

This is the story of a boy who becomes the family's black sheep while searching for his manhood. He journeys along a path fraught with pitfalls and his topsy-turvy relationship with his parents is stretched to the breaking point.

**KALEIDOSCOPE: A Connecticut Boyhood 1942-1955**

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**A Connecticut Boyhood**

*1942-1955*

Bob Sessions

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## CHAPTER 1 WARTIME CHRISTMAS

i

I don't worry much about those yellow Japs because I live in Tylertown, Connecticut. But I do worry about Nazis. The Krauts could bomb us at anytime. I know that because we have air raid drills in school. Why would we have them if the grown-ups weren't afraid we might be bombed?

The war started just over a year ago and nothing has been the same since. Not even the time. Our President, Mr. Roosevelt, started 'war time' on February 9<sup>th</sup> 1942. It's really daylight savings time all year round. It's supposed to save energy, but I don't know how and no one will tell me. Anyway, it stays lighter later so I can play outside longer. Well, almost nothing has been the same.

No bombs fell last night. That's super good. It means that today will go on as scheduled.

Today is Saturday, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1942, and like every other kid in Tylertown, this is a day that has been marked on my calendar for months. We have been studying days and dates on the calendar and time on a play clock at school. So I pay attention to the dates of things. I even know when the bell will ring.

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Rumors that this year's events would be different started flying around the play ground at Apple Hill School last Monday morning. I'm a first grader there, but I'm bored with school. Mom told me last year that first grade would be hard. I don't think it is. On Wednesday, the Principal, Mr. Granger, sent us home with a mimeo sheet telling our parents what changes would be made for Saturday.

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After my Saturday morning pancakes with that wonderful smelling maple syrup that Mom heats on the stove, I plop myself down in front of the radio. My favorite characters are on and I'll spend some time with them while I wait for Dad to get home. The sharp tinny sound of

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the mailman's whistle interrupts "Smilin' Ed" McConnell's voice coming from our big Philco radio. I scramble up off the floor and run to the front door to get the morning mail.

Along with the mail, the mailman always delivers some advice. Today he tells me to bundle up because there's a nip in the air. When he speaks I can see his breath, but he isn't smoking. I thank him. As he turns to leave I step out the door and do some 'pretend smoking' just to be like Dad.

Taking the mail to the den I put it on his desk. Dad is working at his factory today like he's done every Saturday since the war started. Mom says he sits behind a big desk and tells people what to do. But I know that today he's thinking about how important tonight is to us kids and he'll be home earlier than usual.

Then I pick up a silver picture frame that sits on the corner of his desk. It holds an old picture of Dad as a younger man. He is being presented with a big trophy with a golfer on the top. A banner behind him reads "The Compounce Country Club Champion 1928". The men standing beside Dad are patting him on the back. Every time I look at the picture, I think about his grin. If it was any bigger his face would have split.

After lunch, Stubby, my younger brother, and Grace, my younger sister, and I all hear the mailman's whistle at the same time when he comes again to deliver the afternoon mail. We make a mad scramble to the front door, and I win.

"Hi, kids," he says holding out some envelopes. "Remember what I told you about bundling up this morning, Bobby? Be sure to do it because I thought I saw a few flakes just a minute ago."

"Say goodbye to the mailman now, Little Bobby, and close the front door. You're letting all the heat out," Mom calls from upstairs.

"Okay, small fry, listen to your mother. Have fun tonight," he says as he shoos us back inside and pushes the door closed. I don't even get a chance to smoke.

As I take the mail to the den, I wonder for about the zillionth time why Mom and Dad call me "Little Bobby." At six years old I'm the oldest and the biggest kid in the family. Heck, I'm even the biggest

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kid in the first grade class at Apple Hill School, except for Marcel Fortune.

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Marcel's older brothers and sisters call him Bucky, but the rest of us call him Cookie. He's the biggest. But, he should be in second grade so he doesn't really count as a first grader.

Cookie stayed back last year because he had rickets. And he missed a lot of school time. His leg bones were so weak they became bent. He could hardly walk. But they seem straighter now. He can walk a little further, but he still limps. So he must be getting stronger.

Mom made us drink even more milk last year so we wouldn't get sick too like poor Marcel.

One morning, on the playground, Cookie told me he didn't mind our nickname for him, but his mother didn't like it. "Bucky" was her older brother's nickname and she wanted to continue the tradition. It was especially important to her now because the older Bucky was in Italy fighting in the war Marcel explained.

When I told the other kids about it, we all agreed to call him Bucky again. Maybe after the war he'd go back to being "Cookie."

The Apple Hill School yard could be an awfully rough place for someone called "Little Bobby." I'll kill Stubby or Grace if they ever tell anyone about "Little Bobby."

v

This Saturday afternoon creeps by. Big full-bellied gray clouds roll across the sky. Stubby, Grace, and I stand in the dining room window watching for Dad's two-seater Ford coupe.

"I bet the next car will be his," Stubby says.

"No it won't," Grace says. She never agrees with anyone. "It'll be the third one."

Quickly I decide to go along with Stubby.

Grace laughs at us when the next car drives right on by.

"You boys don't know anything," she crows. "I told you it will be the third—"



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Before she can finish gloating the second car pulls into our driveway.

“Dad is home. You kids come out here and get your coats on,” Mom calls.

I’m too excited to bother to tell Grace she’s wrong too. I’ll save that for later. We run to the kitchen and out into the mudroom, grabbing our coats from the pegs. Even with all the excitement and commotion I notice the great smell of baking beans coming from the oven. Mom soaks the beans over night. The, after breakfast she adds molasses, brown sugar, pork fat, and other stuff to the bean pot. It sits on the counter all morning. Then right after lunch she puts the pot in the oven. I love Saturday night’s supper. Baked beans with the big chunks of pork fat cooked right in, brown bread with raisins in it, and hot dogs on toasted buns with lots of mustard and relish.

When Mom tries to put my earmuffs on me she catches my curly blond hair in the metal band. The sharp pain brings tears to my bright blue eyes and I start to holler.

“What’s all this racket I’m hearing?” Dad says adjusting my earmuffs and playfully pulling my stocking cap down over my mouth. “That’s not a good start to one of the happiest nights of the kid year. You three get in the car. Chop-chop now. We don’t want to be late.”

I start to crawl up onto the shelf behind the driver’s seat where I usually ride, but Dad stops me.

“You can ride up front so you can see everything tonight, Little Bobby. You sit next to Grace and put Stubby on your laps.”

Yuck. Not next to her I think, but keep my lip buttoned. It takes a moment of scrambling, but soon we’re set. Dad steps on the starter and it grinds away for a few seconds. The engine catches with a roar and a black cloud of exhaust surrounds the car. I love the smell, but Grace holds her nose. It takes a few minutes to get to Main Street and we all seem to be holding our breath in anticipation.

As we turn onto the upper end of Main Street Stubby, Grace, and I all shout out in wonder. In front of us are all the Christmas lights shining for the first time this year. Wreaths with big red bows are attached to both sides every lamp post. Silver garlands are wound around every telephone pole. And best of all red, yellow, green, blue,

*KALEIDOSCOPE*

and white lights form arches over the road for the entire length of the street. It's like driving through a tunnel of color.

"It's a shame this is the only day this season that these lights will be turned on. At five o'clock all the lights will be shut off," Dad says

"Why?" Stubby asks.

"Because we're afraid the German bombers will use them to spot targets the same way the Japs used radio signals to find Pearl Harbor." Dad explains it all again for about the hundredth time. It was all spelled out in the mimeo sheet I brought home last Wednesday. Dad tells Stubby the lights and decorations will stay up until January second, but the stores will be closing at five o'clock so everyone can be home before dark.

"What about the people who can't shop during the day?" Grace asks. Mom calls her the practical one. I call her nosy.

"Good question, Honey," Dad says beaming at her. "For the rest of the holiday season the stores will be opened Sundays at noon so everyone can still go to church and then shop."

We park near the town green and hear people singing "Silent Night." Older high school kids are handing out song booklets to the crowd gathering around the tall pine tree in the center of the square.

I take mine. As Grace reaches for hers, I tell the boy, "Don't give her one she can't read."

Dad takes one for her anyway and smiles at me.

When we sing "Jingle Bells" and "Deck the Halls" the high school band plays along. After we sing the last song, "It Came upon a Midnight Clear", the minister from our church, Reverend Tedcastle, says a short prayer. After the Amen there is a big drum roll and the tree blazes with Christmas lights.

Now the real fun part starts. The crowd spills out along Main Street to window shop. All the kids are anxious to see what new toys might be under their trees on Christmas morning.

Our first stop is under the red and gold sign of Woolworth's Five & Ten Cent Store. Wind up toys of all kinds roam in the show area inside. We stand earmuff to earmuff watching tanks and jeeps roll by. Monkeys shinny up trees and dancers spin. Store clerks stand by

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ready to keep the toys wound and upright and to stuff Jack back down in his box.

Overhead hang models of war planes. The big slow bombers are guarded by speedy fighter planes. In the display cases submarines, destroyers, battle ships, and aircraft carriers sit on blue cardboard waves. I want one of each.

In another window, board games are laid out for us to see. Monopoly and checkers are the favorites. But I like Parcheesi better. Then I spot my all time favorite. I grab Stubby's hand and pull him down the line until we stand in front of Uncle Wiggly.

"Oh boy! That goes on my list," he shouts.

"Ugh. You boys cheat all the time," Grace says. "I want the spinning ballerina."

Dad tries to smooth things over by saying, "You can each send your own letter to Santa when we get home. Let's go down the street to Muzzy's and see what's there."

Oh boy! Muzzy's is the best store in town. Nothing is cheap there. They are the only store in town that sells electric trains. There are no windup toys in sight. They only have the best model kits on earth. There are blimps, biplanes, bombers, fighters, and all kinds of boats. They have racing sailboats and ocean liners as well as every kind of fighting ship in the Navy. They have models of the smallest LSTs and the biggest aircraft carriers, like the USS Wasp, or the biggest Battleships like the memorial to the USS Arizona that was sunk at Pearl Harbor, and everything in between.

Snow has started to fall. I watch the pretend smoke come out of my mouth as I try to hurry everyone along.

A big crowd gathers to see this year's huge display of electric trains.

Last year the trains circled endlessly. There were steam locomotives pulling passenger trains with green Pullman cars. Gray smoke came from the short smokestacks and white steam blasted out from underneath. A new diesel engine pulled a long freight train made up of boxcars, tankers, open gondola cars, with a big red caboose at the end.

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My favorite was the old fashioned train. It had a shiny black engine with a tall smoke stack and a bright red cowcatcher on the front. Right behind the engine was an open car carrying the wood to burn in the firebox. Behind that was the U. S. Mail car then three open passenger cars came last. The train sat on a siding getting water from a tall water tower. Stubby and I were always fascinated by trains.

This year the crowd stares silently at the empty tracks that run through mountain tunnels and over wooded hills. The tracks at the stations, freight yards, and water towers are empty too.

The adults are reading a big notice Mr. Muzzy has placed in the center of the window. He says he has sent his complete set of trains off to Washington D.C. so the government will have the metal to make bullets if they are needed. And he urges everyone to cooperate with the scrap metal drives. He ends by saying, "Until this awful war is over this window will honor every man and woman from Tylertown who serves in the Armed Services."

"Look kids. There's a picture of your Cousin Jim, who just left for the U.S. Naval Academy. And those two sailor boys over there go to our church. And there is Andy Fine. He worked at the factory until he volunteered for the Marine Corps," Dad says.

I want to leave. I want to see trains not pictures of soldiers and sailors. We walk up and down the whole street, but we weren't as happy as we were before.

Dad saves the day by saving the best for last. We turn off Main Street on to North Main Street. We join the crowd in front of Goodale's window. There standing just on the other side of the glass are full sized cardboard cutouts of our favorite cowboys. The Lone Ranger and Tonto hold their hands out to me inviting me inside. The silver bullets shine in the gun belts along side the holsters and six-shooters that are on display. Hopalong Cassidy stares off into a sunset that we can't see. He holds one of the big ten gallon hats that he wears. Red Ryder clutches his official "BB" gun menacing a masked "owl hoot."

Stubby and I have forgotten the war and the trains. We are so excited we can hardly speak. Grace tugs at Dad's hand urging him to go. He resists for a few more minutes.

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He finally says, "Come on boys. It's time to go. Mom is waiting supper and we still have one more stop to make."

Dad's gloved hand pushes the snow off the windshield. I climb up on my shelf, behind Dad, and wonder where we will go next. Dad turns the heater on. It rattles. All it does is rattle. It never gets warm.

We drive slowly through the thinning crowd. The slower we go the slower the wipers go and the snow streaks the windshield. Soon we are chugging up Main Street hill.

We see people gathered on another green next to my school. There is a shed in the center that wasn't there Friday when school got out.

Dad stops alongside the curb and says, "Everyone out." He sets the brake and opens his door. "Damn it," he chuckles as a car passes and sends a shower of slush across his pant legs.

"Daddy swore," Stubby says. His eyes are as big as bug's eyes.

"There's one more job for your mom to do tonight," Dad laughs. Grabbing Stubby by the shoulders he swings him up in the air. "Sorry about the language son, I was surprised that's all."

As we cross the green we leave footprints in the snow. I try to walk in Dad's steps. But I can't because Grace keeps messing them up as she walks beside him holding his hand. The shed is made from logs that still have their bark. It looks like it's as tall as Dad and I wonder what it's for.

We get to the front and stand alongside other people. I see sheep, and cows, and shepherds wearing light colored cloaks. Then there are three tall dark skinned men wearing colorful robes and decorated with jewels standing by a manger that holds a small baby. A camel stands behind them. They're all made of plaster.

We are kept back by a purple velvet rope just like the one at the movie theater. Stubby tries to slip under the rope, but he is not fast enough to get away from Dad's grab.

"We're not to go too near," Dad says. "This Nativity Scene is brand new and it is just like the one at church.

"Tell us the story about it," Grace says.

"You mean the Story of the First Christmas?" Dad asks.

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As Grace and Stubby draw close to hear the familiar story my mind wanders back to downtown and the treasures I saw. I'm really going to have to work hard on my letter to Santa.

Dad finishes the story and it's time to head home.

We rush in to tell Mom what we saw. She listens as she puts supper on the table. As we eat we run out of steam, slow down, and stop talking altogether.

"This is the quietest you've been since we got home. Has the cat got your tongues?"

"No Dad," I say. "We're just thinking about our letters."

"Well if that's all it is, let's get to it."

We excuse ourselves from the table and follow Dad into the den while Mom cleans up.

Dad goes behind the desk and takes paper and envelopes from the bottom drawer. Then he walks around to the front of the desk and says, "Little Bobby, you're old enough to write your own letter to Santa this year. I'll write the letters for Grace and Stubby. Now sit down behind my desk and open the center drawer. Take out my gold Waterman fountain pen and the bottle of ink and I'll show you how to fill it."

In a few minutes we have the pen filled and Dad reminds me to tell Santa how good I've been. He also tells me that it's better not to ask for too much. I sit there holding the pen just like Mrs. Aparo has taught me. Finally I start in.

Dear Santa.

I've been a good boy all year and I hope you'll bring me some nice stuff. I really-really want an electric train set that blows smoke and steam. But I know you can't do that cause of the war. So I'd like a Hopalong Cassidy hat and a Lone Ranger gun belt with silver bullets and two six-shooters. A new Parcheesi game would be nice because ours is worn out and the dice don't match cause Stubby lost one, but I'd really like an Uncle Wiggly game. A wind

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up jeep and a tank would be fun to play with too. Please no clothes! Specially socks and underwear 'cause Stubby and I don't think they make good Christmas presents.

Maybe if you brought me a "BB" gun Mom and Dad would let me keep it.

Love, Bobby

P.s. I'll make sure Mom leaves you some milk and cookies.

We put the letters in envelopes and lay them on the kitchen counter next to Dad's keys.

vi

When we come down for breakfast Monday morning we find Dad and the letters gone.

## CHAPTER 2

### BOTH COWBOY & ENGINEER

i

It's a drizzling Saturday morning, March 27, 1943, when I buckle on my gun belt. The weight of the silver painted wooden bullets and chrome plated guns make the holsters sag over my skinny hips. My ten-gallon hat droops over everything on my pint-sized head. I strut out the kitchen door without a backward glance. Closing the door between the kitchen and the mudroom I sit on the stool to put on black rubber galoshes. I stand and shrug into my winter coat before I step outside quietly closing the back and storm doors. Standing on the back porch, I look over my open range dotted with low shrubs. Dingy old gray snow is going while new green grass is coming. Clouds, the color of the old snow, hold the promise of sharp flashes of lightning and rolling barrages of thunder that will spook my cattle. Everything is dripping wet.

Dad's booming voice breaks into my thoughts. He is so loud I can hear him through three closed doors.

"I know you're worried, Alberta," he roars. "And I know you didn't get much sleep either, but I'm in real pain and can hardly walk. The golf season will be here in a few weeks. What am I going to do?"

I can't hear Mom's soft reply. I can hear Dad ask her to keep Grace and Stubby quiet in the kitchen so he can get some rest in the front room.

I know that'll cause upsetment because Grace and Stubby will want to listen to Smiling Ed laugh, and say, "Plunk your magic twanger, Froggy." Then "Froggy the Gremlin" will disappear and torment "Midnight the Cat." They listen in every Saturday morning, but our only radio is in the front room. When they can't go in there they'll want to come out and play with me. Mom won't let them because they're too young and I'm not a babysitter.

This is the first Saturday Dad has not gone to his office since the war started. Dad owns a factory and makes important decisions all day. When he's home, he sits, reads his paper, and listens to the radio.



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He does read us a story every night right after supper, but then he grabs his paper. He usually doesn't speak to us again until it's our bedtime. Things must be very important for him to read the news and listen to Lowell Thomas all the time.

But today he's home and that's not good; I'm glad I'm outside and I intend to stay out here too.

Pushing my Hopalong Cassidy hat back, I survey the boundaries of my pretend ranch. To the north is the garage, my barn. To the east is a line of lilac bushes, my cottonwood trees. To the west running along Spruce Street, my Santa Fe Trail is a white picket fence that is my barbed wire fence.

"Remember, stay in the yard," Mom calls from the porch looking at the threatening sky. "Come in if it starts to rain."

I nod "yes."

"Little Bobby, did you hear me?" Mom calls again.

"Yes, Ma'am," I say in my western drawl.

I hate the name Little Bobby. I hope my friends at Apple Hill never hear it or I'll be a dead duck. They don't call my sister Little Grace or my brother Little Stubby. Why me?

I put these thoughts behind me as I head for the sandbox, kneeling and poking to test the sand. It's still too wet and hard to play in. It will be my corral today. I stand up and wipe off my dirty wet knees. Mom will never notice, I think, trying to convince myself.

A fallen branch grabs my attention. After investigating, I decide the branch is just the right size for a great horse. Picking it up I mount up and gallop around.

The mist gets heavier. Oh dam, well, it's not really raining yet.

Billy rides Trigger onto the north section of my ranch. Trigger is a broken broom we found last week; the bristles make a fine regal head. Mrs. Aparo says regal is another word for royal. Billy and Trigger live next door on the Santa Fe Trail. He's in a Catholic school across town. Dad doesn't like Catholics very much.

*KALEIDOSCOPE*

ii

If Billy's dad, Mr. Oulette, knew my dad was home Billy would not be playing over here today. His father doesn't like Dad very much anymore.

About two months ago, when Dad first started to complain about his legs, he and Mr. Oulette were shoveling their side by side driveways. Billy and I were throwing snow balls at each other while they shoveled. They were passing remarks about the war and politics back and forth and laughing when it all changed.

Out of the blue Dad said, "You know, it's you Catholics and Dumbocrats who are driving this country to wrack and ruin." Where ever that was. Then he ended the conversation by telling Mr. Oulette he should become a good Protestant and a Republican.

Mr. Oulette hollered, "Wasp," turned his back, slammed his shovel into a snow bank and stomped into his house.

iii

I spot some stray cattle that need rounding up just as I hear the first rumble of thunder.

"Give me a hand with these doggies," I shout across the range to Billy.

"Sho nuf, padna," he shouts back imitating our radio cowboy heroes Bobby Benson and Gabby Hayes. "I'll take this here side. You stay over there."

I pull off my hat and wave it over my head as I yell, "Yippee," at the top of my lungs. Shouting and waving, I gallop around the pasture. Billy shouts even louder than I do. We want to pin the cows against the western fence. I gallop faster and Billy matches me stride for stride.

We hear the milkman swearing over our yelling. It's coming from the street in front of our garages. We come to a dead stop, drop our horses, and look at each other while listening to the foul language. We've never heard swearing like this. I don't know what some of the words even mean. But I know I won't be asking Mom about them. I remember making that mistake once before and getting my mouth

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washed out with soap. Yuk! The soap smells a lot better. Maybe the older kids at school will tell me.

We run to the fence to see what's happening. The milkman is losing control of his horse, Sadie, and his milk wagon. She's struggling to make a hard right turn away from us. Our running, yelling, and waving must have startled her. The horse normally walks in the gutter; but now she's in the middle of the street.

A big black 1937 Packard sedan comes up the street behind the wagon. The driver leans on his horn and shouts out the window causing more commotion.

The milkman stands, swears and pulls harder on the reins. He gets Sadie back into the gutter and yanks her to a stop in front of our fence. I see the bit pull hard at the back of her foaming mouth. She tosses her head and rolls her eyes. I feel sorry for her. She lifts her tail and deposits a load of "road apples" in the gutter. What a stink!

The driver honks his horn again and continues shouting as he drives away. The milkman silently shakes his fist after him.

"You dummkophs," he snarls at us. "You scared my horse with all that noise and that running. She almost hit a car and dumped my milk over. You dummkophs..." He starts sputtering gibberish.

The milkman is a mountain made taller by standing in his wagon. Bulges of fat start around his eyes and make them look all squinchy. The rest of his body bulges too. He isn't a jolly fat man like our Italian barber, Sam, but he's never been mean to us either. He just plods along delivering his milk.

The milkman's lips curl. The teeth, in his open mouth, look like the mounds of rotted lilac stumps that hide under the fallen leaves between the growing bushes. He shakes the water off his heavy canvas cloak like a gigantic dog.

He grabs his whip from its holder. He flicks it at us.

I scream.

Billy runs to the safety of his backyard and peeks around the corner of our garage to watch the action. He's ready to bolt for his house if he needs to.

The sound of the wagon creaking under the milkman's weight grabs my attention. I don't know the whip wouldn't reach me as the

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milkman swings it toward me again. I scream louder rooted, by fear, to this spot by the fence.

I hear the back door crash open as Dad comes staggering out.

"What in God's name is going on here? What's all this racket about?" he demands.

"He . . . he tried to whip me," I tattle on the milkman. I point to the whip.

"Didn't," he lies.

"Did too."

"Then why do you still have the whip in your hand?" Dad asks. "Little Bobby, you're as much a part of this ruckus as he is. I've had to listen to your noise for the last ten minutes. I don't know where your mother is, but she should have stopped it. Why do you have that whip out, Orlaski?"

"Sadie gets temperamental. She doesn't want to move," he lies again. "Besides, that whip won't reach him," he pushes the whip toward me to prove his point.

The shift in weight causes Sadie to step forward; the milkman viciously yanks her back.

"The plain truth of it is, Mr. Victor, the boys scared the horse. I fight to get her under control. Then I shout at the boys. I want them to quiet down and stay back and not scare my horse. They caused me enough trouble. I'll . . ."

"You've all caused me enough trouble," Dad interrupts.

"No harm done, Mr. Victor. Sorry for troubling you. There's enough trouble in the world today without us scrapping." He clucks Sadie forward.

"Not so fast there, Orlaski. If you ever cause this much trouble around here again I'll take that whip away from you and use it on you. Is that understood? Little Bobby, you find some place else to play" Without waiting for an answer Dad stumbles back into the house slamming all the doors.

I stand rooted in the same spot too stunned to move. I've never seen or heard Dad act like this before. Glancing at Billy I see his jaw drop down to his knees after that explosion. I'm more used to it lately,

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but I'm still surprised. He usually just blows up at Mom and sometimes us kids, but not outsiders.

"I think I hear my mom calling me," Billy whispers disappearing in back of the barn.

It's too dangerous playing cowboy, I'll have to think of something else to stay out here.

The mist grows heavier as I run to the front porch unbuckling my guns. I lay them on the table alongside a dried out Christmas wreath that waits to be burned. I take off my hat and lay it on top of my guns. A gust of wind blows it on to the floor. I leave it there.

The porch stretches across the front of the house and down one side. It has white railings with big columns. Shorter posts support the railings. The floor is gray and the house yellow and sits on the corner of Evergreen Way and Spruce Street in Tylertown Conn.

Three chipped cement steps lead down to a cracked sidewalk that takes you to Freedom's Gate. It's freedom, however, only if you are allowed to open the gate.

The railing becomes my pretend freight train and I become the engineer.

Stubby, Grace and I see many trains when we ride in our car. We wave at the trainmen when we stop at crossings. Sometimes they wave back.

iv

Dad says we see so many trains because the country is fighting World War II. We hear war news every night on the radio. Dad likes to listen to Lowell Thomas because of his deep rich voice. Mom wants to listen to Walter Winchell because he makes the news sound exciting. Most of the time, we listen to Lowell Thomas.

Every window in town is covered with heavy black curtains called blackout curtains. They don't let out any light at night. They help hide us in case the German bombers come. We have Air-Raid Wardens who search for telltale light, and they holler when they find any. They are either older boys or older men who can't join the army.

Mom takes her ration book when she shops. Food is scarce. She needs ration coupons as well as money to buy food. Many people

*KALEIDOSCOPE*

have Victory Gardens to grow their own food. Gas is rationed along with many other everyday items. Dad complains that it is almost impossible for him to get new tires. He finds someone to patch the flat tires when he needs to.

Every Friday Dad gives me a dime to take to school to buy a War Stamp. When I get enough stamps in my book, Mom takes me to the bank and the nice people give me a War Bond.

v

I pull myself up onto the rail, sit in the engineer's seat, and start the train. My bottom gets cold, wet, and very uncomfortable. I stand up on the rail to peer out the cab's window. I spot something on the tracks and jerk the whistle cord. "Whooooo, whoooo," I hoot as loud as I can. The train rolls down the mountain swaying as it rounds the sharp curves. The porch rail can't sway, but I can.

I sway fine until Grace, the squealer who's five, opens the door and looks out at me.

"Telling. Mom's told you before not to stand on the railings. She says 'you'll fall and get hurt'." She slams the door. "Mom." She's always telling.

In my haste to depart the train, I do fall into the flower garden below. Landing on a rock, I tear my pants and skin my knee. My breath is gone so I can't cry. I hear the door open again.

"Little Bobby, where are you?" Dad calls. "Grace says you were up on the rail."

I get enough air back into my lungs to let out a weak moan. Dad's usually calm face twists in concern as he peers over the rail at me.

"Alberta, you'd better come out here. Don't try to move, son. I'll be right there." He stumbles across the porch clutching the rail. He holds on to the column as he staggers down the stairs.

"These Goddamned legs," he mutters.

Mom comes from the back of the house getting to me first. She doesn't even ask me what happened. Scooping me up, she hands me to Dad.

*BOB SESSIONS*

"Can you manage to get him inside while I get the iodine and bandages, Victor?"

"Of course."

My knee burns even more at the mention of "iodine."

"Not the iodine," I scream. "That makes it sting like hell."

"Shhh," Dad says. "If your mother hears that language you'll get soap in your mouth as well as iodine on your knee."

Dad carries me into the living room. He stumbles and falls into his big leather rocker. Luckily, I land in his lap and not the other way around.

Why is Dad so wobbly on his feet? People whisper about how sick he is. We kids talk about how fewer and fewer people come to our house to visit. At least I don't have to hear Grace say, "HI, my name is Grace. Mommy and Daddy call me that because I'm full of grace." Horse manure is what she's full of. We kids wonder what's going on.

Dad tells Grace to find my favorite book. She brings back "Bambi," her favorite, and stares at my bleeding knee.

"Told you I'd tell," she whispers.

I kick at her with my good leg but she darts away. She smirks and twirls her hair behind Dad's back.

Stubby peeks around the kitchen door to see what is going on. He has his thumb in his mouth. At the age of three, he practices getting out of sight whenever he senses trouble.

When the knee is bandaged and the story is read, Dad tries to slip me off his lap. I want to be talked to so I hold on to his arm.

"I hope I won't be able to go to school Monday because of my knee," I say, trying to start a conversation.

Dad takes my head and turns it up to face him, "Do you remember what I've tried to teach you kids?"

"You've got to be careful about what you wish for because it just might come true," Grace chimes in, beaming up at Dad with her Cheshire-cat grin plastered on her face.

Dad strokes her curly hair and says, "Just so, good girl, remind me to give you a dime for your piggy bank. If you boys would pay

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half the attention to me that your sister does, you'd be getting a dime for your banks, too."

Stubby and I exchange glances. We hear these kinds of promises a lot.

Dad nudges me firmly off his lap and onto the floor; then he picks up his paper from the end table, opens it, and starts to read.

Mom doesn't talk to me much because she is too busy all day with Dad, Grace and Stubby, or the housework. Dad doesn't talk to me either because he's too busy with work, the newspaper, or the radio; and the other two kids have nothing important to say. I sit at Dad's feet and think . . .



This is the story of a boy who becomes the family's black sheep while searching for his manhood. He journeys along a path fraught with pitfalls and his topsy-turvy relationship with his parents is stretched to the breaking point.

**KALEIDOSCOPE: A Connecticut Boyhood 1942-1955**

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