

I

Friday, May 22
4:30 A.M.

LIKE all Amish children of ten, Jeremiah Miller had known his share of sunrises. Morning chores had long since taken care of that. Every day brought the same duties. His grandfather had made it clear. Children were for working. Life was supposed to be hard. Generally, for Jeremiah, it was.

But lately, Jeremiah had discovered something new and wonderful in his dawn chores. Something exhilarating. Also a bit frightening, because he suspected it was forbidden. It was so simple, he thought, who could object? If he arose before the others and slipped out quietly, he could be alone, drawn awake early by the allure of a solitary Ohio dawn.

It had begun last winter. None of the other children had understood. After all, who would choose to be alone? So he kept it to himself, now. Even Grossdaddy didn't know. It was Jeremiah Miller's little secret. At so young an age, he had already discovered that the dawn could give him a sense of identity separate from the others. And this was his first act of nonconformity. Among the *Gemie*, that was considered evidence of pridefulness. And pride was surely the worst of sins. He worried that it could eventually brand him a rebel. Like his father.

He'd dress quietly in the clothes his grandmother had made—clothes that were identical to those of other Amish children. Long underwear and denim trousers with a broadfall flap. A

light-blue, long-sleeved shirt with no collar. A heavy denim jacket. Suspenders. And a dark blue knit skull cap. If he escaped the house before the others awakened, Jeremiah Miller was free.

In the barns before sunrise, only the Coleman lantern kept him company, hissing softly as he drifted among the animals, in and out of the stalls. In winter, there was the enchanting, billowing steam his breath made in the crisp air. The delightful crunching of his boots in the snow. There was, especially, the peace and the solitude, and at only ten, Jeremiah Miller had come to reckon that dawn would always be his favorite part of the day.

Today, late in May, it was nearing the end of a season still often raw and bleak, the usual for a northern Ohio spring. Some days were almost entirely awash in gray. Yesterday, there had been only the barest hint of a sunrise, delicate shades of pink as he had worked alone at morning chores. Then an afternoon drizzle had developed into a steady, all-night rain as a storm front moved in off the great lake, a hundred miles to the north.

Jeremiah slipped out from under the quilts and sat, wrapped in his down comforter, on the edge of the bed. He listened there a while for sounds of his family stirring. Hearing nothing, he drew the ornate quilt around his waist, eased lightly across the plain wooden floor to the window, pulled back the long purple curtains, and peered out. Yesterday's rain had slackened to a cold drizzle. He saw no hint of sunlight at his window, but as he was about to release the curtains, the headlights of a rare car flashed on the foggy lane in front of his house. He briefly thought it strange, and then, hitching up the comforter, he let the curtains go slack.

He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on his shirt and denim trousers. He glided down the hall, the wooden floor cool beneath his stocking feet. He passed the other bedrooms care-

fully and crept down the stairs. He eased through the kitchen unerringly in the dark, lifted his jacket from its peg, pulled the heavy oak door open, and slipped through the storm door onto the back porch.

There would be no supervisions on the rounds of his morning chores. No instructions if he worked alone. No corrections. No reminders to conform. The hours before dawn were his alone. The one time of each day when he owned himself entirely. Jeremiah had discovered that solitude was personal. More personal than anything else he had ever known.

On the back porch, he stuffed his feet into his cold boots and laced them, hooked his suspenders to the buttons on his plain denim trousers, and closed the hooks on his short, denim waist jacket. Reaching down for the green Coleman lantern, he gave the pump several adept strokes and lit the silk mantle with a wooden match. Then he rolled his thin collar up and stepped off the porch into the rain.

School would close soon for summer, he thought. He set the lantern on the muddy ground outside the massive sliding doors to the red bank barn. School wasn't so bad. And summers could be long. So why did Grossdaddy speak so bitterly of school?

He set his weight against the sliding door and forced it heavily sideways on its rollers. Grandfather would like the teachers, if only he'd come to visit the school. It was just down the gravel lane, less than a mile. Teacher stayed late every day, and they could talk. If only Grandfather would. The other men thought well of teachers, so why didn't Grandfather? Jeremiah only knew that something had happened long ago. Something that would never be discussed. He suspected it had something to do with his father.

A nervous black kitten launched itself through the crack between the sliding doors at his feet, and he sidestepped it superstitiously.

“Kommen Sie,” he called gently after the cat, momentarily curious. He whistled for it softly, shrugged, picked up the lantern, and squeezed through the narrow opening between the doors.

The three-story bank barn was set into the side of a hill behind the big house. At the bottom of the hill, the sliding doors opened to the lowest level of the barn. The top of the hill gave access, on the other side of the barn, to the second level. There were nine stalls down the right side of the lower level, and eight down the left. The avenue down the middle was strewn with fresh straw. Five massive oak uprights stood in a line down the middle of the avenue, taking the weight of the roof. The cross-beams were made of walnut twelve-by-twelve's. The haylofts ran high above, on either side of the third level, planked out in rough-hewn maple and elm. Long runs of rope and chain looped through a large wooden block and tackle, which was hung from an iron wheel that ran high in the rafters on a rail the full length of the peak. Leather harnesses and collars hung in front of each of the stalls. At the far end, the rakes, mowers, and threshers stood silently in the wide avenue. Their iron wheels were easily a head taller than Jeremiah.

Inside, Jeremiah climbed onto a stepstool to hang the lantern against one of the upright beams, and hopped down in front of the first stall. He scaled the slats of the gate and made a clicking sound with the inside of his cheek against his teeth. He balanced on his toes near the top of the gate and reached up to stroke the nose of the Belgian draft horse, light chestnut brown with a creamy white mane. As it thumped ponderously in the straw, Jeremiah rubbed at its wet nose and bristling hairs, then jumped down with a laugh and took the tasseled whip from its hook beside the stall.

He snapped the black whip playfully overhead and grinned, mindful that his Grandfather's were the very finest of all the Belgians in Holmes County. That was good, not prideful, he

thought. Not prideful to admire a good horse. After all, God had made them Himself. And hadn't Grandfather promised that his time would soon come to work a whip behind them? To learn to plow. To run a harrow. To handle a team of Belgians! A boy should not go to school forever, Grossdaddy had said. Why should a boy be smarter than a father?

As he played with the whip, the unexpected aroma of tobacco drifted Jeremiah's way. Startled, he remembered the skittish cat and the weird headlights earlier on the lane. He stood tip-toe on the stepstool, took down the glowing lantern, held it high overhead, hesitated a fateful moment, and moved apprehensively toward the far end of the barn.

IN THE milky light of dawn, a small girl in a black bonnet stood on the elevated lawn in front of the Millers' white frame house. Her bonnet was tied closely against her cheeks, with thin cloth strands under her chin. Her narrow shoulders were draped properly with a black shawl that was knotted loosely in front and covered her hands. In the delicate morning light, her long pleated skirt showed the barest hint of rich peacock blue. She was motionless except for her large, tranquil brown eyes as they followed the headlights of a car approaching on the lane.

The hollow sound of slow tires crushing loose gravel ground to a halt as the car rolled up to a mailbox mounted on the white picket fence. The driver's window rolled down, revealing police insignias on the sleeve of a blue jacket. The driver reached out and flipped an envelope into the mailbox. As the girl watched silently, the car sped off, throwing gravel, its taillights disappearing into the lingering fog.