

Chapter 5

Belonging

I began life at the Simmons Cottage with a sense of bewilderment among thirty-four other boys from six to eleven years old. I cried a lot each night after we said our prayers and the lights were put out. Our cottage was near the railroad tracks and regularly The New Orleans Express blew its whistle and rattled the windows as it roared on its way into the night, the clatter of its wheels hammering home my travail.

The matron was Miss Ballard, a tall, thin, worn-out warrior with brown hair pulled into a tight ball. She presided over meals and devotions but spent much time in bed resting, oblivious to the fighting and bullying that went on. She was assisted by Mrs. Mellons, the dietician, and they each had a room and bath near the entrance to our two dormitories.

Our cottage was a two-story brick building entered at the second story through a porch at ground level. The dormitories lay to the right and left of the entrance hall; large rooms with white, iron-framed beds, white sheets and patchwork quilts. There were thin pillows. The beds, pushed close together, lined the long walls of the dormitories, leaving a narrow aisle down the center. At the aisle's end there was one bed smaller than the others with siderails. I was assigned to it since I was a new boy and small besides. The floors were of well-scrubbed oak. We swept them

every day and scrubbed them every Saturday. Near each dormitory was a large bathroom with four toilets and a bathtub where we bathed two to a tub.

We went to bed at nine o'clock under orders from Joe Phelps and Edgar "Fat" Green, big boys. They enforced quiet. Someone always yelled, "Turn off the juice," and a boy near the door jumped up and darkened the room. Giggling, talking, bouncing on beds, fighting with pillows, and quiet crying continued until we fell asleep of exhaustion.

There was a lot of fighting and bullying among the boys, which established a definite pecking order and division into big boys and little boys. Everybody knew who could beat whom. I didn't like to fight, but there wasn't any choice sometimes. My first fight came within the first week. It was a cold Saturday in early February when all the boys were home from school. We were in the play area, a hard dirt ground graveled with sharp rocks south of the cottage. A group crowded around me pushing and longing to get a better look at the new boy.

"Where you from," one asked. The others quieted to hear the answer.

"Santa Claus brought me," I answered. I said it in all sincerity, for it was Aunt Gus who had told me. "Santa Claus brought you and was late because of a big snow." My birthday is December 27.

The response was immediate. They laughed, jeered and mocked, "Santa Clause brought him, ha, ha." They obviously knew where boys came from. I was on the verge of tears and was about to give in to them. But the playground roared like a rodeo and then the rabble closed in to taunt me. I knew it would be "cry baby" if I didn't fight that day and would continue thereafter until I did. I took down one boy with a tackle, pushing grit into my face like shrapnel as we crashed. Others jumped in until it was a regular melee with gouging of sharp elbows, shirts torn, skin burns, and bloody faces. It ended when Mrs. Mellon's big form streamed from the kitchen and she twisted an ear or two and said, "You boys should be ashamed of yourselves." I was picked on a little after that, until I had two fights with bigger boys and beat them both. There were Queensberry rules of a sort obeyed in fighting: you didn't hit an opponent when he was down.

We lived a communal life with few exceptions. But, our personal lockers were inviolate. The wooden lockers lined the walls of the playroom in the basement and were not only for hiding our marbles, string, stones, pocket knives, coins, secrets and treasures, but were also seats during bad weather when we spent much time there. One box, which I don't recall having seen, was lined with the tanned skin of moles. A boy of earlier times, part Cherokee and a great hunter, sat over mole runs and, upon hearing the working of feet digging beneath him, dug

down, swooped up the critters, slaughtered them and cured and tanned the hides until he had enough to line his locker.

We played in the playroom in the winter, skinning the cat on the overhead waterpipes or building little tractors out of wooden matches, rubber bands, and empty thread spools. We clipped coupons out of *Colliers* and *Boys' Life* and sent them off for free samples of Ovaltine and Lifebuoy Soap. We used reams of paper trying to say something nice about Ivory soap and Palmolive soap only to see the prizes awarded to someone in Portland, Oregon, or East Orange, N. J.

We went to bed at nine o'clock and arose at six o'clock when a boy came around ringing a small brass bell. We went to breakfast when the bell rang again at six-thirty. Breakfast was usually oatmeal, never sweet enough, occasionally corn flakes or government surplus yellow grits. The dinner bell rang at noon. For dinner we had a lot of fresh vegetables in the summer, grown on our own farms, and canned vegetables and cornsticks in the winter. Supper was at five-thirty. On Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights we had peanut butter, molasses and bread. The other nights there were vegetables. On Sunday night we had a "hand-supper," a pickle relish sandwich, a peanut butter sandwich, and a wedge of pound cake without frosting.

In the dining room we sat at six wooden tables seating six each. We asked God to bless each meal. Miss Ballard and Mrs. Mellons took turns at

breakfasts and dinners and at suppers sometimes called on one of the big boys. The blessing was always the same: "Oh Lord, bless this food to our bodies and us to Thy service." Before, during, and after the blessing children implemented strategies of speed and guile to ensure a successful meal. The first boy to the table claimed the privilege of first extra, the first cut of any thing left over after the original divisions. On Sundays the claim was to the choicest piece of chicken. "I speak for the drum stick," or "I speak for the pulley bone" was the way the girls said it. At the Chowan, John and Cal learned to indicate their choices during the blessing by licking two fingers and marking their pieces or by plunging their forks into the breast or pulley bone.

Certain foods were proportioned by decree, not by choice. Collard greens, spinach, and turnip greens were ladled unto each plate and expected to be eaten. I failed to eat mine at dinner one day during the first week and Miss Ballard, who always checked to see if you ate your greens, took me by the arm, and on the way to the bathroom said, "You must be sick." She gave me a tall glass of milk of magnesia to drink. I took a sip of the vile stuff, hunched my shoulders, leaned close over the sink and poured it out while pretending to drink. I ran the water to wash away the evidence. She was none the wiser. Thereafter, I never left greens on my plate nor did I eat them. At the last minute I scooped the soggy mess in hand and carried it out in my pocket.

Life at the orphanage settled into routines controlled by precisely timed bells, either the brass handbell in each cottage or the deep throated clapper in the church tower. A bell rang, we got up. A bell rang, we went to work or school. A bell rang, we came in for meals. A bell rang, we went to church, and so on, everything, interminably, a set time tuned to the vibrations of bells. Miss Ballard punished us if we didn't report when the bell rang by making us sit on the stairs inside while everyone else went out to play, or she made us stand in the corner on one foot.

John and Cal came to see me during visiting hour, from two to three o'clock on Sunday. Otherwise we saw little of each other until vacation time. In February 1934, Miss Ballard decorated the Simmons dining room with balloons, streamers and bright table cloths and gave a birthday party of ice cream and cake. We birthday boys could invite our brothers and sisters and John and Cal were there.

With the coming of spring my conscious homesickness diminished and I joined happily in the traditional boys' games: scrub football, kick-the-can, marbles, hide, and also in those games with a distinct orphanage imprint; muffin and bringing-in.

Spring games began on the day we were allowed to go barefoot. Mr. Greer decreed that on the day a child brought him a blossom from the dogwood tree we could take off our shoes and go barefoot until fall.

This usually occurred around April 15. With this singular event the energy surged and laughter and outright joy rang out as we ran through the tall grass in the valley.

Unencumbered by shoes, we Simmons boys established a point in the valley about forty yards away from the kitchen door and challenged each other to foot races to establish the fastest among us. The weather was cool and we were still wrapped in jackets and wearing knickers but we were loath to wait for winter to flee and were not about to put our shoes on again. For the race there was no limbering up. We stood crouched at the line and when "on your mark, get set, go" was called we were off, streaking through the cold dew to the point and back.

The foot race, like the fight, was a way of assigning informal positions in the pecking order. These positions were not binding, for we all fancied ourselves as stronger or faster than the other boy but he who was in that position one day might well trail into the cottage with a bloody nose on another. The foot races enabled me to edge up a notch or two in the pecking order for I was a faster runner than most of the smaller boys and faster than many of the larger ones.

On most days we finished work and play by cleaning up, splashing water on our faces, hands and feet. We bathed and got clean underwear on Tuesday and Saturday. Helen Bell and other big girls helped with the bathing of smaller boys, but when we neared eight years

old we preferred to do it ourselves. We scrubbed young skin with an abrasive bar of Lava soap until it was pink and shiny. Our ears were points examined to be certain that we bathed adequately.

We were allowed visits from family but Mama, Aunt Gus, and B.H. lived a long distance from Thomasville. They did come one Easter Sunday with Uncle Marion, in his large black Packard touring car with green shades. On our mother's side we were especially well endowed with uncles. Not so much by their numbers as by their qualities of behavior, which transformed them for us into figures of legend. Uncle Marion, or Mac as he was called, was a dark, quiet talker full of hidden strength. He possessed a way with women. As I first remember him he had gone off to California with my other uncles to seek their fortunes. He became a tree surgeon with a tree company and roamed the country. One year he would be in Maryland and the next in Oregon. Sometimes he came home for a visit driving a fine car and on other visits used his thumb. As a bachelor he had suffered almost continuous pursuit; but though slow in manner he was fleet of foot and had given the girls a long run. We always wondered if he were on the lam from the FBI. He sent reams of poetry to John to have it put to paper in the print shop.

On the day of the visit we rode in regal splendor, leaving the orphanage grounds and touring Thomasville, peering out through darkened windows. Looking for gas, we drove into a filling station which

was closed. Upon leaving, Uncle Marion's car bumper caught the gas pump and jarred it so the gasoline seeped from its base. He got out, looked it over and decided it was of no moment to him and drove off. We were never clear about the outcome but Aunt Gus kidded him years later about getting caught on the way home by the State Patrol.

In June we went on vacation for a week. Mama and Aunt Gus sent money for train tickets and a date was set for us to go to Black Mountain. The suspense before vacation was unbearable. Miss Ballard sent my clothes over to the Chowan to be packed in the suitcase with John and Cal's and on the fateful day Mr. Millsap, the mailman, drove us to the depot to board the Asheville train.

John was always in charge. We changed trains either at Salisbury or Barber Junction or both and I was always badgering John and Cal to buy me something to eat in the depot café. It was a long day's trip but once we had made the final switch and were safely aboard the Asheville train we had no worry of being hungry. One conductor, Mr. John Jones, was an old orphanage boy and he always sensed when orphanage children were on his train. He treated us royally, pushed seat backs to create a large seat so that he could sit with us and point out Andrew's geyser at Old Fort and other interesting things as we rode in and out of tunnels on the upward grade to Black Mountain. He bought us ham sandwiches with white bread and chocolate milk from vendors who

walked the aisles. In Black Mountain, Hub Morehead always met us at the station and took us home for a joyous reunion with Mama, Aunt Gus, and B.H.

Our week at home passed too quickly and after each return we felt again the homesickness and loneliness but gradually the periods became shorter and shorter as we became more involved in orphanage life.

The remainder of the summer was spent in playing: at the swimming pool, in the valley, on the playground. I began forming friendships with other boys, Ralph Hill, Clarence Green, Donald Harrelson, Paul Smith, Leonard Evans.

Most of our games were competitive and physical and pitted us against one another. Some boys were less strong and came under Miss Ballard's protection as her pets. Reece Gardner was a small, thin, red-haired boy who always had severely chapped lips. Miss Ballard watched over him in particular. Being a matron's pet invited derision, and they were continually picked on by the other boys.

The worst fate that could befall an orphanage boy was to be considered a sissy. We all cried from loneliness or homesickness during our first few months and this was tolerated. But prolonged weepiness earned a boy the title of cry baby. The cry baby was not the same as being a sissy, a form of unmanliness. I avoided being designated as either cry baby or sissy, but continued to have occasional crying spells until one day

Fat Green found me crying in the furnace room where he had come to clean out the clinkers and to fill the stoker with coal. He asked me what the matter was and then put his arms around my shoulder. "Don't be sad," he said. "Sometimes it's tough but it's not all bad here." I don't recall crying any more after that.

Mrs. Mellons made life happier for us. She was a widow with children of her own in Tennessee. She was affectionate, warm-hearted, and had the patience and sympathy to listen to our troubles. During winter Saturdays we were forced outdoors to play in cold weather clad in short pants, shirts and thin jackets. Our hands were always raw and chapped so deep they looked as though they had been cut. We shivered, shook, and pressed close into the corners of chimneys to keep warm. The earth there always smelled strongly of urine. We knocked on the kitchen door and gratefully entered the warm room with its good smells of sheets of gingerbread. We persuaded Mrs. Mellons that a tiny piece would not spoil our lunch and we would not let Miss Ballard know. After Mrs. Mellons retired she continued to communicate by mail with dozens of boys who loved her.

We attended church three times a week, Sunday morning and evening, and Wednesday evening prayer meeting. The Greek style auditorium had large columns, wide steps and big doors. It gave a sense of security to enter it as a place of worship. Each cottage had its

appointed seating section. We Simmons boys sat up in the balcony. Service began with the singing of a grand hymn or two. When the refrain called for us to "March to Zion," to a man we were prepared to step out. A darker boyish side showed up in church when we irreverently parodied the grand and serious words of "At the Cross" into a jingle: "At the Cross, at the Cross where I first saw the light, and the money in my pocket rolled away. It was there by gosh and now it's gone and I am sad all the day." for such irreverence and for falling asleep or talking, Miss Ballard thumped heads with bony fingers and sent guilty parties to bed on Sunday afternoons.

Sunday after Sunday Mr. Neilson, our pastor, preached about Jesus – how He lived and how we should try to live as He did. As we listened we faced a giant oil painting hanging above the pastor's head. In the picture Jesus sat at a watering trough among the sheep and shepherds with one child on his lap and with a hand on the head of another. The painting was a gift from the architect who had designed the auditorium; a gift for the children, painted by the giver. Week after week we looked at Jesus and the children listened to Mr. Neilson and slowly we began to absorb the immanence of Jesus. Stripped of specifics, the orphanage was Jesus. My sense of belonging became real. I was an orphanage boy. Jesus loved orphans. Jesus loved me.

The orphanage became the place of my roots. I absorbed the flavor of its sounds, smells, and people and when things were right in all its places, I was no longer sad. The orphanage became vital to me. There was no alienation and when away on vacation, I contemplated my return. By my first September, when school started I was well into becoming an orphanage boy. Those who had jeered and fought me earlier were now my friends.