Chapter 1

Arrival

In January 1934 my two brothers and I rode all day in a cold drizzle wedged together with our belongings in parcels. John was ten years old, Cal eight, and I was six. In the glare of lights at journey's end we rumbled over a railroad crossing and through brick columns entered the orphanage. Charlie Rice, our half-brother-in-law, stopped the flatbed truck, pulled a letter from his shirt pocket, lit a match, read out loud, and rolled down the truck window to toss out the burned stem. In the pale fog the truck lights ghosted streams of boys and girls in sweaters and belted coats leaning against the wind, flush from the cold walking. The face of two boys hung in the truck window.

"Can we help you, mister?" asked one boy, blowing on his hands and speaking through chattering teeth. The other looked past Charlie Rice who puffed away at his pipe.

"Those must be new boys," the second boy's face asked.

"You, boy," Charlie Rice pointed to the first speaker, "Where's Miss Edward's office?"

"Why, Mister, you're sitting right at it. It's right there," he pointed. "There's Miss Hattie now, coming from prayer meeting."

The boys went running toward a short, plump woman with graying bobbed hair, and puffed cheeks rosy in the cold. "Miss Hattie, Miss Hattie," they called out, "There's some new boys, there." They pointed at us.

Miss Hattie, Director of Mother's Aid, who had visited us in our other life, now welcomed us, and asked that we follow her into the low brick office building. We entered a long darkened hallway, passed closed half-glass office doors with painted names, R.D. Covington, Treasurer; Eulalia Turner, Lady Manager; Sallie McCracken, Secretary; Archibald Johnson, Editor, Charity and Children; and I. G. Greer, General Manager.

We clutched string bindings on bundled belongings and followed Miss Hattie to her basement office. There she began our adaptation to orphanage life by explaining that we were to be quarantined for one week at the infirmary to let incubating disease burst out. The long trip, new people, strange words, and a new place, swept me with a bewildering sense of fright and loneliness.

Charlie Rice bade us goodbye without emotion, giving each of us a quarter and telling us to "be good." A light snow had begun. We piled into Miss Hattie's car for the ride to the infirmary, a large, three-story building in an oak grove. Dull light shone from rows of windows. Snow flakes reflected in the truck lights and the wind blew them against shiny black trunks of tall bare trees. The driveway circled around a fishpond.

From a porch at the top of a tall banisterless stair light beamed down on the pond, showing bloated gold bodies, nestled among dark leaves, bumping beneath a thin cover of ice. We trudged up the stairs, carrying our belongings across the porch, past empty chairs rocking gently in the wind, and into the building.

Inside groanings and whimpers of pain seeped from the rows of rooms that opened into long corridors to the right and left of the entrance. The odor of ether hung in the air and wafted from the door lentils and walls.

Older girls moved about in the corridors. Some carried ice cream on trays to soothe throats pained from having to give up their tonsils. Others hurried by carrying towels and balancing basins of water that sloshed and splatted the floor. Yet another carried a whimpering child in her arms. A pale girl, smoking an Ashthmador cigarette, blew out a musty smell as she listened with silent gravity to a young boy with a bandaged hand. He told of his recent misadventure in which a friend accidentally whacked his thumb with a butcher knife. The story brought tears to the girl's eyes and she asked, "Does it hurt now?"

"Not much," he answered.

Miss Hattie asked for Miss Rucker. One of the girls said, "I'll go get her," and dashed up the stair at the corridor's end. In a few moments she

returned, holding the hand of a tall pretty woman who swished up in her nurse's uniform. We were given over to her.

Miss Hattie said, "They have not had supper."

"Take these boys downstairs and get them some supper," Miss Rucker told one of the older girls.

We followed to the basement and in a neat dining room were told to sit at a wooden table with settings of plates, glasses, and eating utensils. Another girl joined the first. They rattled dishes and pots and soon brought stewed apples, pinto beans, sweet potatoes, thick slices of bread, and glasses of cold milk. Throughout they were giving us a good look. During the weeks to follow souls were bared repeatedly as we stepped upon each new landscape of orphanage life. To take the measure of the new boy or girl was not just natural curiosity. It was an orphanage way of life.

Following supper we were shown to our bedroom, a sleeping porch with six beds in a row. There were two other new boys in the room. We chose beds close to each other. But for me there was no settling down. My thoughts came alive. I missed my mother and the others from our former life. I strained at every creak, groan, footstep, and in my imaginings conjured frightening things in the dark. I whimpered. John said, "Hush up, Ted, hush up."

But there was no hushing up. A spring had been tapped, far beyond the reach of sibling authority or even physical intimidation. The sobbing went on, breath after breath, until I fell asleep, exhausted, awakened a time or two by the clanging of a steaming radiator.

About daybreak a small boy came to the door ringing a bell. "It's get up time," he said. I jumped from the bed and pressed my face to the window. In the darkness shadowy trees were outlined. The sky lightened as we dressed. With first light I saw a rolling land with tufts of trees bordering pastures on which a herd of Holstein cows grazed. The pastures were separated from tilled fields by wire fences. The land sloped toward a small orchard bordered by a wide creek, and beyond which woods stretched for a long distance. Close to the infirmary were rows of chicken houses with White Leghorns and Rhode Island Reds picking and scratching in grassless fenced lots. Before I could finish my look around the boy came along ringing his bell, "It's breakfast time," he said.

We followed the boy to the dining room. In daylight the room was warm and low, and opened into a kitchen at the far end. In the kitchen a calm and serene gray-haired woman swung her head from side to side humming a light song as she worked over a metal table filling serving bowls with scrambled eggs and arranging limp bread on a sheet pan. She dispatched two girls, who carried the dishes and placed them near

the center of three tables set with tableware and napkins for six at each table. Plates of toast and glasses of milk were added.

There were several children crowded at the dining room door pushing to enter. The walking wounded and those recovering from sickness forged ahead of new boys and girls, the boys clad in woolen knickers and denim shirts and the girls in woolen skirts and blouses. We newcomers had not yet had time to form even tentative rules of conduct for the circumstances of this new life. The others pushed and elbowed without malice, neither giving nor taking offense, all talking at once or silent at once as they forced the doorway.

At breakfast there were several adults other than Miss Rucker and the dietician; Miss Sallie, secretary to Mr. Greer, and a number of teachers, including Miss Olney, a tall thin wisp of a woman, also known as the Bird Lady, because of her knowledge of and great effort toward educating orphans to the care and safety of "our marvelous feathered friends."

We sat. Grace was asked and food was passed. We new boys and girls stared too long at the sight with vacuous eyes. We moved with timid reflexes, taking too small portions to suit our hunger but, being under observation, we wished to make a good impression with our manners.

At seven o'clock a great bell called out from a distance, its deep voice repeating, "come now, come now," setting off a flurry of activity.

About half of those eating at the dining room tables grabbed books and coats and hurried from the building to school.

After the scholars left my brothers and I were sent in the care of one of the infirmary girls to the sewing room to be measured for orphanage clothes. Outside, boys and girls sallied forth from other buildings nearby, spilling into a horseshoe road, laughing and joking and linking arms together, hurrying to school or to appointed places of duty.

The sewing room, a long low brick building with a wooden porch, was only a short walk away. The inside was one large room filled with girls in straight-backed caned-bottom chairs feeding cloth through Singer's jaws. Their feet peddled furiously. At strategic moments they flashed scissors, snipping connecting threads, and laid aside finished garments of underwear, khaki short pants, denim shirts, overalls, dark brown knickers, and long pants of olive green.

We were given over to a smiling, brown-haired woman in a long dress. She was draped with a soldier's sash stuck with needles with flowing threads, pins and loops of thread with thimbles hanging loose. Around her neck dangled a measuring tape, its free ends flapping as she walked. From her hair, just above one ear, a pencil protruded.

She said, "I'm Miss Wright. I've been expecting you boys." She picked up a tablet of paper from a padded table on which lay folds of denim rolled from a bolt. "Now," she said, "which is John, and Calvin?

You must be Ted." She wrote on the pad. "Well, come along boys. Let's get measured and fitted for your new clothes."

The girls, fresh and pretty and wearing bright colors, smiled and laughed, and looked up from their machines as we passed. Most had bright ribbons tucked behind ears and bows tied atop sparkling hair. We passed other girls working at cutting tables lighted by low hanging metal sockets with string pulls and bare bulbs. The girls reached to shoulder high racks, pulled out bolts of tight wound cloth and cut what they needed, dropping scraps in piles on a clean floor.

Miss Wright led us to one end of the room and behind a screen of denim draped over a wooden frame she measured arms and legs for length and waists and chests for circumference, jotting the numbers on her note pad. A peephole, created where the cloth screen overlapped, enabled me to watch the girls at work. Miss Wright brought us one piece underwear of thin, stiff white cloth cut with armholes but no sleeves. It fastened with a row of buttons in the front and in the rear had a slit that buttoned. I was fitted with short pants and denim shirts, John and Cal with knickers.

"These are your everyday clothes," Miss Wright said. We were fitted with other pants and shirts. "These," she said, "are your school clothes." And another set was for Sunday. She marked each item with India ink, "so

that it won't get lost in the laundry." We returned to the infirmary bearing our new clothes.

After lunch we were taken to the first-aid room and instructed to sit on a bench, "until the doctor comes." We looked into cabinets containing shining scissors, colored liquids in bottles, boxes of bandages, rolls of tape, and salve in jars.

The doctor, a tall man in dark clothes, bent over each of us, probing crevices, parting hair, pounding chests with bony fingers, putting the stethoscope to pounding hearts and blowing lungs. He searched for cooties, itch, and congenital weaknesses. We were declared physically fit and therefore no threat to others but we were to stay out our week in the infirmary to give contagion a chance to show.

That was the way we came to the orphanage, in the winter of one of the middle years of the Great Depression, to a campus and farm of four hundred eighty acres of rolling hills thick with oak, pine, and dogwood trees. In Charlie Rice's truck we had entered the road to the boy's side. Another road entered at the girl's side and the two met, forming a large loop, called the Horseshoe. The seven girls' cottages, large, two-story buildings, were spread along the road to their side and the boys' cottages, also seven, were placed near their road. All the cottages were named after generous benefactors to the orphanage. The roads and cottages of each side were built on slight ridges with an area known as

"The Valley" between them. The Valley, a major orphanage playground, occupied about a third of the campus inside the horseshoe. The other two-thirds was filled with a gym, library, an office building, and Mr. Greer's house. At the campus entrance a privet hedge ran parallel to the road. Beyond the road the railroad tracks ran east and west. Side roads ran from the horseshoe to the farm, poultry yard, laundry, dairy, and to a large building that housed a printing shop and carpentry, plumbing and cobbler shops.

There were more than five hundred boys and girls in the orphanage, boys and girls like us with one or both parents dead. We came from homes perched on hillsides, scattered along country roads, hidden away in mountain coves, located along the streets of small towns, and from mill villages. We came from Hickory Grove, Buffalo, Center Grove, Granite Falls, Cross Roads, High Point, Rock Springs, Sound Side. We came from Zion Hill, Mt. Moriah, Bethany, Mount Pisgah, and Mount Zion. We were sent from Baptist churches; Red Marble, Notta, Ivanhoe, Inez, Sweet Water, Paint Gap, Mildred. Each child, whatever his or her origin, represented a home broken by tragedy, disease, poverty, or violence and so on down the list of human woe.

Each of us lived somewhere else before coming to the orphanage. Each came from a particular dread, a despair. Whatever the antecedents of our orphanage days, the residual sorrow must first be

overcome before we could become orphanage boys and girls. The sorrow began its thinning out when we transferred from the infirmary to cottage life. I was to go to the Simmons Cottage and John and Cal were sent to the Chowan.