Chapter 1

We lived at the end of Lucifer Street, on the Mississippi River side of Cairo, Illinois. Black spruces lined our sandy road. My heart quickened as I watched my dad lope home over the fallen needles. Bouncing along on his shoulder was a red cardboard box labeled **Lionel Company, Rochester, New York.** In that box was my birthday present, the Blue Comet. The Blue Comet was the queen of all trains.

I waited for him under the porch light. The forty-watt yellow bulb made a Grand Central Station for flapping moths and zizzing june bugs above my

head. In the kitchen, our dinner was warm and fragrant on the stove.

The house at the end of Lucifer Street had been my mama's great joy. She fixed it up so pretty when I was just a baby, all yellow curtains and shiny white trim. We have a lone portrait, its edges curled, of me, Dad, and Mama. I was just a skinny, freckled little boy of three in that Brownie camera snapshot, with a cowlick pointing straight up out of the top of my head.

Mama was the bookkeeper in the Lucifer Fireworks plant until one day a bolt of walking lightning shot right through the shipping-room window, stopping the clock and sizzling into a box of Roman candles near her chair. Everyone would say afterward she had not known or felt a thing in that half-second explosion. All I remember seeing was a fire truck out the window of our kitchen and my aunt Carmen, who had appeared from nowhere, covering my eyes with her hands.

What was left of the Lucifer factory was declared unsafe and closed down soon after. You might think my dad would want to move away from Lucifer Street and the terrible reminders of the accident.

But in the end he could not bear to leave the yellow curtains and white trim that Mama had painted herself. He certainly did not wish to move into the Chateaux Apartment Village as Aunt Carmen, his in-town sister, suggested. Aunt Carmen was always telling Dad what he ought to do.

"Get your life back on the tracks and find a good woman, Oscar," Aunt Carmen whispered loudly to Dad every time she had the littlest chance. "The boy needs a mother, and you need a wife to keep your hair short and make you some casserole dinners."

"That goes double, Carmen," my dad always replied. Aunt Carmen lived alone in a little house full of bisque figurines. Squirrel silhouettes were cut into the house's shutters. It was explained to me that Aunt Carmen had never married because the Great War had taken the lives of so many young men that there were not enough to go around.

"A good man is a darn sight harder to find than a good woman," Aunt Carmen always answered my dad with a sniff.

Oftentimes a picture floated through my mind of the wife that Aunt Carmen had in mind for us. She looked like the lady on the Coca-Cola calendar,

black hair parted on the side, dress with the stripes going across diamond-wise, big red lips showing off her white teeth.

"I will never be so lucky again as to find anyone like your mother," Dad said. "A new wife would make trouble and get in the way." What he meant was she would have gotten in the way of the trains in our basement.

Instead Dad and I lived a peaceful life, with me, Oscar Jr., in charge of cooking just as soon as I could reach the stove. In second grade, I was big enough, standing on a sturdy chair, to flip our Sunday pancakes and fry our breakfast sausage. Our weekly menu was casserole-free.

This is what it looked like:

Monday: Lamb chops and fried potatoes

Tuesday: Fried chicken, canned green beans, fried potatoes

Wednesday: Hamburger, fried potatoes, and tomatoes

Thursday: Hot dogs and beans

Friday: Beefsteak and carrots

Saturday: Pork chops and cabbage

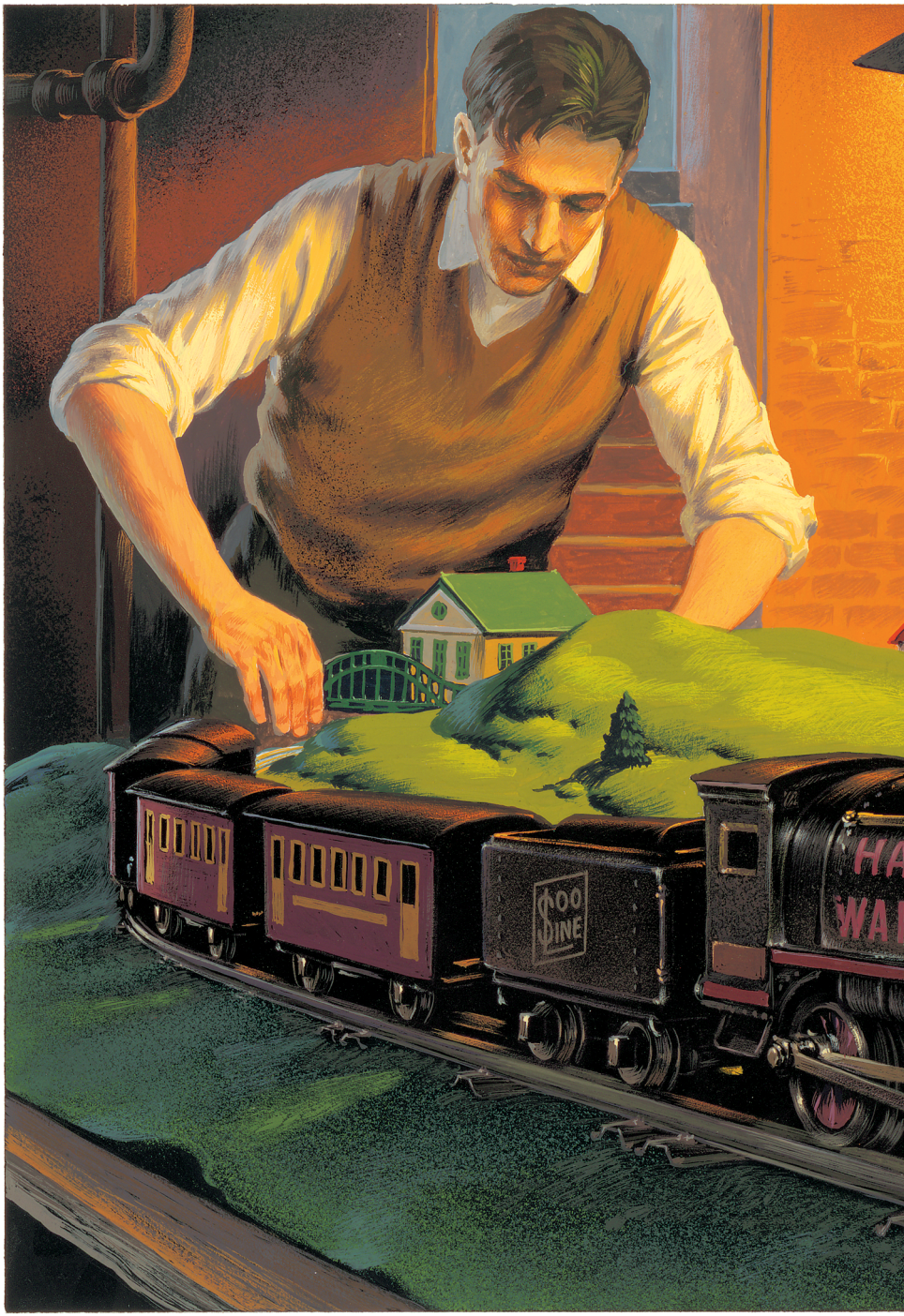
Sunday: Ham and gravy with pineapple rings

The menu never changed from week to week because it satisfied. There was just enough variety to keep us from getting bored but nothing like liver or spinach to scare us away.

I bought all our groceries at Rubin's Market after school, charging them to our account. Then I walked the groceries home, set them on the counter, and began to prepare our evening meal.

We did just fine on our own, Dad and me. Dad had a steady job with the John Deere Company, selling tractors to the farmers. He even had a telephone installed right in the front hall, much to the dismay of Aunt Carmen. For my part, I kept my shoes shined, and my homework was always finished. Dad and I agreed: we had no need whatever of a new wife. So that wife never did happen. It was just as well. A wife would have been putting on her lipstick all the time and giving me cod-liver oil.

In the beginning, Dad had set up our first layout to pull himself out of the widower doldrums. It was a simple one-looper. He made the station out of basswood, painted pumpkin yellow just like the real railway station in downtown Cairo. He cut eight little signs and painted them white with CAIRO in


COOLINE

CAIRO
IPPY
RRIOR

blue, just as it was on the real signs. I hung them off the eaves of the station's shingled roof with chrome-beaded key chains. We laid eastward tracks and westward tracks. The track beds were made of carefully dribbled bird gravel on a layer of carpenter's glue.

Then Dad ordered signals and an electrically operated gate out of the Lionel catalog to go with our first train, a standard work train. Dad took a sable brush that had maybe six hairs to it. He painted SOO LINE HAPPY WARRIOR on the side of the engine in red paint, exactly like on the real Soo Line. Our Happy Warrior had a lumber car with logs as long as cigarillos, two cattle cars, a coaler, a caboose, and a refrigerator car that had small cubes of glass ice inside, each no bigger than one of my Parcheesi dice.

The Warrior was followed by a commuter train, which we called the South Shore Special. We ran it from Chicago to the dunes of Indiana and back. The passenger cars were rigged with real electric lights inside. We put together three stop stations on that commuter express. They came from the Ives Company, which made the most detailed stations.

Then Dad bought us the biggest steam engine in the catalog. It was a 260 series with marker lights on

each side, one red, one green. There was a red light underneath the boiler that made the coals glow. The trim was copper and brass, the wheels had spoked drivers with nickel rims. It carried freight cars and three passenger Pullmans. We named it the Choctaw Rocket of the Rock Island Line. Our first tabletop layout was now too small. We began constructing the mountains of the west, lumping up their foothills out of stiff window screening. We layered plaster of paris on top of that, and then we painted it granite gray. This was sprinkled with sand, glue, and a green mystery powder provided by the Cairo druggist, Hop Shumway.

"You're not going to swallow this stuff, are you, Oscar?" Hop Shumway asked my dad, pushing a box of the green powder across the drugstore counter.

"On the contrary, Hop," Dad answered. "We're going to make the Transcontinental Railroad," and we did.

The benchwork for the mountains, canyons, and bridges that ran between was constructed of wooden crossbeams, like the criss-cross supports of a roller coaster. A tunnel ran through the mountains. The river that coursed under the trestle bridge was

painted blue over silvery tinfoil. The ripples were transparent lines of model airplane glue. The tracks shot down the length and a whole side of our basement. Soon we had two tables and three tunnels.

"You are stark raving crazy, Oscar," Aunt Carmen said when she came to Thanksgiving dinner and asked what was in the basement that smelled of shellac. My cousin, Willa Sue, donkey's years younger than me, gazed at the layout in bewilderment.

"Don't touch anything. You might get electrocuted, Willa Sue," said Aunt Carmen.

"I can show you how the trains run," I said to Willa Sue encouragingly, even though I didn't like her much. Willa Sue had come to Aunt Carmen from a sister who was almost never mentioned. Once I overheard that Willa Sue's real mother might pull herself together one day and reappear, but this had never happened, and Willa Sue called Aunt Carmen *Mama* from day one. She was a cherub-mouthed girl and always had ahold of Aunt Carmen's skirt with one hand. The thumb of her other hand hovered, nearing her mouth, just as Aunt Carmen, quick as a mousing cat, pounced on the thumb and pushed it back down.

"Keep your hands at home, Willa Sue, dear," said Aunt Carmen.

"Girls don't like trains," whined Willa Sue. The thumb darted into the red bow mouth and stayed there a full thirty seconds while Aunt Carmen gave my dad a piece of her mind about his paycheck going down the drain on electric trains and throwing good money after bad on more and more electric trains.

"That's the Transcontinental Railroad you're talking about, Carmen," said my dad with a chuckle in his voice and a hand steady and warm on the back of my shirt collar. Then Dad lit a Muriel panatela so that Carmen and Willa Sue would go upstairs again.

I, myself, could not decide if the summer or the winter evenings were my favorites. I was grateful to have both.

From April through September, we got the Cubs and Cardinals games on the radio. We caught the play by play down in the basement, while the trains ran their routes in the cool shadows.

If you looked up through the two high-up-the-wall windows, you could watch the long summer evenings fade slowly. When we needed air, we

opened the windows and the hot wind of the central plains rushed in.

"You can smell the alfalfa all the way from Kansas on that wind," Dad claimed, while he and I worked on switches, track repair, and new equipment installation.

In 1928, Dad sold a passel of tractors. And seldom did a week go by without a red box, or even two, arriving from the Lionel Company in Rochester, New York. Inside the train-set boxes was always a paper engineer's cap with blue and white stripes and a set of printed Lionel tickets for the route of the train inside. I never wore the hats because I thought they were for babies, but the tickets were printed in color and looked like the real thing. I collected them and kept at least a dozen wadded in an elastic band in my wallet.

On winter evenings, the sun set before I came home from school and before Dad came home from John Deere. We had our supper and talked about the work lying ahead that evening. Then we turned out all the lights in the house and went downstairs. On moonless nights, you might not have known from standing on Lucifer Street that our house was there

at all. The wind soughed through the lonely spruces, much as I reckoned an Alaska wind might blow. Deep in our basement Dad and I stood together, wrapped on all sides by trains racing this way and that way, their smoke pellets pouring smoke, headlights shining down their tracks.

"Listen to that whistle," Dad told me many a time. "I hear that same whistle out in the farmland. The farmers hear it when they're taking in their hay. It goes right straight across the prairie all the way to Lincoln and beyond. Good people and bad hear it from inside the churches and prisons alike just as if it were the voice of the wolf."

"What is the voice of the wolf?" I asked.

Dad did not say.

Our Lionel trains corresponded exactly to the real trains in the big world. They were all modeled exactly on the genuine locomotive, freight cars, and Pullmans. Each was set up to stop at their stations, then to pull out and make their way up the Rocky Mountain ridges, over the Colorado River, and back through the tunnels to the South Side of Chicago. In the windless basement night, our transcontinental Golden State Limited crossed the plains from

Los Angeles to Chicago and back. The station lights winked as each train came through and the striped gate slammed down at the crossings.

By 1929 we owned ten complete trains. My favorite of all was the Blue Comet. Dad also judged it to be the finest of all the great Lionel trains. Her engine was sapphire blue, with a blue tender behind. Her passenger cars bore brass plates with the names of famous astronomers Westphal, Faye, and Barnard. The roofs came off if you wanted. Inside there were hinged doors, interior illumination, swiveling seats, and lavatories with cathedral ceilings.

Dad and I added an observation car to the back of the train. Dad took tweezers and turned two little blue seats right under the arc of the Plexiglas dome so that they were in perfect viewing position. "Someday, Oscar," my dad said, "we'll go to New York City and board the big Blue Comet, and these are the seats we'll reserve. The whole Atlantic shore will be spread before us, start to finish. We'll get out at Atlantic City. Then we can have our portraits painted on the boardwalk, and we can eat Turkish Taffy by the sea. Maybe for your next birthday!"

My next birthday came and went, and Dad and

I never did leave Cairo, but our imaginations took us up and down the continent and that was plenty enough for me. Sometimes I would place my head sideways, ear down, on the grass of the layout. "Are you sleepy, Oscar?" my dad always asked.

"No, just looking," I always answered. "Just looking."

What I was really doing was closing my bottom eye and staring with my top eye into the carriages of the passenger cars. The cars came complete with little cutout people, sitting in silhouette in each window. Here were two tiny tin women in hats, hands uplifted, chitchatting, both bent face to face. There a tin man read the newspaper. A tin boy ignored the porter, who stood above him with a tray, and gazed, two tiny pinholes for eyes, back out toward me. In this way, everything on the layout came to life, and I was no bigger than the people and the trains and buildings that stood in miniature before me. I truly believed that if I wanted to, I could have just walked right into the permagrass and onto a train. I could have dashed right up the steps of the Blue Comet and sped off into the wheaty night prairies with the Rocky Mountains looming just beyond.

Knowing I might be able to do this made me the happiest boy in the city of Cairo, even the state of Illinois. Me, Oscar Ogilvie Jr., in the dark safety of circling trains. Me, with my dad standing large beside me, working the central switches and the throttle, big as a car battery, that caused the trains to roar past, the signal lights to blink red and green, and made all things possible in the world.

Chapter 2

The voice of the wolf howled a thousand miles to the east in the fall of 1929. Something had happened in the city of New York. People called it the Crash. I did not know what had fallen or crashed, since I was only nine years old at the time.

Dad read the *Cairo Herald* aloud to me. "Millionaires are jumping out of skyscraper windows in despair," he reported. "Some of Wall Street's biggest tycoons have sold off their diamond shirt studs. Now they're peddling apples on the street corners."

"Why?" I asked.

"They lost all their money," said Dad.

The radio would not shut up about the crash.

When it was explained to me, the words fell about my ears like raindrops but did not bother to go in.

"Gambling like card sharks on the stock market!" Aunt Carmen was heard to say. "It's the work of the devil. Credit. Margin calls. Credit's what ruins lives! They're like fortune-tellers at the horse races, every last Wall Street tycoon!"

I did not ask what a card shark was, or margin calls for that matter. I had enough trouble on my hands. My problem was math. For me 1929 was the year of blinding math problems. When the teacher wrote the problems on the blackboard, my mind drifted everywhere, to the bugs on the window and the ticking of the wall clock. Our teacher never smacked us, but she did smack our desks plenty with her ruler. Each wrong answer got a *wham*! on the offending student's desk. I got a lot of whacks and whams that year and an F in arithmetic.

Dad tried to teach me a quick way to solve the problems. He had a secret shortcut for fractions, but I could not bring Dad's methods to class because the teacher did not approve of shortcuts.

In the year that followed the crash, my dad's tractor orders began to fall short of what they had

been. There was talk about layoffs at John Deere. Dad was worried about being laid off his job if he didn't sell ten tractors a month.

Nineteen-thirty passed and things got worse. In the summer of 1931, Dad explained that all the money in the country had been sucked down the drain like soapsuds. President Hoover was no better than the Roman emperor Nero, violining away while Rome burned to a crisp. Money was no longer to be found in the pockets of the working people and farmers. Their savings were worthless.

Farm prices fell, and farmers stopped ordering tractors.

By August our menu changed. We dropped from beef to canned yams. From lamb chops we sank to Ham Stix. There were no more Muriel panetelas and no boxes from Rochester, New York. The catalog from Lionel still came in the mail, but now it tortured us with its pictures of the newest, sleekest trains.

One late-summer night, Dad found me deep in the pages of the catalog. I was looking at the "Brand-New Models for Christmas Giving!" page. There was a picture of a boy and his dad, pipe in mouth, glowing over their new trains on Christmas

morning. Put a cigar where the pipe was, and it looked just like Dad and me.

Dad read the catalog advertisement over my shoulder. "She's a beauty, isn't she!" he whispered with a sigh. "The President." It was a new silver model, streamlined like a rocket ship with every car named after a different president. It cost three times more than any other train.

"Boy, it would be perfect on our layout, Dad! And look. They put a girl in the window of the observation car."

That was unusual. Lionel almost always featured boys, in, out, and on top of the model trains with their pipe-smoking dads. Never a girl.

"It's an expensive train. Maybe next year," said Dad.

"It's okay, Dad," I tried to assure him. "We've got plenty of trains!"

But even in our basement world, apart from the world above, Dad cracked his knuckles and frowned. He could not concentrate on the trains.

"Oscar," he said one evening, "they are going to take the house."

"House?" I asked. "What house?"

"Our house," said Dad, looking at the wall behind my head.

"But it's our house," I argued. "It's a free country. No one can take our house away."

"The house is mortgaged, Oscar," he answered. His eyes were open wide like the eyes of a sick man.

"What does that mean?"

"It means it's owned by the First National Bank of Cairo. The president of the bank, Simon Pettishanks, came here in his big Bentley when you were at school. The bank will repossess the house by the end of the week."

"But . . ." My mind raced in ridiculous circles.

"Aunt Carmen hasn't got an extra dime for a cup of coffee," he said. "There's nothing for it, Oscar. We're done."

"But where will we live?"

"They say there's work in California."

"Will we take our layout there? All our trains?"

"Oscar," he began, but he couldn't finish.

"Yes, Dad?"

His face answered me before he opened his mouth to speak. "The trains will be sold along with the house."

"What do you mean, sold?"

Dad winced as if I'd slapped him. "Oscar," he said, "if I don't have the extra cash from selling our trains, I'll become a bum. It means I sneak onto a freight train at night when it's on a siding and try not to get arrested by the railroad police. If I don't get arrested, I sleep in the cattle car with the hobos and tramps and get my wallet and shoes stolen. Sell the trains and I can buy a respectable ticket on the Rock Island Line and shave my face with Barbasol."

I didn't like his "I." I wanted to hear "we."

Dad continued, his voice gravelly: "I guess the bank president's son likes trains, Oscar. Pettishanks paid half price for 'em. It'll buy me a ticket to California, Oscar, and a month's money to live on while I try to find a job."

I did not wait to hear that I would be parked with Aunt Carmen and Willa Sue. My dad held out his arm to haul me in against his side, but I yelled like a boy on fire. I ran upstairs and out into the night, slamming the screen door. Pell-mell I hurtled into the dark, as if the cool spruces of Lucifer Street could stop the burning. I had no doubt the wolf was watching me, red-eyed, from a broken window of the Lucifer Fireworks ruins.

Like a storm looming behind the farthest trees, Dad's leaving waited in the wind before breaking over me. He wanted to work for John Deere, San Fernando Valley, but nobody knew what kind of work was to be had in California. Farming was different out there. Instead of alfalfa and wheat, they grew walnuts and oranges. "Out there" still overflowed with everything Californian, like Chinese food, palm trees, and Hollywood movie stars.

"Deere's got two branch offices out there," Dad said cheerfully. "I've just put in for a transfer." You had to look on the sunny side, he assured me. But his voice had no sunniness in it.

It was always my impression that kids live in a fenced pasture, heavily guarded by grown-ups. We were not allowed out of the fence. We were told what was going to happen but seldom why. If we were told why, it almost never made sense. Not the kind of sense that makes sense when you are eleven.

September 1, 1931, Mr. Pettishanks and his deputy took the keys to our house and ownership of the trains.

I listened through a basement window to Mr. Pettishanks speaking to an assistant.

"Pack the trains and the equipment in cotton wool, Frank," said Mr. Pettishanks to his deputy. "Get rid of this homemade layout. Get a couple of men to take it out and burn it. We need a clean basement to resell the house."

I wanted to pummel Mr. Pettishanks with my fists. I wanted to poke him in the nose and pour sugar in the gas tank of his Bentley saloon. But I did none of these things. My dad found me on my sheetless bed an hour later.

"Time to go, Oscar," he said. "Wash your face. You don't want Willa Sue asking you embarrassing questions about why your eyes are red."

Dad and I boarded the bus to Aunt Carmen's house with our two suitcases of clothes and a case of Ham Stix.

"I'm going to hide the Ham Stix behind that water tank in Carmen's basement," said my dad. "It'll be there for you, Oscar, when you can't swallow another bite of sardine casserole."

Dad wore his tie because he wanted to look sharp. The first leg of his trip was the 5:10 to Topeka.

"Don't drag it out, Oscar," said Aunt Carmen to my dad as he bent to say good-bye to me.

Dad squatted down. "I'll write," he whispered in my ear. "I'll write lots of letters, and when I get a good job out there"—his eyes were all blurry—"you'll come to me on the Golden State Limited. I'll send you tickets, and I'll meet you at the station in Los Angeles. I promise, Oscar."

"I have something for you, Dad," I whispered back.

"What?"

I had been holding it in my hand the whole time. Mr. Pettishanks had left it on the umbrella stand. Before he remembered where he left it, I had sneaked up and snatched it away, wrapping it in careful layers of toilet paper.

Dad unwrapped it. "Holy smokes, Oscar. It's a Macanudo. A rich man's panatela!" He held it to his heart. "I'll keep it safe, and when I see you again, I'll light it up!"

I waved him down the street, leaning as far out of the porch as I could, him walking backward, throwing kisses, and yelling, "The Golden State to Los Angeles, Oscar! Not long!" I held my fingers to my nose to smell the last of the Macanudo. I would never wash it away.

"Get busy with the kitchen chores, now, Oscar!"

said Aunt Carmen when she found me still staring out from the front porch railing into the empty street.

"I never did see a grown-up man cry before," remarked Willa Sue.

"Well, now you have," I snapped at her. But evidently the sting in my voice clearly said, *"Shut up, birdbrain!"*

"In this household, Oscar, we keep our fingers busy and our tongues polite," said Aunt Carmen. "Please wash your hands and get the smell of that disgusting cigar off them!"

She had gotten out a pound of blisteringly white margarine and had it waiting for me unwrapped in a bowl the moment Dad turned the corner of Fremont Street. The margarine, a snowy brick of soft fat, came wrapped in a waxy paper bag cheerfully labeled *Butterine.* In the middle of the fat was a tiny red button. I had to work that little scarlet dye pellet into the rest of the white lard, gradually diluting the intense red color until it spread out and turned the whole lump a revolting yellow.

"Dad buys butter," I said.

"That's exactly why he has gone and lost your house to the bank, young man," answered Aunt

Carmen. "Butter, trains, and cigars. It put him in the poorhouse! You'll find us much thriftier here!"

Nothing was the same after that.

When I came home from school, the supper casserole was all cooked. It sat on the stove in its green ovenproof baking dish. I was not allowed near the stove. "Boys cooking! That'll be the day!" said Aunt Carmen.

I went to bed when my homework was done, my feet scrubbed, and my prayers said in front of Aunt Carmen. As her footsteps receded down the hall, I got the stash of Lionel tickets out of my wallet that I had kept back from the sale of the train sets to Mr. Pettishanks.

I switched the Lionel Line Golden State ticket to the top. Of course it wouldn't so much as get me onto a streetcar, but I loved seeing the words printed in gold letters:

With the toy ticket in my hand, I could sleep.

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Aunt Carmen made her living teaching piano and declamation at the wealthier people's houses after school hours. She had a regular route with once-a-week visits to each family.

I begged Aunt Carmen to leave me home. "I need to do my homework," I explained. She examined my latest report card. "You flunked arithmetic, Oscar," she said.

"I have trouble with long division and fractions."

"Well, that grade's simply going to have to improve," she said.

"If you let me stay home, I promise I will do my homework. *All* my homework. I will do better. Please, Aunt Carmen?" I asked.

Aunt Carmen didn't like being pleaded with. On the other hand, she didn't like me flunking out of arithmetic.

Willa Sue jumped up and down for attention. "We get key lime pie on Wednesdays at the Merriweathers' house," she said in a singsong voice, "and we almost always get a nice piece of chocolate cake from the Baxters' cook on Fridays." She twirled a coil of her hair in her fingers. "If Oscar comes along to

lessons, Mama, maybe they won't give out so much pie and cake. Maybe we'll just get smaller slices, or maybe they'll even switch to Saltines crackers."

Aunt Carmen did not appear to share Willa Sue's worries about Saltines crackers. She frowned at my report card one more time and declared, "You are a boy of eleven, Oscar," in just the voice she'd have used if she were reading out the list of sick parishioners in church. "You will be responsible for at least a C-plus on your next report. You will watch the house. If I catch you reading a novel from the library or making any other kind of trouble, it's not going to be a pretty picture for you."

"Thank you, Aunt Carmen," I answered.

"The world is full of tramps and hobos," said Aunt Carmen. "They are desperate men who get off and on the trains. They wander around town in filthy clothing. They sleep in the alleyways and look for handouts wherever they can find them."

"Yes, ma'm," I said steadily.

"No one is allowed in the house. Do not talk to strangers. You may not use matches, waste electricity, or nibble on what is not yours to eat. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am, and I can have the supper casserole

nice and hot when you get home if you let me light the oven!"

Aunt Carmen looked at me curiously out of her true blue eyes. I guessed that few people offered to do anything for Aunt Carmen because she herself finished doing everything before anyone else could think of it.

All she said to my offer was, "We'll see." Aunt Carmen put on her hat and her white cotton gloves, and down the street she marched to the bus stop, Willa Sue in one hand and her bag of sheet music and *Famous Speeches of Famous Men* in the other.

Over her shoulder, Willa Sue burbled, "I'm bob-bob-bobbing like a red-red robin because it's *Monday*! Monday is Betsy and Cyril Pettishanks day! They have cocoa with whipped cream! Sometimes marshmallows!"

"Pettishanks," I growled under my breath. The Pettishankses were among Aunt Carmen's piano and declamation clients. The Pettishanks boy was the one with my trains. Over the years, I had learned a few bad words on the playground at school. Now I strung them all together and said them out loud as soon as the bus had come and whisked Aunt Carmen

and Willa Sue to River Heights, where the really big houses were.

I opened my book, *Arithmetic for the Modern Child,* and stared at the assignment. Fractions made me sleepy. I needed something to eat to keep me awake.

I padded carefully around Aunt Carmen's kitchen and looked in the larder. She didn't buy vanilla wafers or even cans of Vienna sausage the way I used to do at Rubin's Market. She had a larder full of black-eyed peas and canned codfish cakes. The only answer was pancakes. Aunt Carmen might not notice that one egg, a cup of milk, a dab of margarine, and some flour was missing.

I ate my pancakes with molasses because Aunt Carmen did not spend money on syrup. For cooking, Aunt Carmen used Spry, pure fat in a can, but I could not even look at the Spry without gagging and used a sparing amount of Butterine instead.

My fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Olderby, just loved problems. Before tackling thirteen seventy-fourths divided by two-thirds, then multiplied by seven-eighths, I washed up the pan and my plate so sparkling clean that no one would ever know what I had been up to. The smell of fresh pancakes would

be lost in the smell of warming turnip and condensed milk casserole.

After the first week of pancakes and fractions, I struggled to a D instead of an F on one of Mrs. Olderby's surprise quizzes. Watching Willa Sue and Aunt Carmen disappear on the number 17 bus and knowing my pancakes were ahead of me was as delicious as the hot pancakes themselves. I could not wait for this small adventure every afternoon. But then Mrs. Olderby suddenly jacked things up to decimals. Decimals in long division was a leap into the blackness of space. *Arithmetic for the Modern Child* contained the riddles of the Sphinx as far as I was concerned.

I looked at my homework:

Butcher Smith is selling pork at one dollar and fifty-one cents a pound and liver at two dollars and twenty-nine cents a pound. Butcher Jones is selling pork at two dollars and nine cents a pound and liver at ninety-nine cents a pound. Mrs. Brown wants two and a half pounds of pork and six pounds of liver. Which butcher should she buy from?

I was as lost as a child in the forest. Each problem was like trying to find the Northwest Passage, a

route that did not exist. Dreaming out the window, I pictured butcher Smith and butcher Jones in their bloody aprons weighing meat. Who would want to eat that disgusting liver, anyway? Maybe Mrs. Brown liked one of the butchers better. Maybe butcher Smith winked at her across the hamburger meat. Who cared where she shopped, anyway? Not me!

I doubled my pancake recipe and worked on my homework from the glider on the front porch, using the daylight so as not to waste electric lights.

It was in the porch glider, on a brilliant October afternoon, that I sprawled with ten homework problems spread out on the seat around me.

If a rotor turns at the speed of 569,001.4562 an hour, how many turns will it make if its speed is reduced by .06%?

The nine problems that followed were much worse. My mind wandered to my trains. Where were they now? I closed my eyes and thought of my Blue Comet. Would I ever see it again? I knew I had as much chance of laying hands on my trains as flying to Mars.

"I can help you with that problem!" said a voice.