

**STEPHEN
KING
REVIVAL**

A NOVEL

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**STEPHEN
KING**

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A NOVEL

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This book is for some of the people who built my house:

Mary Shelley

Bram Stoker

H. P. Lovecraft

Clark Ashton Smith

Donald Wandrei

Fritz Leiber

August Derleth

Shirley Jackson

Robert Bloch

Peter Straub

And ARTHUR MACHEN, whose short novel *The Great
God Pan* has haunted me all my life.

That is not dead which can eternal lie,
And with strange aeons, even death may die.
—H. P. Lovecraft



Fifth Business. Skull Mountain. Peaceable Lake.

In one way, at least, our lives really are like movies. The main cast consists of your family and friends. The supporting cast is made up of neighbors, co-workers, teachers, and daily acquaintances. There are also bit players: the supermarket checkout girl with the pretty smile, the friendly bartender at the local watering hole, the guys you work out with at the gym three days a week. And there are thousands of extras—those people who flow through every life like water through a sieve, seen once and never again. The teenager browsing graphic novels at Barnes & Noble, the one you had to slip past (murmuring “Excuse me”) in order to get to the magazines. The woman in the next lane at a stoplight, taking a moment to freshen her lipstick. The mother wiping ice cream off her toddler’s face in a roadside restaurant where you stopped for a quick bite. The vendor who sold you a bag of peanuts at a baseball game.

But sometimes a person who fits none of these categories comes into your life. This is the joker who pops out of the deck at odd intervals over the years, often during a moment of crisis. In the movies this sort of character is known as the fifth business, or the change agent. When he turns up in a film, you know he’s there because the screenwriter put him there. But who is screenwriting our lives? Fate or coincidence? I want to believe it’s the latter. I want that with all my heart and soul. When I think of Charles Jacobs—my fifth business, my change agent, my nemesis—I can’t bear to believe his presence in my life had anything to do with fate. It would mean that all these terrible things—these *horrors*—were meant to happen. If that is so, then there is no such thing as light, and our belief in it is a foolish illusion. If that is so, we live in darkness like animals in a burrow, or ants deep in their hill.

And not alone.

• • •

Claire gave me an army for my sixth birthday, and on a Saturday in October of 1962 I was gearing up for a major battle.

I came from a big family—four boys, one girl—and as the youngest I always got lots of presents. Claire always gave the best ones. I don't know if it was because she was the eldest, because she was the only girl, or both. But of all the awesome presents she gave me over the years, that army was by far the best. There were two hundred green plastic soldiers, some with rifles, some with machine guns, a dozen welded to tubelike gadgets she said were mortars. There were also eight trucks and twelve jeeps. Perhaps the coolest thing about the army was the box it came in, a cardboard footlocker in camouflage shades of green and brown, with PROPERTY OF U.S. ARMY stenciled on the front. Below this, Claire had added her own stenciling: JAMIE MORTON, COMMANDER.

That was me.

"I saw an ad for them in the back of one of Terry's comic books," she said when I was done screaming with delight. "He didn't want me to cut it out because he's a booger—"

"That's right," Terry said. He was eight. "I'm a big brother booger." He made a fork with his first two fingers and plugged his nostrils with them.

"Stop it," our mother said. "No sibling rivalry on birthdays, please and thank you. Terry, take your fingers out of your nose."

"Anyway," Claire said, "I copied the coupon and sent it in. I was afraid it might not come in time, but it did. I'm glad you like it." And she kissed me on the temple. She always kissed me there. All these years later, I can still feel those soft kisses.

"I love it!" I said, holding the footlocker against my chest. "I'll love it forever!"

This was after breakfast, which had been blueberry pancakes and bacon, my favorite. We all got our favorite meals on our birthdays, and the presents always came after breakfast, there in the kitchen with its woodstove and long table and our hulk of a washing machine, which was always breaking down.

“Forever for Jamie is, like, five days,” Con said. He was ten, slender (although he bulked up later), and of a scientific bent, even then.

“Nice one, Conrad,” our father said. He was dressed for work in a clean coverall with his name—RICHARD—stitched in gold thread on the left breast pocket. On the right breast it said MORTON FUEL OIL. “I’m impressed.”

“Thanks, Daddy-O.”

“Your silver tongue wins you the opportunity to help your mother clean up breakfast.”

“It’s Andy’s turn!”

“It *was* Andy’s turn,” Dad said, pouring syrup on the last pancake. “Grab a dishtowel, Silver Tongue. And try not to break anything.”

“You spoil him rotten,” Con said, but he grabbed a dishtowel.

Connie wasn’t entirely wrong about my concept of forever. Five days later, the Operation game Andy gave me was gathering dust bunnies under my bed (some of the body parts were missing, anyway; Andy got it at the Eureka Grange rummage sale for a quarter). So were the jigsaw puzzles Terry gave me. Con himself gave me a ViewMaster, and that lasted a little longer, but it eventually wound up in my closet, never to be seen again.

From Mom and Dad I got clothes, because my birthday falls near the end of August, and that year I was going into first grade. I found new pants and shirts about as exciting as a TV test pattern, but tried to say thanks with enthusiasm. I imagine they saw through that with no trouble; false enthusiasm does not come easily to six-year-olds . . . although, sad to say, it’s a skill most of us learn fairly rapidly. In any case, the clothes were washed in the hulk, hung on the clothesline in the side yard, and finally folded away in my bureau drawers. Where, it’s probably needless to add, they were out of sight and mind until September came and it was time to put them on. I remember there was a sweater that was actually pretty cool—it was brown with yellow stripes. When I wore it I pretended I was a superhero called the Human Wasp: evildoers, beware my sting!

• • •

But Con was wrong about the footlocker with the army inside. I played with those guys day in and day out, usually at the edge of the front yard, where

there was a dirt strip between our lawn and Methodist Road, which was itself dirt in those days. With the exception of Route 9 and the two-lane leading to Goat Mountain, where there was a resort for rich people, all the roads in Harlow were dirt back then. I can remember my mother on several occasions weeping about all the dust that got into the house on dry summer days.

Billy Paquette and Al Knowles—my two best friends—played army with me on many afternoons, but on the day Charles Jacobs appeared in my life for the first time, I was on my own. I don't remember why Billy and Al weren't with me, but I do remember I was happy to be by myself for a change. For one thing, there was no need to split the army into three divisions. For another—this was more important—I didn't have to argue with them about whose turn it was to win. In truth, it seemed unfair to me that I should ever have to lose, because they were *my* soldiers and it was *my* footlocker.

When I advanced this idea to my mother one hot late-summer day shortly after my birthday, she took me by the shoulders and looked into my eyes, a sure sign that I was about to receive another Lesson in Life. “That *it's-mine* business is half the trouble with the world, Jamie. When you play with your friends, the soldiers belong to all of you.”

“Even if we play-fight different sides?”

“Even if. When Billy and Al go home for their dinner and you pack the soldiers back into the box—”

“It's a *footlocker!*”

“Right, the footlocker. When you pack them away, they're yours again. People have many ways to be lousy to one another, as you'll find out when you're older, but I think that all bad behavior stems from plain old selfishness. Promise me you'll never be selfish, kiddo.”

I promised, but I still didn't like it when Billy and Al won.

• • •

On that day in October of 1962, with the fate of the world dangling by a thread over a small tropical spit of land called Cuba, I was fighting both sides of the battle, which meant I was bound to come out on top. The town grader had been by earlier on Methodist Road (“Moving the rocks around,” my dad always grumbled), and there was plenty of loose dirt. I scraped enough together to make first a hill, then a big hill, and then a *very* big hill, one that came up

almost to my knees. At first I thought of calling it Goat Mountain, but that seemed both unoriginal (the real Goat Mountain was only twelve miles away, after all) and boring. After consideration, I decided to call it Skull Mountain. I even tried to poke a couple of eye-like caves in it with my fingers, but the dirt was dry and the holes kept caving in.

“Oh, well,” I told the plastic soldiers tumbled in their footlocker. “The world is hard and you can’t have everything.” This was one of my father’s favorite sayings, and with five kids to support, I’m sure he had reason to believe it. “They’ll be pretend caves.”

I put half of my army on top of Skull Mountain, where they made a formidable crew. I especially liked the way the mortar guys looked up there. These were the Krauts. The American army I arranged at the edge of the lawn. They got all the jeeps and trucks, because they would look so groovy charging up the steep slope of the mountain. Some would turn over, I was sure, but at least a few of them would make it to the top. And run over the mortar guys, who would scream for mercy. They wouldn’t get it.

“To the death,” I said, setting up the last few of the heroic Americans. “Hitsmer, you are next!”

I was starting them forward, rank by rank—and making comic-book-style machine-gun noises—when a shadow fell over the battlefield. I looked up and saw a guy standing there. He was blocking the afternoon sun, a silhouette surrounded by golden light—a human eclipse.

There was stuff going on; at our house on Saturday afternoons, there always was. Andy and Con were in our long backyard, playing three-flies-six-grounders with a bunch of their friends, shouting and laughing. Claire was up in her room with a couple of *her* friends, playing records on her Imperial Party-Time turntable: “The Loco-Motion,” “Soldier Boy,” “Palisades Park.” There was hammering from the garage, too, as Terry and our dad worked on the old ’51 Ford Dad called the Road Rocket. Or the Project. Once I heard him call it a piece of shit, a phrase I treasured then and still use now. When you want to feel better, call something a piece of shit. It usually works.

Plenty going on, but at that moment everything seemed to fall still. I know it’s only the sort of illusion caused by a faulty memory (not to mention a suitcase loaded with dark associations), but the recollection is very strong. All of a sudden there were no kids yelling in the backyard, no records playing upstairs, no banging from the garage. Not a single bird singing.

Then the man bent down and the westering sun glared over his shoulder, momentarily blinding me. I raised a hand to shield my eyes.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, and moved enough so I could look at him without also having to look into the sun. On top he was wearing a black for-church jacket and a black shirt with a notched collar; on the bottom blue jeans and scuffed loafers. It was like he wanted to be two different people at the same time. At the age of six, I put adults into three categories: young grownups, grownups, and old people. This guy was a young grownup. He had his hands on his knees so he could look at the opposing armies.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Charles Jacobs.” The name was vaguely familiar. He stuck out his hand. I shook it right away, because even at six, I had my manners. All of us did. Mom and Dad saw to that.

“Why are you wearing that collar with the hole in it?”

“Because I’m a minister. When you go to church on Sundays from now on, I’ll be there. And if you go to Thursday-night MYF, I’ll be there, too.”

“Mr. Latoure used to be our minister,” I said, “but he died.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, though, because Mom said he didn’t suffer, only went straight to heaven. He didn’t wear a collar like that, though.”

“Because Bill Latoure was a lay preacher. That means he was sort of a volunteer. He kept the church open when there was no one else to do it. That was very good of him.”

“I think my dad knows about you,” I said. “He’s one of the deacons in the church. He gets to take up the collection. He has to take turns with the other deacons, though.”

“Sharing is good,” Jacobs said, and got down on his knees beside me.

“Are you going to pray?” The idea was sort of alarming. Praying was for church and Methodist Youth Fellowship, which my brothers and sister called Thursday Night School. When Mr. Jacobs started it up again, this would be my first year, just like it was my first year at regular school. “If you want to talk with my dad, he’s in the garage with Terry. They’re putting a new clutch in the Road Rocket. Well, my dad is. Terry mostly hands him the tools and watches. He’s eight. I’m six. I think my mom might be on the back porch, watching some guys play three-flies-six-grounders.”

“Which we used to call rollie-bat when I was a kid,” he said, and smiled. It was a nice smile. I liked him right away.

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh, because you had to hit the bat with the ball after you caught it. What’s your name, son?”

“Jamie Morton. I’m six.”

“So you said.”

“I don’t think anyone ever prayed in our front yard.”

“I’m not going to, either. What I want is a closer look at your armies. Which are the Russians and which are the Americans?”

“Well, these ones on the ground are Americans, sure, but the ones on Skull Mountain are Krauts. The Americans have to take the mountain.”

“Because it’s in the way,” Jacobs said. “Beyond Skull Mountain lies the road to Germany.”

“That’s right! And the head Kraut! Hitsmer!”

“The author of so many evils,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Do you mind if I just call the bad guys Germans? ‘Krauts’ seems kind of mean.”

“No, that’s great, Krauts are Germans, and Germans are Krauts. My dad was in the war. Just the last year, though. He fixed trucks in Texas. Were you in the war, Mr. Jacobs?”

“No, I was too young. For Korea, too. How are the Americans going to take that hill, General Morton?”

“Charge it!” I shouted. “Shoot their machine guns! Pow! Budda-budda-budda!” Then, going down way low in my throat: “Takka-takka-takka!”

“A direct attack on the high ground sounds risky, General. If I were you I’d split your troops . . . like so . . .” He moved half of the Americans to the left and half to the right. “That creates a pincers movement, see?” He brought his thumb and forefinger together. “Drive on the objective from both sides.”

“Maybe,” I said. I liked the idea of a head-on attack—lots of bloody action—but Mr. Jacobs’s idea appealed to me, just the same. It was sneaky. Sneaky could be satisfying. “I tried to make some caves, but the dirt’s too dry.”

“So I see.” He poked a finger into Skull Mountain and watched the dirt crumble and bury the hole. He stood up and brushed the knees of his jeans.

“I’ve got a little boy who’d probably get a kick out of your soldiers in another year or two.”

“He can play right now, if he wants to.” I was trying not to be selfish. “Where is he?”

“Still in Boston, with his mother. There’s lots of stuff to pack up. They’ll be here Wednesday, I think. Thursday at the latest. But Morrie’s still a little young for soldiers. He’d only pick them up and throw them around.”

“How old is he?”

“Just two.”

“I bet he still pees his pants!” I yelled, and started laughing. It probably wasn’t polite, but I couldn’t help it. Kids peeing their pants was just so funny.

“He does, at that,” Jacobs said, smiling, “but I’m sure he’ll grow out of it. Your father’s in the garage, you say?”

“Yeah.” Now I remembered where I had heard the man’s name before—Mom and Dad at the supper table, talking about the new minister that was coming from Boston. *Isn’t he awfully young?* my mother had asked. *Yes, and his salary will reflect that,* my dad replied, and grinned. They talked about him some more, I think, but I didn’t pay any attention. Andy was hogging the mashed potatoes. He always did.

“You try that enfilading maneuver,” he said, starting away.

“Huh?”

“Pincers,” he said, tweezing his thumb and finger together again.

“Oh. Yeah. Great.”

I tried it. It worked pretty good. The Krauts all died. The battle wasn’t what I’d call spectacular, though, so I tried the frontal assault, with trucks and jeeps tumbling off the steep slope of Skull Mountain, plus Krauts tumbling off the back with deathcries of despair: “*Yaaaahhh!*”

Mom, Dad, and Mr. Jacobs sat on the front porch while the battle raged, drinking iced tea and talking about churchy things—in addition to my dad being a deacon, my mom was in the Ladies Auxiliary. Not the boss of it, but the next-to-boss. You should have seen all the fancy hats she had in those days. There must have been a dozen. We were happy then.

Mom called my brothers and sister, along with their friends, to meet the new minister. I started to come, too, but Mr. Jacobs waved me back, telling Mom we’d already met. “Battle on, General!” he called.

I battled on. Con, Andy, and their friends went out back again and played on. Claire and her friends went back upstairs and danced on (although my mother told her to turn the music down, please and thank you). Mr. and Mrs. Morton and the Reverend Jacobs talked on, and for quite awhile. I remember often being surprised at how much adults could yak. It was tiring.

I lost track of them because I was fighting the Battle of Skull Mountain over again in several different ways. In the most satisfying scenario—adapted from Mr. Jacobs’s pincers movement—one part of the American army kept the Germans pinned down from the front while the rest looped around and ambushed the Germans from behind. “*Vat is zis?*” one of them cried, just before getting shot in the head.

I was starting to get tired of it and was thinking of going in for a slice of cake (if Con and Andy’s friends had left any), when that shadow fell over me and my battlefield again. I looked up and saw Mr. Jacobs, holding a glass of water.

“I borrowed this from your mother. Can I show you something?”

“Sure.”

He knelt down again and poured the water all over the top of Skull Mountain.

“It’s a thunderstorm!” I shouted, and made thunder noises.

“Uh-huh, if you like. With lightning. Now look.” He poked out two of his fingers like devil horns and pushed them into the wet dirt. This time the holes stayed. “Presto,” he said. “Caves.” He took two of the German soldiers and put them inside. “They’ll be tough to root out, General, but I’m sure the Americans will be up to the job.”

“Hey! Thanks!”

“Add more water if it gets crumbly again.”

“I will.”

“And remember to take the glass back to the kitchen when you finish the battle. I don’t want to get in trouble with your mother on my first day in Harlow.”

I promised, and stuck out my hand. “Put er there, Mr. Jacobs.”

He laughed and did so, then walked off down Methodist Road, toward the parsonage where he and his family would live for the next three years, until he got fired. I watched him go, then turned back to Skull Mountain.

Before I could really get going, another shadow fell over the battlefield. This time it was my dad. He took a knee, being careful not to squash any American soldiers. “Well, Jamie, what did you think of our new minister?”

“I like him.”

“So do I. Your mother does, too. He’s very young for the job, and if he’s good, we’ll only be his starter congregation, but I think he’ll do fine. Especially with MYF. Youth calls to youth.”

“Look, Daddy, he showed me how to make caves. You only have to get the dirt wet so it makes kinda almost mud.”

“I see.” He ruffled my hair. “You want to wash up good before supper.” He picked up the glass. “Want me to take this in for you?”

“Yes, please and thank you.”

He took the glass and headed back to the house. I returned to Skull Mountain, only to see that the dirt had dried out again and the caves had collapsed. The soldiers inside had been buried alive. That was okay with me; they were the bad guys, after all.

• • •

These days we’ve become gruesomely sensitized to sex, and no parent in his or her right mind would send a six-year-old off in the company of a new male acquaintance who was living by himself (if only for a few days), but that is exactly what my mother did the following Monday afternoon, and without a qualm.

Reverend Jacobs—Mom told me I was supposed to call him that, not Mister—came walking up Methodist Hill around quarter to three and knocked on the screen door. I was in the living room, coloring on the floor, while Mom watched *Dialing for Prizes*. She had sent her name in to WCSH, and was hoping to win that month’s grand prize, an Electrolux vacuum cleaner. She knew the chances weren’t good, but, she said, hope springs infernal. That was a joke.

“Can you loan me your youngest for half an hour?” Reverend Jacobs asked. “I’ve got something in my garage that he might like to see.”

“What is it?” I asked, already getting up.

“A surprise. You can tell your mother all about it later.”

“Mom?”

“Of course,” she said, “but change out of your school clothes first, Jamie. While he does that, would you like a glass of iced tea, Reverend Jacobs?”

“I would,” he said. “And I wonder if you could manage to call me Charlie.”

She considered this, then said, “No, but I could probably manage Charles.”

I changed into jeans and a tee-shirt, and because they were talking about adult things when I came back downstairs, I went outside to wait for the schoolbus. Con, Terry, and I attended the one-room school on Route 9—an easy quarter-mile walk from our house—but Andy went to Consolidated Middle and Claire all the way across the river to Gates Falls High, where she was a freshman. (“Just don’t be a fresh *girl*,” Mom told her—that was also a joke.) The bus dropped them off at the intersection of Route 9 and Methodist Road, at the foot of Methodist Hill.

I saw them get off, and as they came trudging up the hill—squabbling as always, I could hear them as I stood waiting by the mailbox—Reverend Jacobs came out.

“Ready?” he asked, and took my hand. It seemed perfectly natural.

“Sure,” I said.

We met Andy and Claire halfway down the hill. Andy asked where I was going.

“To Reverend Jacobs’ house,” I said. “He’s going to show me a surprise.”

“Well, don’t be too long,” Claire said. “It’s your turn to set the table.” She glanced at Jacobs, then quickly away again, as if she found him hard to look at. My big sister had a wicked crush on him before the year was out, and so did all her friends.

“I’ll have him back shortly,” Jacobs promised.

We walked down the hill hand in hand to Route 9, which led to Portland if you turned left, to Gates Falls, Castle Rock, and Lewiston if you turned right. We stopped and looked for traffic, which was ridiculous since there were hardly any cars on Route 9 except in the summer, and then walked on past hayfields and cornfields, the stalks of the latter now dry and clattering in a mild autumn breeze. Ten minutes brought us to the parsonage, a tidy white house with black shutters. Beyond it was the First Methodist Church of Harlow, which was also ridiculous since there was no other Methodist church in Harlow.

The only other house of worship in Harlow was Shiloh Church. My father considered the Shilohites moderate to serious weirdos. They didn’t ride around in horse-drawn buggies, or anything, but the men and boys all wore black hats

when they were outside. The women and girls wore dresses that came down to their ankles, and white caps. Dad said the Shilohites claimed to know when the world was going to end; it was written down in a special book. My mother said in America everyone was entitled to believe what they liked as long as they didn't hurt anybody . . . but she didn't say Dad was wrong, either. Our church was larger than Shiloh, but very plain. Also, it had no steeple. It did once, but a hurricane came along back in the olden days, 1920 or so, and knocked it down.

Reverend Jacobs and I walked up the parsonage's dirt driveway. I was interested to see that he had a blue Plymouth Belvedere, a very cool car. "Standard shift or push-button drive?" I asked.

He looked surprised, then grinned. "Push-button," he said. "It was a wedding present from my in-laws."

"Are in-laws like outlaws?"

"Mine are," he said, and laughed. "Do you like cars?"

"We all like cars," I said, meaning everyone in my family . . . although that was less true of Mom and Claire, I guessed. Females didn't seem to totally understand the basic coolness of cars. "When the Road Rocket's fixed up, my dad's going to race it at the Castle Rock Speedway."

"Really?"

"Well, not him, exactly. Mom said he couldn't because it's too dangerous, but some guy. Maybe Duane Robichaud. He runs Brownie's Store along with his mom and dad. He drove the nine-car at the Speedway last year, but the engine caught on fire. Dad says he's looking for another ride."

"Do the Robichauds come to church?"

"Um . . ."

"I'll take that as a no. Come in the garage, Jamie."

It was shadowy and musty-smelling. I was a little afraid of the shadows and the smell, but Jacobs didn't seem to mind. He led me deeper into the gloom, then stopped and pointed. I gasped at what I saw.

Jacobs gave a little chuckle, the way people do when they're proud of something. "Welcome to Peaceable Lake, Jamie."

"Wow!"

"I got it set up while I'm waiting for Patsy and Morrie to get here. I should be doing stuff in the house, and I *have* done a fair amount—fixed the well-pump, for one thing—but there's not a whole lot more I *can* do until Pats gets

here with the furniture. Your mom and the rest of the Ladies Auxiliary did a terrific job of cleaning the place up, kiddo. Mr. Latoure commuted from Orr's Island, and no one's actually lived here since before World War II. I thanked her, but I wouldn't mind if you thanked her again."

"Sure, you bet," I said, but I don't believe I ever passed that second thanks on, because I barely heard what he was saying. All my attention was fixed on a table that took up almost half the garage space. On it was a rolling green landscape that put Skull Mountain to shame. I have seen many such landscapes since—mostly in the windows of toyshops—but they all had complicated electric trains running through them. There was no train on the table Reverend Jacobs had set up, which wasn't a real table at all, but sheets of plywood on a rank of sawhorses. Atop the plywood was a countryside in miniature, about twelve feet long and five feet wide. Power pylons eighteen inches high marched across it on a diagonal, and it was dominated by a lake of real water that shone bright blue even in the gloom.

"I'll have to take it down soon," he said, "or else I won't be able to get the car in the garage. Patsy wouldn't care for that."

He bent, planted his hands above his knees, and gazed at the rolling hills, the threadlike power lines, the big lake. There were plastic sheep and cows grazing near the water (they were considerably out of scale, but I didn't notice and wouldn't have cared if I had). There were also lots of streetlamps, which was a little peculiar, since there was no town and no roads for them to shine on.

"I bet you could have quite a battle with your soldiers here, couldn't you?"

"Yeah," I said. I thought I could fight an entire war there.

He nodded. "That can't happen, though, because in Peaceable Lake, everyone gets along and no fighting is allowed. In that way it's like heaven. Once I get MYF going, I plan to move it to the church basement. Maybe you and your brothers would help me. The kids would like it, I think."

"They sure would!" I said, then added something my father said. "You betchum bobcats!"

He laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. "Now do you want to see a miracle?"

"I guess," I said. I wasn't actually sure I did. It sounded like it might be scary. All at once I realized the two of us were alone in an old garage with no car in it, a dusty hollow that smelled as if it had been closed up for years. The door to the outside world was still open, but it seemed a mile off. I liked

Reverend Jacobs okay, but I found myself wishing I had stayed home, coloring on the floor and waiting to see if Mom could win the Electrolux and finally get the upper hand in her never-ending battle with the summer dust.

Then Reverend Jacobs passed his hand slowly above Peaceable Lake, and I forgot about being nervous. There was a low humming sound from under the makeshift table, like the sound our Philco TV made when it was warming up, and all the little streetlights came on. They were bright white, almost too bright to look at, and cast a magical moony glow over the green hills and blue water. Even the plastic cows and sheep looked more realistic, possibly because they now cast shadows.

“Gosh, how did you do that?”

He grinned. “Pretty good trick, huh? ‘God said, Let there be light, and there was light, and the light was good.’ Only I’m not God, so I have to depend on electricity. Which is wonderful stuff, Jamie. Such a gift from God that it makes us feel godlike every time we flip a switch, wouldn’t you say?”

“I guess so,” I said. “My grandpa Amos remembers before there were electric lights.”

“Lots of people do,” he said, “but it won’t be long before all those people are gone . . . and when that happens, nobody will think much about what a miracle electricity is. And what a mystery. We have an idea about how it works, but knowing how something works and knowing what it *is* are two very different things.”

“How did you turn on the lights?” I asked.

He pointed to a shelf beyond the table. “See that little red bulb?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s a photoelectric cell. You can buy them, but I built that one myself. It projects an invisible beam. When I break it, the streetlights around Peaceable Lake go on. If I do it again . . . like so . . .” He passed his hand above the landscape and the streetlights dimmed, faded to faint cores of light, then went out. “You see?”

“Cool,” I breathed.

“You try it.”

I reached my hand up. At first nothing happened, but when I stood on tiptoe my fingers broke the beam. The humming from beneath the table started up again and the lights came back on.

“I did it!”

“Betchum bobcats,” he said, and ruffled my hair.

“What’s that humming? It sounds like our TV.”

“Look under the table. Here, I’ll turn on the overhead lights so you can see better.” He flipped a switch on the wall and a couple of dusty hanging lightbulbs came on. They did nothing about the musty odor (and I could smell something else as well, now—something hot and oily), but they banished some of the gloom.

I bent—at my age I didn’t have to bend far—and looked beneath the table. I saw two or three boxy things strapped to the underside. They were the source of the humming sound, and the oily smell, too.

“Batteries,” he said. “Which I also made myself. Electricity is my hobby. And gadgets.” He grinned like a kid. “I love gadgets. Drives my wife crazy.”

“My hobby’s fighting the Krauts,” I said. Then, remembering what he said about that being kind of mean: “Germans, I mean.”

“Everyone needs a hobby,” he said. “And everyone needs a miracle or two, just to prove life is more than just one long trudge from the cradle to the grave. Would you like to see another one, Jamie?”

“Sure!”

There was a second table in the corner, covered with tools, snips of wire, three or four dismembered transistor radios like the ones Claire and Andy had, and regular store-bought C and D batteries. There was also a small wooden box. Jacobs took the box, dropped to one knee so we’d be on the same level, opened it, and took out a white-robed figure. “Do you know who this is?”

I did, because the guy looked almost the same as my fluorescent nightlight. “Jesus. Jesus with a pack on his back.”

“Not just any pack; a battery pack. Look.” He flipped up the top of the pack on a hinge not bigger than a sewing needle. Inside I saw what looked like a couple of shiny dimes with tiny dots of solder on them. “I made these, too, because you can’t buy anything this small or powerful in the stores. I believe I could patent them, and maybe someday I will, but . . .” He shook his head. “Never mind.”

He closed the top of the pack again, and carried Jesus to the Peaceable Lake landscape. “I hope you noticed how blue the water is,” he said.

“Yeah! Bluest lake I ever saw!”

He nodded. “Kind of a miracle in itself, you might say . . . until you take a close look.”

“Huh?”

“It’s really just paint. I muse on that, sometimes, Jamie. When I can’t sleep. How a little paint can make shallow water seem deep.”

That seemed like a silly thing to think about, but I didn’t say anything. Then he kind of snapped to, and put Jesus down beside the lake.

“I plan to use this in MYF—it’s what we call a teaching tool—but I’ll give you a little preview, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Here’s what it says in the fourteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. Will you take instruction from God’s Holy Word, Jamie?”

“Sure, I guess so,” I said, starting to feel uneasy again.

“I know you will,” he said, “because what we learn as children is what sticks the longest. Okay, here we go, so listen up. ‘And straightaway Jesus constrained his disciples’—that means he commanded them—‘to get into a ship, and to go before him to the other side of the water, while he sent the multitudes away. And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain to pray—’ Do *you* pray, Jamie?”

“Yeah, every night.”

“Good boy. Okay, back to the story. ‘When evening was come, he was there alone. But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves, for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightaway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.’ That’s the story, and may God bless his Holy Word. Good one, huh?”

“I guess. Does *spake* mean he talked to them? It does, right?”

“Right. Would you like to see Jesus walk on Peaceable Lake?”

“Yeah! Sure!”

He reached under Jesus’s white robe, and the little figure began to move. When it reached Peaceable Lake it didn’t sink but continued serenely on, gliding along the top of the water. It reached the other side in twenty seconds or so. There was a hill there, and it tried to go up, but I could see it was going to topple over. Reverend Jacobs grabbed it before it could. He reached under Jesus’s robe again and turned him off.

“He did it!” I said. “He walked on the water!”

“Well . . .” He was smiling, but it wasn’t a funny smile, somehow. It turned down at one corner. “Yes and no.”

“What do you mean?”

“See where he went into the water?”

“Yeah . . .”

“Reach in there. See what you find. Be careful not to touch the power lines, because there’s real electricity running through them. Not much, but if you brushed them, you’d get a jolt. Especially if your hand was wet.”

I reached in, but cautiously. I didn’t think he’d play a practical joke on me—as Terry and Con sometimes did—but I was in a strange place with a strange man and I wasn’t completely sure. The water looked deep, but that was an illusion created by the blue paint of the reservoir and the lights reflecting on the surface. My finger only went in up to the first knuckle.

“You’re not quite in the right place,” Reverend Jacobs said. “Go a little bit to your right. Do you know your right from your left?”

I did. Mom had taught me: *Right is the hand you write with*. Of course that wouldn’t have worked with Claire and Con, who were what my dad called southpaws.

I moved my hand and felt something in the water. It was metal, with a groove in it. “I think I found it,” I told Reverend Jacobs.

“I think so, too. You’re touching the track Jesus walks on.”

“It’s a magic trick!” I said. I had seen magicians on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and Con had a box of magic tricks he got for his birthday, although everything but the Floating Balls and the Disappearing Egg had been lost.

“That’s right.”

“Like Jesus walking on the water to that ship!”

“Sometimes,” he said, “that’s what I’m afraid of.”

He looked so sad and distant that I felt a little scared again, but I also felt sorry for him. Not that I had any idea what he had to feel sad about when he had such a neat pretend world as Peaceable Lake in his garage.

“It’s a really *good* trick,” I said, and patted his hand.

He came back from wherever he’d gone and grinned at me. “You’re right,” he said. “I’m just missing my wife and little boy, I guess. I think that’s why I borrowed you, Jamie. But I ought to return you to your mom now.”

When we got to Route 9, he took my hand again even though there were no cars coming either way, and we walked like that all the way up Methodist

Road. I didn't mind. I liked holding his hand. I knew he was looking out for me.

• • •

Mrs. Jacobs and Morris arrived a few days later. He was just a little squirt in didies, but she was pretty. On Saturday, the day before Reverend Jacobs first stood in the pulpit of our church, Terry, Con, and I helped him move Peaceable Lake to the church basement, where Methodist Youth Fellowship would meet every Thursday night. With the water drained, the shallowness of the lake and the grooved track running across it were very clear.

Reverend Jacobs swore Terry and Con to secrecy—because, he said, he didn't want the illusion spoiled for the little ones (which made me feel like a big one, a sensation I enjoyed). They agreed, and I don't think either of them peached, but the lights in the church basement were much brighter than those in the parsonage garage, and if you stood close to the landscape and peered at it, you could see that Peaceable Lake was really just a wide puddle. You could see the grooved track, too. By Christmas, everyone knew.

"It's a big old fakearoonie," Billy Paquette said to me one Thursday afternoon. He and his brother Ronnie hated Thursday Night School, but their mother made them go. "If he shows it off one more time and tells that walking-on-water story, I'm gonna puke."

I thought of fighting him over that, but he was bigger. Also my friend. Besides, he was right.