

Jep's Place: Hope, Faith and Other Disasters is the entertaining story of a boy growing up during the Great Depression in a family of 13 children of Polish immigrants in a small farmhouse at the end of a dirt road.

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Jep's Place:

Hope, Faith and Other Disasters

by

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Chapter 1: Mystery Trip

There were 13 kids in our combined family—15, counting two of my father’s sons by his first wife. They died in infancy. Not even my mother knew about those two.

Ma and Pa each brought three kids to the new family. They had seven more children, two years apart. Emaline was the first, then Gladys, Irene, me, Lora, Louis, and Julia. In the two upstairs bedrooms, girls slept in one room, boys in the other. It was kids, wall to wall.

The entire 13 kids did not live at the farm at the same time. There was always someone coming or going, running off or being run off, so it was hard to get an accurate headcount. I can only say it looked like a load of pumpkins when we all piled into our Essex sedan for a ride into town.

The last five kids were born at the farm in Gill. The mid-wife who delivered them had once worked for a doctor and she assured us that she knew all about delivering babies. Years later, she told us how she had learned midwifery by listening in on the doctor’s dinner conversations while working in the kitchen as cook’s helper.

She was a bit addled, but the price was right. She did not charge for her midwife services. That might have been because we were her only customer. Her heart was in the right place and she certainly was a comfort to my mother who otherwise would have given birth unattended.

Our farm was a “Noah’s Ark” type of operation with a little bit of almost everything—cows, pigs, chickens, ducks, geese, goats, pigeons, rabbits, bees, and a horse. The author M.G. Kains wrote Five Acres and Independence. If my father had written such a book, it would have been titled Seven Acres and Poverty.

When I was about four years old, my father converted the back shed to a kitchen. I can remember a family friend standing waist deep in the middle of the floor nailing boards onto supports. The floor slanted, so they slanted the ceiling to match. It made the kitchen appear to list like the Titanic. Water periodically coursing through the cellar completed the illusion. When it rained, the roof leaked like it had been shot full of holes. In springtime when the drain became sluggish, jars and bottles floated in the cellar in water a foot deep.

The well was a different story; that went dry before the ink dried on the deed. My older brothers helped my father dig a new well, but it was often on the verge of running dry by the end of summer. For some reason, my father seldom drank water, perhaps in the spirit of conservation.

With so many kids, it was easy to get lost in the shuffle, so it was a pleasant surprise, one frosty winter morning, when my father singled me out to go with

him. Snow creaked under our feet as we walked out to the garage to my father's pride and joy; his beautiful tan Essex.

The tarpaper sided garage my father had built was a long rectangular box that fit our square-backed car well. The older boys said it was the crate that the Essex came in. I was never sure whether they were kidding or not. When Pa opened the garage doors, the faint smell of tires, gasoline and exhaust conjured up thoughts of adventure. As the only one going, I got to sit in the prized front passenger seat. Pa turned the car ignition key on, set the choke, throttle and spark, got out and inserted the crank in a hole under the radiator. He put his foot on the crank. With one quick thrust of his foot, the car engine responded with a throaty strumming. He backed the car out and closed the doors. We were off, with me sitting next to Pa, ecstatic to have him all to myself, gloating that my brother, Louis, was too young to go along, and had to stay home with the girls.

It had all started that cold winter morning. From my bed, I could hear murmuring in the kitchen, downstairs. Usually, I liked to get up early, but the bed, piled high with quilts, was warm and cozy. The room was frigid enough so that I could see my breath in the air. Icy frost covered the boards of the slanted ceiling. Drafty cold air seeped in between the wooden laths on the walls where horsehair plaster had fallen away, and it had taken most of the night to get the bed warm enough to fall asleep. I snuggled down under the feather quilt next to my brother, Louis, to snooze a while longer.

I once asked Ma why we could not have heat upstairs. "Be thankful you have a roof over your head and food on the table," she said. "Think of the starving kids in Africa and China." When saying my nightly prayers, I gave thanks for the roof over my head despite its being leaky. I thought about the kids in Africa and China pictured in the pamphlets, that missionaries sent Ma, soliciting funds. There was usually some pitiful little kid holding an empty bowl, standing in front of a hut made out of mud and sticks. Those pictures made me glad we were not poor.

My sister Emaline had burst into the bedroom.

"Joey, wake up, wake up," she cried.

I burrowed deeper under the covers. Emmy laughed.

"Do you want to go with Pa?"

There was no need to ask twice. I jumped out of bed, and ran downstairs in my long underwear. The floors were so cold it hurt my feet. I stood close to the wood stove in the kitchen, grateful for its comforting warmth. Frost ferns had completely covered the windows with their breath-taking beauty. Emmy took the tea kettle from the stove.

"Never mind staring at the windows, you've got to get washed and dressed."

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I followed her into the pantry where the pump stood, next to the black iron sink, with the handle raised. She poured hot water into the pump, and worked the handle, up and down. Soon water poured out of the pump's mouth. She filled the wash basin and tempered the cold well water with hot water from the kettle. I shivered as I washed up, but soon I was back by the warm stove. My other sisters joined Emmy, helping her to get me bundled up. I couldn't stand still for the excitement, wolfing toast, washed down with coffee while standing by the stove as they dressed me.

"Hold still, Joey," Emmy said.

Getting to go with Pa in his pride and joy—his tan Essex—was all I could think about. I headed for the door.

"Hang on," Emmy," said. "Your hat looks grungy."

She whipped off my hat, clapped a brown beret on my head and wrapped a scarf around my neck. I looked like a French explorer setting out for the North Pole.

Pa sported a new haircut with the smell of barbershop hair tonic still lingering. He looked especially handsome in his polished black high top shoes, blue serge suit, white shirt and tie. When he put on his navy blue overcoat, it gave him the look of royalty. I felt a surge of pride in having him for a father. Sunday clothes transformed Pa. He stood straighter and taller, with an air of confidence, unlike the slump-shouldered man who wearily trudged into the house after work, the caustic smell of paper mill chemicals clinging to his dingy work clothes. Dressed in his Sunday best, he had the confident look of a man of means.

Sometimes, after conserving water, he liked to tell us how he had left home at 13 or 14, to make his way to America. His father had sent him out to make his way to America with little more than the clothes on his back, a new pair of shoes and 50 cents. As a boy Pa could neither read nor write, and the 50 cents was soon gone. He told how he had found food and a place to sleep at the end of each day. Somehow he made his way across Poland to Germany.

He worked for about a year to earn his ship's passage. He told of coming to the New World as a "greenord" and working his way up to become a prosperous businessman. Seeing him dressed, as grandly as Prince Albert pictured on his tobacco can, left little doubt in my mind that Pa would soon be rich, again.

He put his English driving cap on at an angle; I adjusted my beret to match.

"Such a pair," Ma said in Polish, as we went out the door. My chest seemed to expand to be so grandly dressed, going where, I knew not, but glad just to be going out into the world beyond our isolated farm. My sisters had returned to cooing and fussing over our new baby Julia. A blast of cold air swept into the kitchen from the open door.

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“Hurry up, and close the door before the baby catches a death’a cold,” they called out in a chorus.

Joy and self-importance swelled my head as we drove off in a swirl of steam from the exhaust of the fancy Essex, sporting real crank-up windows and bud vases on the door posts. We went down the dirt road, bordered by high snow banks, barely wide enough for one car. The stately Essex rumbled over the planks bridging the brook that bordered our farm. Pa continued out onto the graveled main road. Here, the snow-packed road was wide enough for cars to pass. Pa gloried in the Essex’s powerful “super-six” engine with aluminum pistons and adjustable louvers on the radiator. It even had an automatic oiling system to lubricate the chassis. Pa pressed on the gas pedal to get a running start as we came to a hill. The car surged up the slope with a powerful roar.

The carburetor had a heater. Unfortunately the passengers had none. Our breath came out in little clouds. Pa took off his cap, from time to time, to wipe the frost forming on the windshield. He lit up a Lucky Strike by igniting a wooden match with his thumbnail. The smell of sulfur and tobacco smoke drifted in the frigid air. I blew out puffs of breath, pretending to be smoking, just like Pa. The love I felt for him seemed to rise from my heart toward him, but he was busy navigating his powerful car and hardly noticed me. The car seemed to get colder as we drove through the frigid air. I began to shiver, and was glad my sisters had bundled me up in long underwear, a heavy woolen coat, mittens and beret. I only hoped no one would notice that it was a girl’s beret when we got to wherever we were going.

I began fantasizing. The cone-shaped nickel-plated headlight reflected the side of the road. I watched images of proud trees and poles topple and get dragged down into the back of the headlight, swiftly humbling them. I imagined that we were riding in a powerful ruthless machine unmercifully mowing down everything we encountered on the way to our mysterious destination.

Pa was usually not one to talk much to children. But it was enough for me just to sit beside him, just the two of us, together, though I yearned to hear him say he loved me, just once. Pa sat up straight as he drove, looking very masculine with the Lucky Strike clamped in his lips. I gazed up at Pa in adoration. He could have posed for a cigarette advertisement. His eyes were intent on the road as he fiddled with the choke, the knobs for the radiator louvers and the carburetor heat control. He handled the big wooden steering wheel as though he were piloting a river boat. When he parked the Essex in Turners Falls, the car doors closed with a solid “thunk”.

“Not tin, like a Model T Ford,” Pa said, with a smug smile.

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We waked to an enormous brick building with a wide flight of steep stairs going up and up. I hung onto Pa's hand, struggling to keep up. At the top landing, a tall oaken door opened onto a hushed interior with ceilings that seemed to go as high as the sky. I grew fearful. Sunlight streamed through stained glass windows, casting spectacular red and yellow and blue patterns where it fell. The heady smell of incense, statues, ornate altar and paintings of angels on the ceiling made me wonder if the stairs had somehow led us to heaven, or at least partway there. The scene looked every bit like the holy picture in our dining room where light beams drew good people up into the air while others suffered in a fire pit, begging for mercy with outstretched arms. My fears built as we walked down the aisle past statues of people with bloody wounds adorning the walls. This was one scary place. I could not see to the front where I feared the fire pit most certainly was located.

Suddenly, the beret vanished from my head; and my preoccupation with bloody bodies vanished. I looked around to see who'd taken the beret. No one was there. I looked up at Pa. He solemnly continued walking, looking straight ahead with his head high. He was bareheaded, hat in hand, with no sign of the beret. Apparently, he hadn't noticed that my beret had suddenly vanished. I followed him to long rows of wooden seats; worried, not knowing what to do. Pa ushered me to the right side where men sat. Women sat on the far left, while families sat together in the middle rows. To be the only boy sitting with the men made me feel grown up.

Once seated, Pa pushed a brass button on the back of the seat in front of us. A little hanger sprang open and he hung up his hat. I had hoped that my beret was hidden inside his hat, and he would hang that up, too. But, no such luck. I stared at the little button and empty hook in front of me. I tried to puzzle out the vanishing beret. I prayed for a miracle. Ma was always praying for something, but it never seemed to pan out. The beret didn't reappear. My luck with prayer wasn't any better than Ma's.

Everyone sat in silence, neither speaking nor looking at each other. Socializing, apparently, was against the rules. I dared not ask my father about the beret for fear of getting cuffed for breaking the silence. I pondered what to do.

My thoughts about the dilemma of the beret soon faded as a person entered from a side doorway at the front of the room. The person wore a long black dress with a fancy white lace over-blouse, and a little beanie. I couldn't decide if the person was a man in a dress, or one homely woman. A deep voice, sounding stern and masterful, left little doubt that the person was a man. He began rattling off what sounded like Polish, but he talked so fast, I couldn't make out a thing.

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Two boys in red dresses with white over-blouses followed him around, fetching things for him. I caught a few words of prayer in Polish. "Mi Oicha ee sina ee duha---Our Father and Son and Holy Ghost."

His rapid fire talk sounded like a cross between an auctioneer and a machine gun. Once he got into the swing of things, his voice rose and fell, and then rose higher yet, until his fierce hollering scared me. His scowling gaze roamed about the room, then seemed to zero in on our direction. His face grew redder as he got wound up. I wondered if he was hollering at me for walking in without taking off my beret. At this point I gave up trying to understand what he was railing on about. The distance from him to me was comforting. I figured I could probably outrun him to the door if he started after me.

As he ranted on, I resumed dwelling on the mystery of the vanishing beret. I knew I was going to get a good licking for losing that nice beret. A vision of it appeared in my mind's eye--- brown felt, with a little curved tail sticking up at the top. Losing it wasn't even my fault. Well, maybe a little bit. I shouldn't have been so proud of myself being all dressed up and gloating about being the only one to go with Pa. I'd been warned about being proud.

Despair swept over me. I began to hope. Maybe Pa would not notice the beret gone, and when I got home, I could throw myself upon the mercy of my sisters. They might holler, but at least they wouldn't spank me. Despair won out. Pa was sure to notice when we went outside and I just knew I would get a licking. I just hoped that it would not be in front of everyone.

I tried to see if there really was a fire pit at the front of the church, hoping the fierce sounding man in the dress would not throw me into the pit for the double sin of being so proud and for losing the beret, or even for not removing it, like all the other men did. I reasoned that I could claim that it was a girl's beret, and since all the women in church wore hats, a girl's beret would be permissible to keep on. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if being thrown into the fire pit wouldn't be better than facing Pa or the guy in the dress hollering his head off.

What would I tell my sisters when they asked what happened to their beret; when I had no idea what had happened, and Pa hadn't seen anything, either? Perhaps God had snatched it from my head. Maybe he gave it to some woman who'd forgotten to wear a hat. The whole thing was baffling. Both my head and stomach began to hurt.

Organ music burst forth, startling me back to reality. People began singing. At first I liked the music and singing, but when the music stopped, my thoughts drifted back to the missing beret. The outing with Pa wasn't fun, anymore. Here, I'd felt so fortunate getting to be the only one to go with Pa, and now I was in a

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jam, again. Why hadn't he left me home and taken one of my sisters or my brother Louis? Then I wouldn't be in all this trouble.

My knees hurt from kneeling on the hard little wooden benches down by the floor. I couldn't see what was going on, nor understand the priest's Polish half the time, droning words like "dominius pobiscum". The boring rigmarole seemed to drag on forever. The only thing to break the deadly monotony was a fierce cracking and banging of steam pipes that started up. As the place got warmer, my heavy coat made me hot and sweaty. My long woolen underwear began to itch, and I dared not scratch for fear of getting cuffed. I wondered, in the depths of my despair, if this ritual would ever end. There seemed to be no limit to sitting, standing, kneeling, sitting, and back to standing in this strange silent game of Simon-says which I mostly guessed wrong.

We got a little break when two men came around with baskets on the end of a long pole. Pa and the other people put in money. It apparently was for refreshments, because people got up and went to the front to line up at a railing. They knelt there waiting for the man in the dress. Folks opened their mouths like baby robins and he would feed them a little morsel like a mother bird to shut them up. It didn't seem like all that commotion was worthwhile for what little they got and I figured that was why Pa didn't bother with it.

Just when I felt like we were going to spend the rest of our lives jumping up and down, folks began acting more lively. Women began picking up their pocket books, straightening their hats and pulling on their gloves. Men began unsnapping their hats and flipping the hard little kneeling benches up. People stood looking relieved and happy to be finished with the ordeal of it all. The bloody statues, partially hidden by the restless crowd, were not as disturbing, and the atmosphere took on a festive air. People who had completely ignored each other nodded and smiled as though their sight had been miraculously restored by the torment they had endured.

Pa got his hat off of the little hanger, briskly stepped out into the aisle and stood in the line headed for the door. He still hadn't noticed that I wasn't carrying the beret. I tagged along, keeping my eyes peeled for the damned thing. My hope lay in someone finding it and putting it where I could see it. Maybe God would take pity on me and would put it back on my head just as quickly as he'd snatched it off. No such luck. I began trying to think of an excuse. Nothing came to me.

Outside, the long set of stone stairs looked frightfully steep. I hesitated. Pa reached into his pocket, slipped out the beret and put it on my head, all in one motion, like a magician pulling a coin out of the air. I looked up at him and smiled. His eyes twinkled as he took my hand. The lump in the pit of my stomach

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eased; the world became bright and cheerful, and I was able to breathe normally. My small hand in Pa's big calloused grasp made me feel safe as we walked back to the car.

On the way home, the Essex seemed to run better. It climbed hills with little effort and cruised along the flats at a swift pace. Trees and telephone poles were felled and swept away into the shiny headlights in a twinkling as the car sailed along. It reminded me of workhorses who wearily plodded in the fields, but then, after a hard day at work, would break into a trot with renewed vigor, without any urging, once they knew they were heading home.

When we entered the kitchen, the wood stove radiated warmth to the four corners of the room. The ferns Jack Frost had left on the windows were gone. The aroma of chicken soup filled the air. Lemon pie, baking, added to the delicious smells. The room seemed filled with peace and harmony. I took off the beret and handed it to my sister Emmy. I hung my head, waiting for Pa to tell everyone what a fool I'd made of myself. Depression began to come over me. It seemed that I could not go one day without doing something wrong, and getting scolded, spanked or called a bad boy or mischief-maker. I headed for my refuge, the big built-in wood box by the stove.

"How did everything go?" Ma asked, half listening, as she cuddled Julia and murmured, "jes cieko cham"—I love you—the very words I longed to hear. Pa shrugged, "Church is church. What can happen in church?"

My despair evaporated and a warm glow returned to the kitchen as I watched Ma and my sisters coaxing the baby to smile. Julia kicked her feet in delight with each happy grin. No one dreamed Julia would soon be dead.

Chapter 5: Washday

As I grew older, washday held out a chance for me to redeem myself. I helped Ma lug water from the outside rain barrel, pail by pail, to fill a big copper boiler sitting on the glowing kitchen wood stove. The kitchen soon became an inferno.

I lugged more rain water to fill the rinse tub while Ma filled the wash tub with hot water. She refilled the boiler from the rain barrel, added a couple of bars of brown P&G lye soap, and put Pa's work clothes in to loosen the ground-in grease and grime. Without stopping to rest, Ma grabbed a piece of clothing from the wash water and began scrubbing on the metal washboard. After scrubbing a section, she looked to see if it was clean, then, turned the clothing to scrub another place. Soon, steam from the top of the boiler came rolling across the low ceiling. The stench of lye filled the air. Wash water soaked the front of Ma's apron. Sweat showed in dark circles under her arms. Ma stopped, from time to time, to rest her head on her forearm. She went back to scrubbing, hurrying, always hurrying, with quick steps, snatching at laundry. The worst of it was; she never quite got her washing caught up.

When Ma got a piece of clothing scrubbed, I cranked it through the wringer into the rinse water and, later, back to wring it dry. As I cranked, my imagination took hold. I became Cranker Man—who could overcome the toughest piece of wet laundry that dared defy him. It was a time when I knew I was being good. I went to take a break out on the porch, away from the heat and steam and stink of lye, when I spotted a pickup truck racing down the road to our farm, trailing a rooster tail of dust. It pulled into our driveway. A sign on the side of the pickup read SEARS & ROEBUCK CO. A washing machine sat on back. I figured the driver was lost and wondered whatever possessed him to turn down our road. A neatly dressed man, wearing a tie, got out.

“Why don't you show me where your mom's at, Sonny?”

Water stood in puddles on the kitchen floor, the boiler billowed steam, and Ma stood hunched over the tub, scrubbing. A huge mound of laundry sat on the floor. Her hair was coming undone, and her face showed weariness and despair.

“Lady, have I got the machine for you,” the man said.

“We got no 'electric,” Ma said, with a sigh.

“I know that, ma'am. But this machine doesn't need it. A gasoline engine makes it go. And I'm here to give you a free demonstration.”

I figured the Sears man couldn't have known Ma would be doing the washing that very day. It was a sure sign that somehow she would have that washer. The salesman seemed to glow as he talked about the end of her drudgery with this

miracle of modern science. Ma cut him off. “You jus’ wasting your time, mister; my husband will never buy it.”

“When he sees how easy it makes life for you, he’ll buy it. I know he will. Won’t hardly cost more than a pack of cigarettes a day.”

Ma’s eyes brightened as he told her about the Sears & Roebuck easy payment plan. He unloaded the washer onto the back steps’ landing, pulled out the choke knob, stepped on the kick-start pedal and had it pattering merrily in no time.

“I’m gonna’ leave the washer here for you to use all day—free,” the Sears man said. With that, he hopped into the truck, gave a cheery wave and took off in a swirl of dust. It all happened so fast Ma could only stand there with a big grin on her face. Her eyes were fixed on the purring machine. She hadn’t smiled that much since before Julia died. And it made me feel good to see her so happy. Then, with a start, she swung into action to take advantage of this temporary respite presented by God, Sears Roebuck, or maybe St Jude, patron saint of the hopeless.

She loaded the washer and pulled back on the gear shift lever sticking out on the side. The agitator went into motion swishing the clothes back and forth in the sudsy water. As soon as one batch of washing was done, she’d start another, pausing only long enough to change the water when it got too murky. Soon the clotheslines were full, and we began hanging clothes on barbed wire fences. Then the machine died. Ma clapped her hands to her head. “Yesus Maria, we’ve worked the poor thing to death.”

“No, Ma, maybe not,” I said, checking the empty gas tank. I siphoned gas from the saw rig we cut firewood on, and soon had the machine running, again. We took down curtains and stripped the beds. “Take off your clothes,” Ma said, and she washed those also. When the fences by the house were full, we spread laundry on bushes and the lawn to dry. Soon, clothes reached out into the hayfield. When we finished spreading the last of the laundry, the farm looked like a clothing factory had exploded. But every last piece of dirty clothing in the house was clean. Ma was caught up at long last. When Pa got home from work, Ma was ecstatic. Her words came out in a jumble as she told Pa about this wonderful washer that only used a little gasoline and could be bought for a pack of cigarettes a day. But Pa just shook his head.

The next day, Ma watched, shoulders slumped, tears brimming, as the Sears & Roebuck man drove off down the road with that wonderful washer.

“Don’t worry, Ma,” Emmy said, putting an arm around her, “Someday I’ll get a job and I’ll buy you that washing machine.”

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