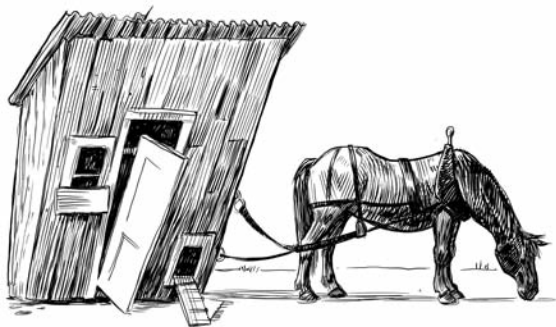


CHAPTER TWO

Horsepower



“The country is a great place for kids,” he said as we drove out of the city. “You’re gonna love it.”

We drove across the countryside for what seemed like hours, until we came upon a little town. He drove into it and parked Maggie across the street from a store. “Zackary’s General Store,” the hand-painted sign said in big red letters.

“This is Station Hill,” he said. “Our farm is about eight miles from here.”

“This is where you’ll be going to school in the fall,” Mother informed us.

I shuddered at the thought. I didn’t want to go to school here. The idea was frightening.

“In the meantime, who wants an ice-cream cone?” the Sergeant asked.

“I do!” Pat cried.

I did not give in. I said nothing. I was boiling with anger and hate.

“Well, then that does, come with me,” the Sergeant said.

By the time they were halfway across the street, I felt I’d made my point. I got out of Maggie and followed them into the store.

Ice cream is a very soothing thing. As we drove out of Station Hill, all licking our ice-cream cones like mad, I even found myself getting a little curious about our new farm. The farms in the Roy Rogers cowboy movies were always very nice. If our farm was like one of those, then maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

I saw the farm long before we reached it. It was on the left side of the road, just a little way back from the bottom of a large hill. There were trees all around the yard, though mostly on the far side of the house. It looked pretty from a distance.

“It’s got a real nice creek,” the Sergeant informed us for the nineteenth time. “It runs right through the east quarters.”

“Will there be ducks in it?” Pat asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe in the fall.”

“We’ll have some nice tame ducks, don’t you worry,” Mother promised him. Her eyes were glowing. She was very happy.

As we came up the dirt road, we went past a large white farmhouse with a pack of girls playing outside, and then, through the trees up ahead, I got a glimpse of our new home. It was a two-story house, clad in brown shingles. In back of it there was a big red barn and a few other buildings. On one side of the yard, there was a small pond.

When we drove into the yard, I got out and looked more closely at the house and my heart fell into my boots. It was an old wreck. It looked like it had ghosts living in it. I looked around at the other buildings and saw that our new farm wasn't new at all! In fact, it was so old that I thought that we should let it die in peace and move back to Wistola. I wanted to tell the Sergeant this, too, but he was so happy that I was afraid to say anything against it.

Our "new" house didn't have any doors or windows to speak of, and a large flock of pigeons was living upstairs in our bedroom. The place was a terrible mess inside. There was dirt and dust all over.

"The Smiths haven't lived here for a few years, so it needs a little cleaning and fixing, but it'll be a fine home when we're finished with it," the Sergeant said as he led us into the living room.

"It'll be lovely," Mother declared. "And the best thing of all, it's ours! We'll never have to pay rent on it!"

"No," the Sergeant laughed. "Just the mortgage."

"What's a mortgage?" Pat asked.

"It's when you sell your soul to the devil," the Sergeant answered quickly.

“What’s a soul?” Pat asked.

“It’s the part of you that you can’t see,” I said, whereupon Pat began to examine the air around him.

Mother stepped across the room, and she tore a loose strip of green wallpaper off the wall.

“Good plaster behind it,” the Sergeant said, looking at the bare wall where the wallpaper had been stripped away.

“Where’s the light switch?” I asked, after looking around the room and not seeing one.

“They don’t have electricity out here yet,” the Sergeant informed me.

“No electricity!” I cried. “What about the radio?”

He just shook his head at me and smiled.

“No radio!” I cried. I felt a cold chill run through my body. Never again would I hear those thrilling words, “The shadow knows,” followed by that insane laugh. There would be no more Fibber McGee and Molly, with things crashing out of the closet when Fibber opened the door. There would be no more Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd. No more Superman! No more Green Hornet! No more anything!

“Electricity will come out here someday,” he said. “You have to have faith in the future.”

The future? I had no future. Someday soon they would find me lying among the trees out back, and they would find me dead. Dead! Dead from an excess of boredom.

“What are you looking for?” Mother asked me a few minutes later, as I ran about the place with an urgent ex-

pression on my face, looking into closets and the pantry for what wasn't there.

"I can't find the bathroom," I confessed. I felt a bit of a fool, not being able to find it.

"Come with me," the Sergeant said.

He led me outside, onto the stoop, and pointed at a little building with a half-moon cut into the door.

"There's the bathroom," he said.

I should have known. It was an outhouse, exactly like the one at Auntie Margaret and Uncle Max's farm. And it had exactly the same kind of rough wood seat with the same two holes, above the same kind of awful poop pit that produced that same awful smell. My heart sank into my boots. In my mind's eye I saw again the wonderful modern bathroom in the Norris block, back in my beloved Wistola. A beautiful bathroom, fully equipped with sink, bathtub, and toilet. A beautiful bathroom that we had only had to share with six other families. I wished I'd appreciated it more. I wished with all my heart I could go back to it now, and I would have said so right then, but I couldn't talk freely when he was around. I hated him for ruining our lives!

From that first moment when Mother attacked the green wallpaper, they hardly ever stopped working. Uncle Max and Auntie Margaret's farm was about three miles away, and later on that morning, they appeared on the scene with their truck. They brought my cousin Annie with them, along with a huge basket of food.

Annie and Pat and I each took a sandwich and a bottle of Orange Crush and we had a picnic along the creek. After we finished our lunch, we wandered along the shallow waters for some distance, until I was bitten by a vicious mosquito.

“Where are you going?” Annie asked me.

“I’m going back. A mosquito bit me,” I said.

“You are such a dunce!” Annie growled. “Come on, Pat.”

On my way back I rubbed my arm where the mosquito had attacked me and I thought about what I’d be doing if I were back in Wistola. Right about now we’d be delivering our morning’s beer bottles to the liquor store, and a little while from now, we’d be sitting in the Roxy, watching a movie. Maybe it would be a Tarzan movie with Johnny Weissmuller. But no. Instead I was out here in the middle of nowhere, being eaten alive by country mosquitoes.

After lunch the grown-ups began to work again, and they worked until dusk. And the next day was the same. They just never stopped. Day after day they worked at it. They cleaned and washed the place from top to bottom. The hole in the roof was repaired. Doors and windows appeared on the scene and went into place. Everywhere around there, there was the sound of scraping and hammering and sawing. The smell of fresh paint was always in the air.

As for us kids, we climbed through the barn and played in the hay and wandered along the creek, and it was

almost like having fun. Well, maybe being out here was okay for a holiday, but it wasn't the sort of thing you can go on enjoying day after day.

For the first week we slept in the back of Maggie, under the stars. Auntie Margaret begged us to come home with them and stay there, but the Sergeant would not hear of it. After they'd gone home, he explained his reasons to our mother.

"I don't want to owe him anything," he said.

"It wasn't him that invited us," she responded coldly. "It was my sister."

"It's all the same," the Sergeant replied.

The truth of the matter was that the Sergeant and Uncle Max didn't get along all that well. In fact, they had a tendency to spend most of their free time arguing about one thing or another. Usually it was in a good-natured way, but sometimes they got downright angry with each other.

"Actually, I don't mind it so much," Mother murmured. "Sleeping in the open, I mean. It's a nice change, and the stars are pretty."

"I love the stars!" Pat chirped.

The Sergeant pointed out the Big Dipper and then various other star formations. I don't know what they were called. Pat was very enthusiastic about it all, but I had no interest in stars, since they were too far away to affect me. The Sergeant was still droning on about them when I fell asleep.

The day finally came when we transferred our furniture

across the yard, from the barn into the house, and that night we moved in with the mice.

I had always believed that there was nothing in the world that my mother was afraid of. She was not afraid to go after the people in the apartment block who failed to wash out the bathtub after they used it. She was not afraid to return bad meat to the butcher and bawl him out about it. She was not afraid of thunderstorms or vicious dogs. But I discovered she was deathly afraid of mice. She screamed at them whenever they came out to look at her, which they did quite often. I think they actually sensed that she was afraid of them. And once a mouse gets the idea you're afraid of him, he likes to come out and scare you whenever he has a free moment on his hands.

"I can't stand them!" she exclaimed one morning at breakfast, after a night that was full of small, scurrying activities.

"Hold on," the Sergeant said in that hearty manner he had. He then abruptly left the table, put on his cap, and went out the door.

"Where's he going?" Pat asked.

"Search me," Mother said with a shrug of her shoulders.

A half hour later, he came back with a mean-looking tomcat.

"I got him from a farmer down the road," he explained. "He'll take care of them."

Soon afterward Pat named the cat Cannibal, because of certain habits he had. And, shortly after that, the mice stopped coming out to look at Mother.

Of all the cats in the world, this old tomcat, Cannibal, was the sweetest of them all—except in regard to mice. But he loved people. He loved to curl up on people’s laps, and he would head directly for any lap as soon as it came in sight. He also liked to have his head rubbed. In fact, you could rub it forever, even until the fur fell off, and he would still never get tired of it. He was an old cat and one of his ears was half gone, but he was still healthy and vigorous.

It turned out that there was an elderly horse living on our farm when we arrived. Pat and I found him out in the pasture beyond the woods. His name was Flight, and the Sergeant told us he was an old plow horse who had seen better days. He said Flight came with the farm and therefore belonged to us.

One day, soon after we’d discovered Flight, I helped Pat to get up on his back and then stood back to see what was going to happen. Nothing happened. Flight just kept on eating grass like he’d been doing and didn’t seem to notice Pat was riding him. I then got on his back too, and both of us spent an hour riding him, going nowhere.

In time we discovered that if we were willing to wait long enough, Flight would eventually begin to move with us on his back. However, we had no idea how to steer him, and so most of our journeys on Flight took us places we didn’t want to go. Once we found ourselves far out on the southeast pasture, and after an hour of waiting and hoping, we decided that the only sure way to get back to the house in time for supper was by walking there.

After our long walk home from the far pasture, we complained bitterly to the Sergeant about Flight, and the next morning he showed us how to put a horse bit in his mouth—in Flight’s mouth, that is. Once we had a bit and reins installed on him, steering Flight was simple. Very simple, in fact, since he would only go in one direction. To the left. He wouldn’t make a right turn at all, unless one of us got off and pulled him around. Eventually we discovered that the whole trick with Flight was to decide where you wanted to ride him and then make sure it was on your left when you started out. Otherwise, you’d miss it.

The Sergeant used Flight quite a lot during those early days, because he was easy on gas. He used him to pull the cord wagon, and once he put a special harness on him, with chains attached, and Flight pulled the little red granary across the yard.

For some reason Flight took a fancy to Pat. When Pat was outside, he would sometimes come in from the pasture or the woods and follow him around. Sometimes we found him outside the house, waiting for Pat to come out.

“He likes you,” the Sergeant said to Pat one morning when the horse came over to smell his hair.

“He likes me,” Pat repeated.

“If he changes his mind, he could kill you with one kick,” I pointed out.

Then I asked the Sergeant, “Could I have a dog?” I fully expected him to say yes, but once again he surprised and disappointed me.

“We’ll have a dog someday,” he said, “but it’s not going to be some old mutt. I’m going to get a purebred German shepherd.”

“When will we get him?” I asked.

“When I have enough to buy one,” he said. “But right now money is in short supply. It doesn’t grow on trees, you know.”

I had a feeling then that I would never have a dog, for I knew we were very poor. He had spent everything we had to buy the farm and the truck. But that night, when I was sitting out on the stoop, I heard them talking about it in the kitchen, and my hopes rose up again.

“All he wants is a dog to keep him company,” she said. “He’s left all his friends behind. I don’t see why . . .”

“I’m not going to have some mongrel running around the place,” he said. “It’s going to be a purebred German shepherd or nothing. Anyway, I’ve already told him that, and I can’t go back on my word. If I did, he wouldn’t respect me.”

“Maybe not, but he might love you a little more,” Mother said in an acid voice.

Sometimes we were forced to help our mother and the Sergeant, but at least it was something to do. And once, after Pat and I had delivered two pails of morning water from our windmill pump house to the kitchen, the Sergeant smiled at us and said we were doing fairly well for a couple of city slickers with soft hands. Pat usually spilled twice as much water as he delivered.

One morning during our second week on the farm, the Sergeant took us down the lane past the barn and showed us a building. Actually, we'd seen this building before. It was old and gray and it had an unpleasant air about it.

"This is the old henhouse," the Sergeant informed us.

We went inside, and it was really a mess. The floor was covered with chicken droppings and bits of rotten straw and lost feathers. The roosts were coated with the same stuff, and even the ceiling had chicken droppings on it.

"What does a hen look like?" Pat asked.

"It looks like a chicken," I quickly informed him, drawing from my deep reservoir of country knowledge.

"This is where your mother's going to keep her laying hens when we get them," the Sergeant said.

At that exact instant, my inner voice told me there was something about this chicken coop that I really didn't like. Then a deeper and more powerful voice told me what it was.

"I want you troopers to clean it up. Use the flat barn shovel and the wheelbarrow and get all this chicken crap out. All of it. Right down to the dirt floor. You can dump it beside those chokecherry bushes over there."

I looked at Pat, and Pat looked at me. Later, after the Sergeant had gotten us started and then left us to it, I said what was on our minds:

"I wish we still lived in Wistola," I moaned. Then I went over to the wall and kicked it, for I had already developed an intense hatred of chicken coops.

When Pat threw the first shovelful of dry chicken crap

into the wheelbarrow, a great cloud of dust rose up, and he disappeared from view. Then he disappeared altogether. When I looked around the corner, he was halfway to the house.

“Where are you going?” I yelled.

“I’m going to tell Mother on him!” he cried.

Not a bad idea, I thought, and I ran after him.

We found Mother in the kitchen, dripping with sweat. She was boiling the laundry. Pat immediately let out with a barrage of complaints about the hated chicken coop. I solemnly confirmed everything he said as he went along. It is not too farfetched to say that, in all of recorded history, no farm building has ever been subjected to such criticism and condemnation as that old chicken coop received from Pat and me that morning.

Eventually Mother came out with us and looked inside the chicken coop. Then she told us to wait there while she went to the barn to talk things over with the Sergeant.

“She’s going to ask him to let us go,” I told Pat. And my heart rose as I watched her head off. I had a lot of faith in Mother. She was very pretty with her red hair, and I knew that the big Sergeant liked her a lot.

As soon as she disappeared into the barn, Pat and I ran after her. We went in the back way and crawled up the ladder to the loft as quietly as possible. Soon we were lying on the floor a few feet above them, looking down through the cracks in the floorboards.

“They’re really too young,” I heard her say. “There’s a foot of chicken manure in there, and I don’t—”

“It won’t hurt them,” the Sergeant interrupted with a grunt. He was adjusting something in the engine of the old tractor while Mother was talking to him.

“It would be different if they were used to it,” she said.

“They’ll get used to it soon enough,” he countered.

At this point I had an almost overwhelming urge to shout, “Come on, Mom!” I didn’t, of course.

“Who’s winning?” Pat whispered to me.

“I don’t know,” I whispered back.

“Really!” Mother exclaimed.

“Well, it’s too late anyway,” the Sergeant declared. “I told them to do it, and I can’t go back on my orders.”

“Well, I don’t agree,” Mother responded.

“Then I guess we’ll have to leave it at that,” the Sergeant said.

Mother then turned away in a huff and marched out of the barn. Even though I couldn’t see her eyes, I knew they were flashing. Her eyes always flashed like neon lights when she got mad.

“Who won?” Pat whispered to me.

“Okay, you two! Get down from the loft and get back to work!” the Sergeant shouted from below.

“He won,” I said to Pat.

Did I mention that his former occupation involved shooting people?

It really was terrible work.

“This is going to take us years and years,” I said morosely as I watched how slowly Pat filled the wheel-

barrow. Meanwhile, Cannibal settled down lazily in the grass to watch the proceedings.

Later on, as I wheeled the first load out to the bushes, the Sergeant drove by on his way to the field. He waved at us from the tractor and stuck his thumb up in the air. This, as I understood it, meant that he was happy because he got to ride the tractor and we got to do all the dirty work.

As soon as he was out of sight, we took a much-needed break. Flight then wandered over. He stood next to Pat and began to smell his hair. While Pat was rubbing his muzzle, I picked up a large rock and threw it at the chicken coop.

“Remember when Dad used Flight to pull that red building around?” Pat asked. “Maybe we could—”

“Shut up for a minute,” I interrupted. “I’m thinking.”

I don’t know where my wonderful idea came from, but it struck me like a ton of bricks.

“We can use Flight to pull the chicken coop onto some clean ground!” I exclaimed. “Just like he pulled that other building! Then all the chicken crap will be left behind!”

It took a very long time to get the heavy harness on Flight and drag the chains out and attach them. Then it took another long time to get Flight moved around so he could reach the chicken coop by making left turns. We eventually got him there, but then it took a while to find good places to attach the chains to. I finally attached mine to a sturdy inside post on the left side of the door, and Pat attached his to the one on the right.

“Now we gotta do it real slow,” I warned him as I pulled on the reins.

Flight was very obliging, at first. He moved steadily ahead until the chains tightened up. But then he refused to budge. We tried everything, but as soon as the chains tightened and the chicken coop began to creak a little, Flight stopped dead in his tracks.

“It isn’t going to work,” I said.

Pat wasn’t listening. In fact, he was gone. Then I saw him come running out of the back of the barn with the old buggy whip in his hand.

“If we hit him with this, he’ll go,” Pat said.

“I’d better do it,” I said, taking the whip from his hand. “You’ll hit him too hard, and he might wreck it.”

I then gave Flight a gentle tap on the rump with the buggy whip, just the merest touch.

It was, I think, very fortunate that Pat and I happened to be standing on Flight’s right-hand side, because the moment the whip touched him, Flight lurched to the left like a maddened elephant. He tore everything loose that was holding him back and headed straight for the woods. The chains and the two doorposts went with him.

“It didn’t work,” Pat observed.

Then, behind us, the chicken coop slowly collapsed. It seems the doorposts were an essential part of what was holding it up. As the chicken coop came down, a great cloud of dust and feathers rose up and engulfed Pat and me.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Pat replied.

When the dust settled, we stared in horror at the devastation.

Where's Mother going to put her chickens? I wondered.

"Is he going to shoot us?" Pat asked, looking worriedly out at the field.

A moment later, we ran bawling back to the house. Mother met us on the doorstep.

"I saw it," she said, looking solemnly down at the two dirty little wretches she'd brought into the world.

We promptly threw ourselves on her mercy.

"It was Pat's idea!" I proclaimed.

"No, it wasn't!" Pat cried. "He did it. He hit Flight with a whip!"

"It doesn't matter whose fault it was. The problem is how you're going to explain it to your father when he comes back." She sighed.

"Can we move back to Wistola now?" Pat asked.

"Don't be silly," Mother replied. She shook her head at us and sighed again. "Maybe he'll think it fell down by itself, so don't tell him you pulled it with the horse."

She shook her head again, this time with her eyes closed. "In the meantime, I suggest you get the harness off Flight before your father gets back. Then come back here and get cleaned up."

Later in the day, the Sergeant returned from the field. We heard the tractor stop, and, a few minutes later, he came into the kitchen. Of course, Pat and I didn't notice him, since we were busy reading the *Children's Illustrated Bible* and couldn't look up. We both knew that Mother was

at the stove and we both hoped she might protect us, as she'd always done in the past. Of course, in the past we'd hardly ever gotten into trouble with a Nazi shooter.

"I suppose you noticed," Mother said quietly. "The old chicken coop collapsed."

"I noticed," he said in a hard voice.

Pat and I were still reading with all our might, but we felt electricity in the air all around us.

"It's lucky the boys weren't in it when it happened," she said.

"Is it?" he asked.

"Really, dear, you can't trust those old buildings," she declared.

There was a long pause before the Sergeant replied.

"Well, I expect we can build another chicken coop," he said finally. "And maybe those two boys over there would give me a hand with it—that's if they can tear themselves away from the Bible for long enough."

We looked up at him.

"How about it, you two? Will you help me build a new one?" he asked us.

Pat and I agreed to this suggestion much as Moses accepted the Ten Commandments from God. That is, quickly, with a very powerful demonstration of enthusiasm and gratitude.

"What we'll do," he said with a slight smile, "is get Flight to help us pull the remains of the old one apart, and then we'll build a new one with the old boards."

"Good idea!" Mother exclaimed.

“And while I’m at it,” the Sergeant said, “I’ll show the boys how to put the work harness on Flight.”

Mother and the Sergeant then began to laugh. Pat quickly joined in, even though he had no idea what he was laughing at. As for me, I refused to laugh at his joke.