

THE QUILT

Gary Paulsen

Yearling



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THE QUILT

GARY PAULSEN

A Yearling Book

Foreword

This is the third book about my relationship with my grandmother Alida. For various reasons, and to my great good fortune, my grandmother essentially became my mother. The first book, *The Cookcamp*, covered a summer I spent with her when I was just five years old and she was working as a cook for a crew of older men making a road up into Canada from Minnesota during the Second World War. The second, *Alida's Song*, is about the summer I spent with her when I was fourteen.

Initially, because of the pain of remembering the emotional disaster that was my mother, I had decided not to write anything else about my early years with my mother and grandmother; and so in the end of *The Cookcamp* there's a note of finality about seeing my grandmother again when I was a child. But my grandmother shines so in my life, made things so wonderful for me when I was a small boy and, later, when I became a man, that I simply had to write more about her. And so *The Quilt*. All that I am, I am because of her, and in that way this final story, all true, is more hers than mine. By her life, through me, she has made it happen.

In this third book I have just turned six. At six I still did not understand what the war was or how it would affect me. Just two years later I would move to the Philippines and see war personally. I became a street child in Manila, living in the aftermath of the barbaric cruelty the Japanese had committed there. But the summer I was six I learned what women, and more specifically, my grandmother, had to do to keep life, and families, together during the war.



Chapter One

For America, World War II lasted for nearly five years. During those years there was a time when the boy could not live with his mother.

His father had gone off to fight one week after the boy was born and his mother went to work in a munitions factory in Chicago. At first the boy lived with her in the tiny apartment by the elevated railway. Soon, though, other people—men—came to visit her and she started to do very grown-up things. He did not fit in, and when life with his mother became too difficult, he went to live with his grandmother.

The first time this happened his grandmother was working as a cook for a group of men building a war road from northern Minnesota up into Canada. They spent a wonderful summer together; later he would remember only good things about those months and indeed all the times he was with his grandmother.

He called her Grandma. Her name was Alida but he called her Grandma and he loved her very much, as he would love her the rest of her life and his life, and she adored him as well and cooked him apple pies and knitted stockings and mittens for him even though it was summer and read him letters from his mother, which made him love his mother, even though sometimes he would look at the paper his grandmother held and see that there was no writing on it. And she spoke to him in Norwegian as if he were a little man and not a boy.

The second time he went to live with his grandmother he was just six and he stayed with her at first in her small house in a little town near the Canadian border, in Minnesota.

There were only a hundred and forty people living in this town and he lived with her in a two-room house that was set on the outskirts of the village near a small stream. The water made a wonderful burbling noise that helped him sleep when he thought of his mother in Chicago and missed her.

Once, while his grandmother was sitting at the small table in the one room that served as a parlor, living room and kitchen, he asked her, “If I miss Mother so much”—and he called her Mother then, although when he spoke to his mother he always called her Mom—“why is it that I can't be with her?”

And his grandmother, who was crocheting what would become a bedspread, put her crocheting down on her lap. She took him in her arms, which he always liked but did not see a reason for now, and said, “She is living in a very fast time, your mother, and working very hard, and she would not have time to spend with you and that would make her sad. It's bad to be sad.”

“Sometimes in the night when I think of her and miss her *I'm* sad.”

"I know, I know. And that is why you're with me. That's just the way things are now."

"Is it because of the war?"

"Yes. It's the war."

"I thought it was because of the men who came home with her from the plant where they make bullets for the soldiers."

"No. Those men are nothing and you mustn't think about them."

"Do they come home with her because of the war?"

"Yes. They are nothing to think about." And she went back to her crocheting except that he could see that her fingers went very fast and hard with the crochet hook, and she missed a stitch and had to go back. He could tell that she was upset but could not understand why and thought it was something he'd said, and hugged her and stood next to her that way for several moments. Then he said, because he thought it would help, "I don't miss my father at all."

Her fingers stopped for a moment, then continued, more slowly, and she sighed. "You never saw him. He was in the deserts in California training in tanks when you were born and they sent him right overseas."

"But I will see him someday."

"Yes."

"After the war."

"Yes, after the war."

He thought for another moment. "When will the war be over?"

Her fingers stopped again and her voice grew tight and with the clipped sound of her Norwegian accent had almost knife edges. "When men are sick and tired of being men . . . She trailed off. "Never mind. The war will be over when it's over. Go play outside."

It was summer and he played on the edge of the water and in the stream, which was only ankle-deep, making boats with leaves and sticks and lying down on his side to make them look bigger so they were like ships as they bounced and careened down the rapids. Enemy ships, which he had seen in newsreels on the rare occasions when his mother had taken him to Gene Autry and Roy Rogers movies in Chicago, which he liked very much—the movies—even though he did not know exactly what an enemy was except that one was German and one was Japanese and he did not know exactly what *they* were except that they were bad and soldiers were fighting them.

He played war with the stick boats and leaf ships and dropped rocks on them and pretended they were bombs, and each time he sank one of them he pretended he was helping his father in some way, by killing the Germans and Japanese, and he would be able to come home and send away the men who visited the boy's mother in Chicago.

He would sometimes play in the stream all day until his grandmother called him in to eat. He would find that it was very late and still light and his eyes could barely stay open.

They ate potatoes and small pieces of venison that his grandmother got from neighbors who hunted deer. And she made him apple pies, as she had in the cookcamp in the woods the year before. Sometimes they had *lefsa*, a kind of big tortilla made of potato flour, which she

cooked on a piece of iron on top of the stove.

The *lefsa* was delicious, especially when she smeared it with butter and rolled it into a long tube with chokecherry jelly she had made from berries picked in the summer.

Sometimes he would find himself in her lap, falling asleep with *lefsa* in his mouth and the sun still bright outside.

“Why is the sun still out at night here? It's not in Chicago,” he asked one day, sitting at the table. “Is it because of the war?”

She shook her head and smiled. “No. God makes the days long in summer in the north. Norwegians have more time to get all their work done.”

“What's a Norwegian?”

She laughed. “Why you are, little one. You're my brave little Norwegian.” And she sang a song about a thousand Swedes who ran through the weeds with one Norwegian chasing them, and he didn't understand really what it meant but tried to hum along with her.

She sang a lot in that time when the two of them lived in the little house and most of his memories of then would have her singing. She sang short songs with a foreign sound, which he would find was Norwegian. She sang while she cooked, leaning over the stove with flour on her cheeks and in her hair, her eyes crinkled with smiles.

One day she decided to hang new wallpaper in the little bedroom and she made paste with flour and water and took out the wallpaper with the pretty flowers that she had ordered from Sears and Roebuck. A neighbor lady came to help. Her name was Clair and she was old like his grandmother and had the same lines by her eyes from smiling all the time. She brought a quart jar full of red liquid that she said was her special berry wine.

He had often seen his mother drinking beer in the Cozy Corner Bar in Chicago when she met with men. She'd have him stand on the bar and sing the “Mares eat oats and goats eat oats and little lambs eat ivy” song, which he always got wrong and sang, “Marzeedotes and goazeedotes and liddlamseetdivey.”

Everybody laughed when he sang and gave him drumsticks of Southern fried chicken and nickel bottles of Coca-Cola. He liked all that, but he didn't like what the drinking did to his mother.

But his grandmother and Clair were different. They took little sips from jelly glasses and even gave him a little sip, which tasted sweet and a bit sticky, and soon they were giggling and flopping the wallpaper over their heads when they tried to hang it, and his grandmother began singing songs that made Clair blush, even though when they weren't laughing she sang along.

The wallpaper never did get pasted to the walls, and instead his grandmother and Clair sat in the kitchen and talked about when they were young. The boy sat listening because they laughed the whole time they talked, and he thought how much fun they must have had when they were young.

“I should have married Clarence,” Clair said once.

“He didn't ask you,” his grandmother said, laughing, “he asked me. And I married him. You married Sven, remember?”

“Yes, Alida,” Clair said, “but Sven was weak and Clarence was strong.”

“You had three sons with Sven before he died.”

“But you had four, Alida, and four daughters, before Clarence passed on....”

“That's true. But even so, you loved Sven, didn't you?”

“Sven was a poet,” Clair said, nodding, but then she smiled and added, “But poets don't always get the wood cut, if you know what I mean.”

And his grandmother laughed and blushed and said, “Oh, you, Clair, you're terrible!”

And they laughed and laughed, sipping the sticky wine, and the boy didn't understand most of what they said. As the evening came on he kept closing his eyes and opening them more slowly, and he finally felt himself being carried to bed and thought if his mother was this way when she drank he would not mind it so much.

The next morning the sound of his grandmother slamming pans in the kitchen woke him up and he went out in his pajamas to see her making pancakes.

“This morning,” she said, all smiles, “we are having buttermilk pancakes fried in bear grease with honey on top.”

“What's bear grease?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

“It's grease made from bears. Clair brought two quarts of it over when she came to help with the papering and I thought you might like to taste pancakes made with it. It's the very best for pancakes and doughnuts and rubbing on your boots.”

And while he tried to think of how you could get grease from a bear or why you would use it for pancakes or doughnuts or why you would rub it on your boots, his grandmother's ring came from the phone hanging on the wall.

He loved the party line. In the city everybody had their own private phone but here all the phones were on the same line and each had their own special ring. His grandmother's ring was a short, a long and then another short, but they heard all the rings and often his grandmother would put her hand over the mouthpiece and hold the earpiece to her ear and listen in on other people's conversations.

It was called rubbernecking, and he loved it even though his grandmother said it was wrong.

“But you do it,” he said.

“Yes, but it's still wrong, and it's very wrong for you, my little Norwegian.”

But this time the ring was for her and she wiped the flour from her hands and took the earpiece from the hook on the side and rose on her toes to reach the mouthpiece.

“Hello, yes, this is Alida!” She always yelled in the telephone and she started every sentence with “Hello, yes,” as if she needed to constantly reestablish that she was still there listening. “Hello, yes, Kristina, go ahead!”

The boy heard only the one side, though he listened hard.

“Hello, yes, I see.”

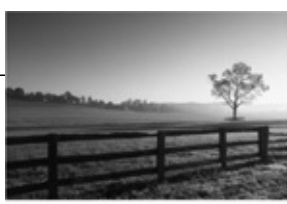
And: “Hello, yes, that will be fine. How soon?”

And: "Hello, yes, I'll have to get Elmer to give us a ride out. It depends on his truck. With the gas rationing he has to run it on tractor fuel and sometimes he can't keep it running. We see you when we see you."

She listened again, then: "Hello, yes, there's no problem. He's a good boy and no trouble. Yes, then, we'll see you."

And she hung up and turned to the boy and smiled and said, "We're going to go spend some time with Kristina. Her man is off in the war and she needs some help on her farm."

Which is how it happened that the boy learned of the quilt.



Chapter Two

The boy had not been raised on a farm. Most of his life he had been in Minneapolis, living in a small apartment with his mother while she worked at a laundry and then in another small apartment in Chicago when she went to work at the munitions factory. He knew a little about city living, about how to say “hello” and “please” and “thank you” to the super, how not to make noise in the hallways, how to play in one place so his mother could find him easily, how not to make noise when his mother napped because she worked the night shift, how not to go outside the building because there were bad men, how to turn the radio on and listen to the Lone Ranger and Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy and Red Skelton, how to be careful of Mr. McAllister, who lived next door and did not like children.

But he knew almost nothing of farms. He had seen farms when he visited his cousins at Christmas for a day or two but had no real concept of what happened on one and so he was very excited all through the evening while his grandmother packed.

“Is it a big farm?”

“Not so large. I think they have a hundred and sixty acres with about eighty acres cleared.”

“Does she have animals?”

“Of course, silly. All farms have animals.”

“What kind of animals?”

She looked at him. “Farm animals.”

“Are there cows?”

She held up a denim jacket that had seen better days, then shrugged and put it in the box she was packing. “Yes, cows.”

“And horses?”

“Of course. You can't farm without workhorses. Who would do the work?”

“Chickens?”

“Yes. Chickens and ducks and horses and cows and pigs. All the farm animals.” She sighed as she put a worn dress in the box. “Now, get ready for bed. Elmer is coming to get us early in the morning to take us out to Kristina's farm and we have to be rested and ready.”

He put on his pajamas and she washed his face and tucked him into the small cot next to her bed, but at first he was too excited to sleep. He listened to her moving around, packing, and just as he started to doze off he remembered something.

“Will she have a dog?” he called.

“A dog, yes. And cats, too, I suspect. She might even have fish or a kangaroo. Now go to sleep.”

But still sleep wouldn't come and he turned and tossed, until at last his eyes closed for just a second. Then he heard his grandmother say, “Come on, sleepy bones, Elmer will be here soon and we have to have breakfast ready for him.”



It was hard to decide on who was older or in worse shape, Elmer or his truck. In the lay of the land of family in the north part of Minnesota, where it seemed that almost everybody was related to everybody else in some way, Elmer was some distant relation to the boy's grandmother but older, much older, than her and broken by his years.

He was short and bent, with an old wool jacket that seemed almost to reach the ground and a beard that was gray and roughly cut with a scissors, and tufts of hair that grew thick and long out of both ears and both nostrils.

The top of his head was completely bald and around the sides there was a white ring of silver-gray hair that he apparently also kept trimmed with the same hacking scissors he used on his beard.

There was not a tooth in his head and he had long ago broken what served as his dentures so that he had callused gums that were so hard he could actually chew, and the boy watched with outright fascination as he ate pancakes. His manners were fastidious and he carefully dabbed at his mouth with a handkerchief after each bite, and when he had finished eating he sipped coffee into which he dipped two sugar lumps, which he put inside his lower lip while drinking the coffee.

He then turned to the boy's grandmother and said something that seemed completely made up of lisps and whispers. The boy could not understand a word, but apparently his grandmother could because she turned to the boy and said, “Get your travel bag and go out to the truck. We have to leave. It's a long way and his truck is acting up.”

“He said all that?”

“Of course,” she said. “In perfect Norwegian. Now, hurry. Elmer is a busy man. He's the only one around with a truck that can take us anywhere. All the rest of the men are in the war.”

The boy took his small tote bag, which he had used to carry his three favorite toys from Chicago: a small stuffed dog that he'd had since he was little (that was how he thought of it, had since he was little); a rubber statue of the Lone Ranger and his horse, Silver, the hero of his favorite radio show; and a little metal tank, which he kept because his father was a tank man.

With the bag over his shoulder he went out into the summer morning to get into the truck. He stepped out of the door and stopped.

It was a truck in name only. Somewhere in the past—the ancient past, because the truck actually had wooden-spoke wheels—Elmer had taken a car, a four-door sedan, and cut the roof and doors off and made a wooden-plank bed that came up to the rear of the front seat and hung out the back over what might have once been a rear bumper. There was no roof, no

stuffing left in the seat—Elmer had put two burlap sacks over the bare springs sticking up and the windshield, which provided a minimum of protection, was such a maze of cracks and chips that it was impossible to see through it.

And then, as a finishing touch, for twenty or so years Elmer had hauled loads of wood, straw, feed, dead animals, live animals, dirt, concrete—countless loads of everything imaginable—and each load had left a deposit of some kind on the planks.

“Where am I going to sit?” the boy asked.

Elmer rattled off some words to his grandmother and she said to the boy, “Just sit on the boards in back of the seat.”

“They're covered with potty.” He knew the other word, had heard his mother say it many times, but also knew he would get in trouble for saying it. “It's everywhere.”

She looked and then shrugged. “It's just chicken manure. It will wash out. Go ahead and sit down—you'll be walking barefoot in it before long.”

“In *potty*?”

She laughed. “It will squeeze up between your toes like mud. You'll like it. It's good for you.”

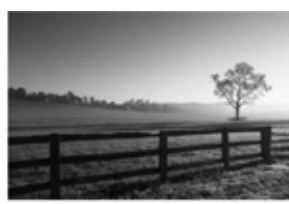
“*Potty*?” he repeated, but she was stuffing boxes and bags in back of the seat. When she was finished he climbed onto the top of the pile and sat down—far away from the potty. Elmer moved levers on the steering wheel. Then, with further lispings and loud hissing (his grandmother reached around and covered the boy's ears), he went to the front of the vehicle and, using a crank and more swearing (the boy was sure it was swearing, because some of the words had the same sound in any language), he cranked and jiggled and levered until the truck gave a loud gasp of smoke, hesitated and finally started wheezing into life.

Elmer ran around the truck, worked the levers some more—there was no foot accelerator and the throttle was a lever on the steering wheel—and with further sputtering and coughing and grinding sounds the truck started moving down the road in an absolutely blinding cloud of smoke.

On top of everything else the truck had no muffler. The explosions from the four cylinders when they chose to fire, was deafening.

Elmer leaned over and screamed something to him. His grandmother turned and nodded to Elmer and yelled to the boy, “He said that usually it runs better. A little better. It's just that he has to use low-grade tractor fuel and that's why it's so rough and smoky.” She turned around, looked out through the cracked windshield, then looked back at the boy again and smiled.

“What a nice day for a drive. We'll be there in no time at all.”



Chapter Three

The ride was more in the nature of an adventure than something that would take “no time at all.”

Initially the road was just a single gravel lane cut through the forest, and then it turned into simple dirt, wide enough for one vehicle, with a ditch cut on each side and thick trees interspersed with small man-made clearings of forty to eighty acres.

Had it been raining, or winter, or spring, they would not have been able to travel at all. With mud or snow the track would have been completely impassable.

As it was, the highest speed the truck could maintain was ten miles an hour. Kristina's farm was only seven miles away. But age, wear on machinery and the poor quality of tractor fuel, which was little more than low-grade kerosene, all contributed to slow the truck to a measly four or five miles an hour—hardly more than walking speed. Indeed, on more than one occasion the boy and his grandmother got out and walked alongside the bouncing vehicle. Every quarter to half mile the engine would overheat and Elmer would have to stop the truck, let the engine cool down and get a bucket of water from the ditch to pour into the boiled-over radiator. Each of these stops took half an hour or so and the end result was that the truck averaged about a mile an hour.

The boy loved it. In his mind it was a grand adventure, a voyage through wilderness, and he imagined wild beasts and Indians and even Germans and Japanese hiding in the forests along the road. He found a stick in the shape of a gun and used it to guard and defend the truck and Elmer and his grandmother. As they churned past each new homestead, which were what the small clearings were, the people who turned to look and the children who ran out to see them became the people who cheered the tanks that liberated villages in the newsreels.

He felt very much the hero, and when, nearly seven hours after they started, they came to a wooden mailbox with the name Olaf Jorgenson carved on the side, he felt almost sad that the ride was over.

The driveway was a tunnel through overhanging thick green trees and brush. They drove through them, bouncing and jerking with steam boiling out of the radiator, for two hundred yards until they came to a clearing. To the left stood a small, neat two-story white-painted frame house, surrounded by a low white wooden fence. To the right stood a series of small buildings—a granary, a chicken coop, a shed and a red barn with an arched roof. Next to the barn was an old Minneapolis-Moline tractor with steel lug wheels, all covered with rust, and next to that, a wagon with high sides and a long wooden tongue that stuck out the front and lay on the ground.

There was no other machinery, no car, no truck. As they hammered-wheezed-smoked in the yard a cloud of chickens exploded into running flight and a dog came streaking out from in back of the barn barking, with his shoulder hair up.

Elmer tried to kill the engine. Of course, now it refused to die. He jerked the throttle and spark levers down and he had to engage the hand clutch to lunge it ahead to still the yammering.

There was a moment of silence, deafening after seven hours of noise. In the sudden quiet broken only by the barking dog and cackling chickens, his grandmother said:

“We're at last here.”

The boy was out of the truck instantly and the dog, after peeing on the tire, approached him with tail wagging and pushed against his leg. He knelt and hugged it and began petting while Elmer stiffly got out and his grandmother turned and handed boxes and sacks to Elmer.

There was still no other indication that people lived at the farm.

When their packages were on the ground Elmer went to the front of the truck and turned the crank to start it. He climbed on, made a big circle in the dusty barnyard and disappeared down the driveway, the truck clanking and smoking.

The dog broke away to chase the truck. The boy stood up.

“He didn't say goodbye.”

“Yes, he said it in Norwegian, but not loud. You must not say it loud or the devil will hear and ruin your trip. He had to hurry to get back before dark.”

“Does the devil come in the dark?”

“No. He doesn't have any lights.”

“The devil?”

“No. Elmer.”

The truck had disappeared, but the boy could still hear it. “But can't the devil hear the truck anyway?”

“That's different. Come now, grab a box and let's get up to the house.”

Just then the screen door slammed. A woman came out of the porch along the front of the house.

She was very tall, wearing large men's bib overalls and a blue work shirt, with long white blond hair tied up in a bun on her head, and she was hugely pregnant.

“Why is her belly so big?” the boy asked in a whisper.

“She's going to have a baby,” his grandmother said. “Very soon. That's why we're here. To help.”

Kristina came through the gate and stopped. “Alida! It's so good to see you! And I see you brought your helper. I would have come out sooner but I was putting bread in the oven. Why did Elmer leave so soon? Usually he stays to eat.”

“He wants to get back before dark,” Alida answered. “Though if he knew you had fresh bread he might have stayed. That man loves his gullet.”

Kristina had a big voice, strong but still soft in some way, and she leaned down and shook the boy's hand and he saw her face close on for the first time and thought, and would think for the rest of his life, that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Her eyes were a striking blue and almond-shaped, with a tilt at the corners and long blond lashes. Her nose had a slight upturn and her teeth were even and white when she smiled at him. He liked her instantly.

"We're here," he said, "to help you have a baby."

"Hush!" his grandmother said. "How you talk!"

"Well, that's what you said. Just now, you said we were here to help."

"Sometimes the young ones talk just to hear themselves," his grandmother said. "Hush now."

"But—"

"Well, he's right, Alida. That's why you came out here. Come now, to the house, before the banty roosters come out of the coop and make a fuss. They think they own the world and don't like company, and we have to eat supper before chores."

Kristina picked up a box and went to the house and the boy and his grandmother followed with the rest of their packages.

"I have a room in the back for you and the boy," Kristina said, "and a cradle for the baby which will be good for a while. He can lie with me when he first comes."

"He?"

"I did the flour-and-ring test last night and three times it pointed to boy. That's what Old Man wants most. A boy. It would be so nice to surprise him with a son when he comes home."

She stopped talking and the boy thought it was because they were at the door, but he caught a glimpse of her face and saw she was crying, soft tears, and it didn't make sense to him until she said:

"The damn war. The damn, damn war."

"Men," his grandmother said. "It's how they fix things. Fight over them. Just like bulls."

When they entered the house, they came directly into the kitchen. The boy immediately smelled the bread baking and started to salivate. Except for a jar of canned wild plums they had opened on the way and shared with Elmer, they had not eaten all day, and he was starved.

Along one wall was a wood-burning cookstove, facing the door, and it was making the room very hot because Kristina had it fired up to bake the bread. On the other wall, to the right, there was a sink, but instead of faucets it had a hand pump. To the left the wall was full of cupboards.

In the middle of the kitchen was a table with four wooden chairs, and from the ceiling hung a Coleman gas lantern. There was no electricity on the farm. But that summer in the cookcamp the boy and his grandmother had lived without electricity, so he knew about lanterns and candles.

"Sit," Kristina said. "We'll eat."

“Let me,” his grandmother said, moving to the cupboards. “You’re so close now. Let me do the work.”

“But I feel fine.”

“Hush now,” his grandmother said. “Don’t let the devil hear.”

“Oh, Alida ...”

They put the boxes and packages in a side room. Soon there were plates and silverware on the table. His grandmother cut fresh bread, hot from the oven, and took a jar of honey from the cupboard and from the top of the stove a cast-iron pot filled with stew. They sat to eat.

They did not talk while they sat but kept at the food until they were done. The boy ate three slices of hot bread with sugared honey and a full plate of stew and thought he had never eaten food that tasted so wonderful, and when they were done they put the dishes in the sink for later and went back out into the yard.

It was still light and with the summer sun would be light for another four hours. The boy was halfway across the barnyard, following his grandmother and Kristina and looking for the dog when he heard a loud chukkering behind him. He turned to see four enraged barn roosters, with their neck feathers all puffed up, flying through the air toward his head.

“Grandma!” he yelled, and ran for her skirts. She turned and waved her arms.

“Get gone with you, damn you!”

And the roosters seemed to stop in midair. They veered off to the side and backed away.

“They’re cowards,” Kristina said over her shoulder without turning. “Just don’t let them bluff you down.”

“What’s bluff?” The boy watched them flutter from the protection of his grandmother’s skirt.

“Like a lie,” his grandmother said. “They lie to scare you and pretend they’re tough, but they’re all talk.”

They didn’t look like all talk to the boy. They looked like they could tear his head off and he decided either he would not come into the yard alone or he would find a big stick to carry. Faced with Alida, however, the roosters gave up and moved off to the back of the barn to look for bugs in the manure.

The barn was a wonderful mystery to the boy, dark and cool. Three cats came up and rubbed their sides against his legs in greeting.

“Cotton, Candy,” said Kristina, pointing at two gold cats, and then at a brown one, “and Mud. We got them to keep the rats and mice down but they mostly just steal milk.”

She moved to the back of the barn and slid the door open. The boy was surprised to see seven cows standing there, waiting to come into the barn.

“Hello, girls,” Kristina said. She turned back into the barn and the cows followed her in. They were enormous and the boy moved back against the front wall. But they all trooped to their stalls, each waiting for the one next to her to get settled before going into her own stall.

“They know where to go,” he said. “Just like people ...”

“Better than people.” His grandmother snorted as she carried a bucket from a little side

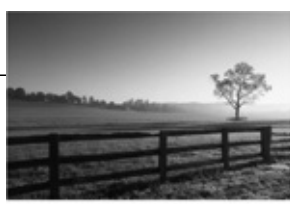
room. She took a stool from a hook on the wall, leaving two other small three-legged stools.
“They almost never fight.... People aren't so smart.”

The boy remembered suddenly. “What was that word she used back in the house?”

“What word?”

“She said ‘shores,’ or ‘chores.’ What does that mean?”

“It means light work,” she said, smiling down at him. “Light work in the mornings and evenings before the real work starts.... You'll see. Now, here, carry this stool down to the red cow on the end. We'll start there and Kristina can come the other way and we'll meet in the middle.”



Chapter Four

The boy did not think of it as light work. Kristina might be pregnant but she could work like a man, and his grandmother and Kristina kept him running.

“Your job is to carry the stools between the cows for us,” Kristina said, smiling as she finished milking a cow. She stood to carry the bucket of milk to the milk cans in the pump room at the end of the bar.

“I could carry the buckets of milk,” he said. She shook her head. “Not yet. Just the stools for now, and keep the cats from sitting on top of the cows. Abigail and Eunice don't like and they fidget and give less milk.”

“The cows have names?”

“You bet. And they know them.” She slapped the cow she had just finished milking lightly on the rump. “Isn't that right, Abby?” And the cow turned and looked at her before turning back to face forward.

They didn't quite meet in the middle. His grandmother did four cows and Kristina did only three, but twice the boy saw her stop milking and lean her head into the cow's flank and close her eyes and wince and sigh, and he guessed that something about having a baby was hard work and perhaps hurt or made a person tired and he decided to work as hard as he could and help as much as he could.

He ran back and forth with the stools and tried to shoo the cats off the cows but they ignored him. When milking first started, they sat up on their hind legs like little bears in back of his grandmother and Kristina and waited to have milk squirted into their mouths. But soon they'd had enough milk, and they jumped up onto the backs of the cows and began jumping from cow to cow, playing on them.

Some of the cows did fidget, and while at first he was afraid because the cows were so large, after a time he realized how gentle they were and he went between them after the cats. Soon he ignored the cows completely.

What with chasing cats, running back and forth with the stools and then after the cats, by the time milking was done and all the milk put into the milk cans in the water trough in the pump room, the boy was so tired he nearly staggered as they walked back to the house.

In the kitchen he found they were to eat again, a light lunch (as his grandmother called it) before going to bed. He sat in a chair at the table.

It had been a long day, with Elmer and the truck and the road and getting to the farm and milking and learning about roosters and cats jumping on cows and wagging dogs and cows

with names and Kristina, and soon his eyes closed and no matter what he did he could not get them to open again, food or no food. The last thing he remembered was his grandmother carrying him, saying, "What a good little man you are," and putting him into a bed with a feather mattress so soft he just sank and sank until he thought he would never come up and then, just, plain, nothing.

GARY PAULSEN



Morning.

He opened his eyes because bright sun was coming through a window across his face, and he heard something he had never heard before, the sound of a rooster crowing.

He lay for a moment, still half asleep, remembering where he was, thinking of the day before and his mother, wondering if she'd ever seen cows and geese and chickens, and he heard the two women talking in the kitchen, just off the bedroom where he lay.

"It started while we were milking this morning but I'm not sure about time, Alida. He was home on leave for two weeks and it seems like we spent most of it in the sheets. It could have been any time in those two weeks."

"So what's the soonest, and the latest?"

"Three days ago was soonest ... nine or ten days from now would be the latest."

"And you waited until day before yesterday to call me?"

"I didn't want to be a bother."

"Babies are never a bother. We have to call Martha."

"But I haven't any pains yet; my water hasn't broken—"

"Kristina, I'm not a midwife. We have to call Martha. She knows what to do and it might take her a day or two to get her own things in order to come over here. I'll call her after lunch."

"But—"

"There will be none of the buts. I know what they say, first come, late come. But you're so big.... We'll call Martha right away. And I'm going to call some of the other girls too. Sometimes you can't have too many women."

A lot of it made no sense to the boy and he felt bad that he had missed morning milking and they had let him sleep. But he knew they were talking about the baby and when it might come, and he was excited at the prospect because he did not know anything about how babies came or what you did or how they worked except that it must be inside Kristina and had to come out, and he had many questions he wanted to ask.

But his grandmother's voice sounded tight and worried, the way it did when he asked her questions about his mother. So he decided to hold back. He rolled out of bed and went into the kitchen and asked instead, "Where's the potty?" He hadn't seen a bathroom. Both women laughed and Kristina said, "Outside, in back of the house, there's a little house with a seat with holes in it. Just rip a page out of the catalog for paper. Or if it's just front potty you can go in the bushes."

He had gone to the bathroom outside when he was at the cookcamp with his grandmother just number one (he had never heard “front potty” before) and they had had a potty chair in the trailer. This was more serious than number one and he went outside and found the little house. He did his business, wondering while he was sitting there why they called it number one and number two. He stood and opened the door to see the roosters, all four of them standing there staring at him, chukkering with their neck feathers out in threat. He closed the door.

At first he was frightened and chagrined that he had forgotten them. The dog, who was named Jake and who had apparently followed the boy from the house, sat there too watching the roosters, his ears cocked. After a time the boy collected himself, remembering what they'd told him about the roosters being cowards. He opened the door, raised his arms wide to make himself look bigger, screamed “Yaaaaahhhhh!” and ran right at them.

It was most gratifying. They were taken completely by surprise and as a bonus, Jake joined in the fun. Feathers flew as the roosters squawked and screeched out of the yard, the dog cocked their tails, and the boy almost strutted back into the house, his pajamas flopping.

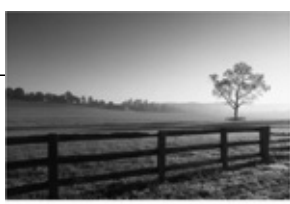
“I ran into the roosters,” he said, sitting at the table. “Me and the dog had to chase them out of the yard.”

But the two women weren't listening. Kristina was standing, leaning against the wall, her face pale and drawn, and his grandmother was on the phone, cranking the one long ring that would get Central.

“You must go outside,” she told him, holding her hand over the mouthpiece, “and play alone for a little time. We have something to do now.”

“Is it the baby?” he asked.

“Play. Go play outside now, hurry,” and then, turning to the phone, she said, “Central, this is Alida out to Kristina's. Get Martha out here as soon as possible and tell her to bring the others. It's starting.”



Chapter Five

Women came from everywhere. He had been in the yard for only a short time, making roads in the dust with a small wooden blade that he pretended was the bulldozer he had ridden the summer before at the cookcamp, when the first wagon came down the driveway from the road.

He had not seen horses pull before and he was amazed by the team that came with the first freight wagon. There were two of them, one gray with white markings on his forehead and the other all brown, and they were huge, like living walls of horses pulling into the yard. They had come at a trot and were covered with sweat and surrounded by flies. Two women holding cloth bags and what looked like folded sheets climbed down from the high seat in front of the box, using the steel spokes of the wheels as steps. They left a boy in the seat holding the reins, a boy who did not seem that much older than he was.

He hoped the boy would stay to play, but instead the driver expertly slapped the reins against the rumps of the horses and they obediently pulled in a wide circle. Without waving or saying anything he started back down the driveway.

One of the women called after him. “You stop and water them in a ditch and let them blow, and don't you run them. You and your sister take care of the chores until I come back. I'll be home when I get there.” The other woman smiled and waved.

With that they made their way to the house.

Perhaps an hour passed, and the boy was very curious about what was happening but just as he decided to go inside or at least peek through the door, another wagon, pulled by two similar horses, both sweaty, came trotting down the drive. This time three women got off and went inside and a girl who was perhaps ten or eleven sat holding the reins. She called after one of the women:

“I should stay and help.”

One of the women turned. She was plump and wearing an old-time dress that came almost to the ground, and she had red cheeks and dark hair up in a bun. “Not this time,” she said. “You're too young yet. You go home and tend to chores.”

“How am I ever going to learn?” the girl asked.

“You're too young,” the woman repeated, and then one of the other women pulled at her arm and said:

“Come on, Martha, let's get inside.”

With that the three women disappeared into the house and the girl turned the horses and

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