tell you,” right after I tackled one of the Bray twins when he caught a pass over on my side. I’m not much heavier, but I’ve gotten a heck of a lot stronger with my weight-lifting program this past year!

Toward the end of July I’m unloading two beef-quarters off Howard, Jr.’s, truck, and I bring in the first piece and lay it down on the block. I should have moved my knives off the block and put them back in the rack like Mr. Summer’s taught me to, but I’ve got a lot of work to do on these two quarters, and I haven’t got time for the niceties.

Mr. Summers gets aggravated if he finds one of my knives on the block after I’ve finished using it. He never really gets mad, but he sort of puffs up and says, “Billy, the knife belongs in the rack, not on the block – remember that if you’re going to be a butcher!” But I don’t intend to be a butcher but one more month!

I twist the first quarter of beef around so I can stack the next one on top without it slipping off the block. Then I bring the second one in and dump it on top of the first one, and I reach over and grab the far side and pull the second one farther up on the block – and all at once I feel something bump my left leg just above my knee.

My leg gets sort of hot all at once, and I look down to see what I hit, and my foot is all wet and my shoe is red! Even the floor is getting red! Everything from my knee down is red! It’s really wet and warm! I can see it’s blood making everything red, but I don’t hurt anywhere! Then I realize I’ve stuck the knife I left on the block into my thigh! So I hobble up front where Howard, Jr., is talking to Mrs. Summers, and I call out half-way there as quiet as I can so I won’t scare anybody:

“Somebody help me, I’ve cut my leg! Howard, help me! I’ve cut my leg bad. I’ve gotta get to the doctor, quick!” So Howard, Jr., helps me out to his truck and lifts me up on the seat, and I’m squeezing my leg to see if I can stop the bleeding, but it keeps pouring down my leg as hot as it can be! I point him up to Dr. Schechner’s office near our house on Fairview Boulevard, and we

get there in five minutes. But that's time enough for the front floorboard to fill up with blood, which makes me almost puke to see it.

And I show him where the front door is, and he helps me up to the door and opens it, and I point out the doctor's office – and all at once I don't know anything! Everything turns gray and it's spinning around, and I pass out right as a nurse comes through the door.

Dr. Schechner sews up the top of my gash and says, "You're lucky you didn't cut something worse. But, you'll have to stay in bed for a couple of weeks."

And I ask about football practice, and he says, "Boy, you won't be playing football or anything else for two or three months on this leg. You'll be lucky if you ever do any sports again with your muscle cut bad as it is!"

After I'm finished there, some men help Howard, Jr., carry me over to our house, which is just two doors away, and they put me in bed. I go back to sleep, and everything seems OK. I don't dream about anything bad, even if my football career has ended right when it was getting pretty good. So I stay flat for a week, and I start walking with a crutch Mrs. Evans next door lent me from when Commander Evans was laid up with a bad knee.

Well, what do you do when you can't go to early practice, and you can't expect to ever play football again? And Mrs. Summers sends Howard, Jr., up every Saturday with my \$20 pay in a little brown bag, and she even comes to see me with Mr. Summers once. What you do is you learn to knit! Mama teaches me how with some pink yarn she found in a drawer, and I knit a square and rip it out and do it again – and that's all I can do for a few long days.

When school starts I'm three days late, and when I get to my first chemistry class they're starting to memorize the names of the elements. Doc Kizer assigns six more symbols to learn, but I don't hear him right and I try to learn all hundred in one night!

So next day I'm a wreck, hobbling around school, and I make a 15 on the chemistry quiz. I know I won't get anything out of chemistry all year long if it's this hard. But one good thing happens! Barbara meets me every day and helps me. She walks me to class and carries my books! I've never had this kind of attention from a girl before. I'm sure going to miss football, but Barbara makes up for a

decent part of it!

Then another good thing happens when I go out to watch my first football practice. Mr. Perdue sees me coming over on crutches, and he walks over to me. He knows about my leg and he says right away, “Billy, sorry you can’t play for me this fall, we’ll miss you. I think you would’ve played some good football this year.”

That makes me feel good to be missed by Mr. Perdue. He played in the Rose Bowl for Duke, and he played pro-football for the Detroit Lions. And then he surprises me half-to-death! “Billy, I want you to be a part of this team. I want you here at all the games and go with us to away games. I want you to be the official spotter in the press box wherever we go. You’ll know all the players, and you’ll be a great help to the play-by-play guys.”

So of course I jump at his offer! It’s great because now I don’t see my fall being as empty as I expected it to be, and the quartet will sing again on the team bus!

## Rose la Rose

Friday morning Raymond catches me before homeroom, “Billy, whatcha doing after the game tonight?”

“Well, I probably won’t do anything dangerous!” I say.

And he yells so everybody in the hall can hear him, “Well, Billy, I think the Four Musketeers oughta go see Rose La Rose tonight! ’Cause Rose is back in town!”

I’ve heard of Rose la Rose and Sweet Georgia Brown downtown at the Gaiety Theater, but I never gave much thought about going because I here there are so many sailors and bums that hang out there. But now it seems like a good idea if we go together because nobody’s going to bother Horse – or if he does he’ll wish he hadn’t. So after we get kicked in the pants by little Portlock High – we shouldn’t have ever lost to them – we climb in Harry’s Dodge and head down to East Main Street where most of the sailors hang out and get drunk, and get lots of other stuff if they don’t watch out.

Golly! In front of the Gaiety Theater there’s a line of 30 or 40 sailors in uniform and about a dozen in civvies. You can tell who’s a sailor and who’s not because most of them wear black shoes and white socks and have real short hair.

Two years ago a sailor came up to HINES a couple of times and pretended he was a civilian just moved into Norview, and he dated Jan for a while. Nobody knew he was a gob until she gave his secret away to one of her friends, and the guys out front under the awning ran him away. But they didn’t hurt him because he was a pretty nice guy – for a sailor – and his hair wasn’t real short, and he even wore brown shoes and colored socks.

So we get through the long line before the show starts and get some popcorn – which is real good. That’s more than you can say about the crap at the Norview Movie Theater, which is always stale but we eat it anyway.

The lights are still up when we get inside, and a four-piece band is playing some rowdy numbers, and the sailors are yelling to each



other over the music. We can hardly hear the band until we get down front. And when we get to where we can see everything Rose has got, there isn't a single seat without a dark blue uniform in it – except over on the right where the perverts sit, as Raymond calls them.

The perverts are guys who get off doing stuff to themselves while they're watching the show. Nobody bothers them. They just stay in their own place up front. So we hustle on near the back where we can get four seats together, even though we have to ask a couple of guys in civvies to move over. And then we call up all our dirty jokes and play “can you top this” – and boy! We didn't know we could get so dirty!

Then, about ten minutes later the lights start dimming, and the band slips into a number with lots of BRRROO MMM! VRRROO MMM! to it – and we figure it's time for the first girlie to bust out and show us what's she's got!

But no way!

Two ancient comedians prance out wearing crazy hats and pants way too big. One of them has a baseball bat he's swinging at the other guy's head. He misses and the bat slips out of his hands and heads for the crowd of sailors! And everybody ducks, including us! We all laugh, though, because it's only made out of rubber. The guy who catches it throws it back to the comic, who does a balancing trick with it – and the show is going lickety-split!

The comics are real funny – but we didn't come to see funny men. After a few minutes of this stuff the sailors boo them off the stage. Then the band starts up the BRRROO MMM! VRRROO MMM! again.

This time there's a leg creeping out from behind the curtain! It's a naked leg with a stocking rolled down and it's wearing a high-heeled shoe – and I can feel me getting excited! And then a comic with a bare leg and a stocking steps out from behind the curtain. And it's his leg we're getting so hot about, so we boo him off stage right!

Then the music comes up again, and the drums are pounding, and the cornet player is blasting out a high cadenza, as Raymond calls it. And another naked leg slides out from behind the curtain,

and then a naked arm – and then a beautiful woman with long red hair and a fan hiding her boobs prances on stage and dances and moves like I’ve never seen before, anywhere! Not even in my dreams!

The comics take their turn after the dancer, and they’re a heck of a lot funnier than they were the first time – and we give them a good hand. Harry yells, “Give us some more dames!”

Soon another dancer slides out under the curtain and gives us some real sexy moves. She looks like she doesn’t have a thing on above her waist. All four of us start hitting each other on the shoulders for flinching. We’ve got to do something! This is the best thing I’ve ever seen anywhere! And we haven’t even seen Rose la Rose yet – and she’s supposed to have made a couple of movies.

About then the lights come up, and the manager comes on stage and welcomes everybody, especially the sailors, and gives them a nice patriotic talk. Then he says it’s time to get refreshments from the members of the cast walking down the aisles, but those cast members look like they’re just bums off the street carrying trays and stuff to buy.

They’re selling little American flags and popcorn and pictures of Rose la Rose – and more popcorn – and a real expensive book with “guaranteed 50 authentic pictures of 20 different strip-queens” who come to the Gaiety Theater during the year. The book is three dollars, which is too much for us after paying a dollar to get in. Most of the sailors don’t buy it either, but we see a couple of guys at the end of our row chipping in to buy one.

They finally finish selling the stuff, and the band comes back into the pit. Then the comics bounce in and do a real funny routine with a woman comic who probably used to be a stripper until she put on an extra 30 pounds, which doesn’t hurt her boobs at all. And she dances over to the side of the stage and performs some sexy moves for the perverts – which they really take to – and so would I! I notice the lights never come all the way up down where the weirdos are.

And then the best one of all comes slithering through a slit in the curtain – ROSE LA ROSE! She’s wearing a bunch of roses she strips off one by one and pitches them to the sailors down front,

darn the luck! Man! She's got the moves like we've never seen before! Everything you could want her to do she does for you! She's got to be the best stripper on the East Coast – like her poster says out front!

Some of the sailors are good and soused by the time Rose comes on, so six big men stand at the front of the stage all the time she's performing. They have to pull one gob in uniform off the stage and take him down the aisle screaming, "Oh Rose, Rose, take me home with you!"

She's so good I figure she probably was a real dancer once-upon-a-time before she took up burlesque. She's got jugs like dancers don't usually have, though. Harry says they're probably not real, but they're as real as we need them!

She dances across the front of the stage and then to the back where she picks up some feather fans and starts taking her clothes off! And it's obvious now why they call it a 'strip-tease.' Everybody in the theater starts yelling for her to "take it off, take it off, take it all off!"

First she pulls her bra off behind the feather fan and throws it out to a sailor in the second row. Somebody next to him starts a fight to take it away from him, and the ushers have to stop the fight! So, for over fifteen minutes Rose la Rose prances for all of us like we've never seen before – not even in a movie – except at the Pic Theater where they have movies where women are half naked pretending to be nudists in a nudist camp.

One time they had Hedy Lamar there in a movie she made before she got famous. She swims in a pool with nothing on – I even saw that movie – but it was kinda dark, and it wasn't easy to see what she's got. Heck! This show is a lot better.

After an hour and a half we're ready to get out of that theater – which is really hot – and we're sweating and dying for a coke. So we leave and go get in the car, but we don't have very much to say about it all. I guess when you've seen it in person there isn't much to talk about!

### ***The Dear Departed***

Mr. Turner posted a notice for tryouts for the State Contest Play last week, and I tried out. I probably didn't have to, though, because I was in the Senior Class Play last year. But I really want to go to Charlottesville to see the other schools' plays, and I want to have a weekend of powerful fun! So I try out, and I'm one of two secondary leads in *The Dear Departed*. It's a real good play – it's funny with a surprise ending – and Mr. Turner says comedies have a better chance to get a "Superior Rating" than a Chekov play or something serious like that.

We start out rehearsing after school, but most of the guys are in sports, so we go to night rehearsals. Gary Mitchell, who's got the lead part, isn't a matinee idol by any stretch of the imagination, but it's an old-man's part, so he'll have a good character.

After three weeks of hard work, we perform for a school assembly and everybody likes it. They whoop and holler at the surprise ending!

A week later we're off to Charlottesville for some fun, and Mr. Turner gets us rooms at the Queen Charlotte Hotel, which is real old and nice and pretty expensive. But Mr. Turner keeps reminding us the school is paying!

The performance schedule has us going on in the afternoon, almost the last ones, which suits us fine. We're as ready as any cast could be. We put on a beaut of a show – no missed cues, everybody is in character and then some. It's as complete a show as we've ever done – in rehearsals or anytime!

And now comes the hard part – the waiting, the suspense – waiting on the judges' decisions. So we go for a long walk and see more of Charlottesville, and when we get back an hour later, there's a list of ratings for all the plays! Each play is judged individually by set standards. We aren't competing against other plays. We're really nervous, so Mr. Turner helps by marching us in like soldiers right up to the bulletin board – and Norview gets a Superior Rating – the

best you can do!

We're so happy we don't know what to do! After all, we're competing against Granby and Maury and Thomas Jefferson of Richmond and a lot of other big schools that have been in this contest business for years. This is the first time for Norview! So Mr. Turner and Mr. Bergeron are so happy they take us all out to dinner where we have a first-class celebration at a fancy restaurant I wouldn't ever go to myself!

Then we take off as a group, a huge group, to cover the town and settle down. We end up back at the hotel to sit and talk and laugh and scream until we're afraid they're going to kick us out. Then good old T. T. Turner gives each one of us a certificate he's printed-up with our name on it, and he gets flustered when we give him hugs for being such a good director.

Then some of us go for another long walk all the way up to the University of Virginia campus, and all over that end of town. The girls are bushed when we get back to our hotel, so they go to bed. But some of the guys are itching to go out again to see what the University's night-life is like, but Mr. Turner and Mr. Bergeron sit down in the lounge and talk about the play and what it takes to be actors and directors, so I stick around to listen.

It gets to be ten o'clock, and Mr. T. and Mr. B. are drinking something out of Coke bottles, and they offer me one. Then Mr. Turner goes to his room and brings me a good cold one – and I pretty much chug-a-lug it! But, man, it doesn't taste like the Cokes I've known. It tastes more like medicine in a Coke bottle – with a little Coke slung in – but what the hey! I'm game!

About fifteen minutes later Mr. T. asks if I want a refill, and I'm not going to be chicken. "Hell, why not? We're celebrating! Bring on the Cokes!" And he brings me another one that is a little more medicinal-tasting – so I sip it this time.

Well, a while later the lounge has gotten hot as hell, and every word they speak is really funny – funny-ha-ha! We're talking about the play and they're getting funnier every swig I take, even if they are teachers! And even if I can't remember much of what they say, it's still funny!

Then right out of the blue their conversation turns unfunny. My

stomach is trying to jump out of my mouth. I feel like I've eaten too much coconut cake.

And I know I'd better go to bed! So I flip them a high goodnight – or I think I did – and I pull myself up the banister-rail to the second floor. I stumble down the hall to my room, somehow find the key, and fall on the bed. Everything in the room is swirling around and around and around like the Coney Island Ferris Wheel has been set loose on my rug. I'm trying to figure things out, but I can't think straight.

Then in a flash it hits me in the belly – I AM DRUNK! I've never been drunk before, not even a little bit – even when Jimmy Winn gave me that wine.

But I'm sure of one thing! My stomach hurts like hell! And I'm afraid I'll throw up every expensive morsel I ate for supper. So I lie down on the bed slowly to keep the ceiling where it's supposed to be. Then I feel sicker lying down, and my stomach tells me I'm going to throw-up! So I stumble into the bathroom and sit on the side of the tub. I hang my head over the john so I'll have some place to puke when it comes. Well, dammit! Now I can't vomit, but I need to vomit – bad! The next thing I know, I think I'm going to pass out. My stomach's getting tighter till it feels like it's gonna burst and spew up all that Coke. I'm just sitting on the edge of the tub waiting to die!

And then, somehow, I fall asleep sitting there! I fall head-first into the bathtub – and my head bangs off the bottom – KABAM! That sure wakes me up, but I don't know where I am or what I'm doing – wherever I am! But I manage to crawl on my hands and knees to the bedroom and pull up on top of the counterpane and fall dead asleep.

In the morning I wake up – still dressed – and I feel as bad as I've ever felt. My head is twice the size it was last night. I drop my clothes on the way to the shower and stand in the cold water until my head shrinks a little. Then I carefully dress and make my way to the elevator. When it stops I straighten myself up and walk into the dining room. Mr. T. smiles like he knows something everybody else doesn't know. And he says, "Billy, you look like you didn't sleep well last night!"

Well, I don't answer him a word. I don't feel like playing games with anybody on earth, especially the guy who made me feel this way. All I want is a small bowl of corn flakes and milk in my stomach – because I remember that's all I could stand the time J.T. and I ate the minnows and got so sick down at Red Horse.

## Billy

Born in Danville, VA, in 1930, Bill Martin grew up in a large family in the rural South where little boys played with guns for fun and blindly accepted dares from friends as an initiation ritual. Covering the years 1934–1948, Bill Martin’s stories re-create the color of an era long gone, yet readers today will still identify with the feelings present in a childhood of yesteryear.