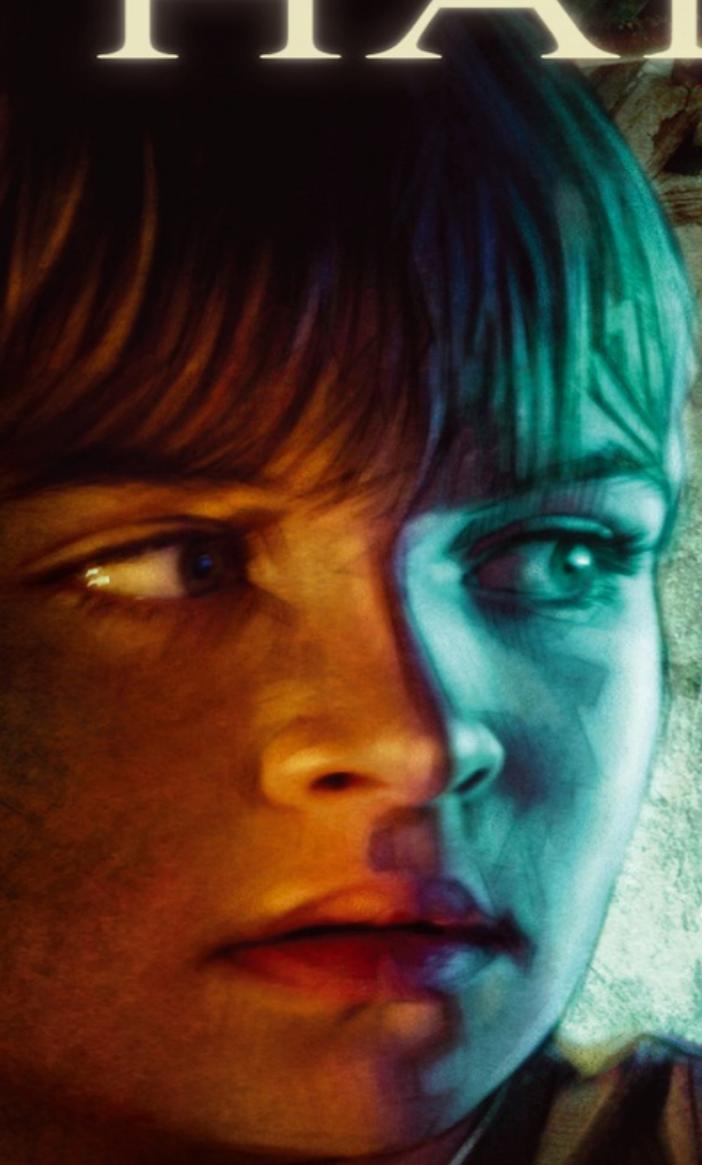


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MARGARET PETERSON

HADDIX



AMONG THE HIDDEN

The first book in the Shadow Children sequence · Five million books sold

He saw the first tree shudder and fall, far off in the distance. Then he heard his mother call out through the kitchen window: “Luke! Inside. Now.”

He had never disobeyed the order to hide. Even as a toddler, barely able to walk in the backyard tall grass, he had somehow understood the fear in his mother’s voice. But on this day, the day they began taking the woods away, he hesitated. He took one extra breath of the fresh air, scented with clover and honeysuckle and—coming from far away—pine smoke. He laid his hoe down gently, and savored one last moment of feeling warm soil beneath his bare feet. He reminded himself, “I will never be allowed outside again. Maybe never again as long as I live.”

He turned and walked into the house, as silently as a shadow.

“Why?” he asked at the supper table that night. It wasn’t a common question in the Garner household. There were plenty of “how’s”—*How much rain’d the backfield get? How’s the planting going?* Even “what’s”—*What’d Matthew do with the five-sixteenth wrench? What’s Dad going to do about that busted tire?* But “why” wasn’t considered much worth asking. Luke asked again. “Why’d you have to sell the woods?”

Luke’s dad harrumphed, and paused in the midst of shoveling forkfuls of boiled potatoes into his mouth.

“Told you before. We didn’t have a choice. Government wanted it. You can’t tell the Government no.”

Mother came over and gave Luke’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze before turning back to the stove. They had defied the Government once, with Luke. That had taken all the defiance they had in them. Maybe more.

“We wouldn’t have sold the woods if we hadn’t had to,” she said, ladling out thick tomatoey soup. “The Government didn’t ask *us* if we wanted houses there.”

She pursed her lips as she slid the bowls of soup onto the table.

“But the Government’s not going to live in the houses,” Luke protested. At twelve, he knew better, but sometimes still pictured the Government as a very big, mean, fat person, two or three times as tall as an ordinary man, who went around yelling at people, “Not allowed!” and “Stop that!” It was because of the way his parents and older brothers talked: “Government won’t let us plant corn there again.” “Government’s keeping the prices down.” “Government’s not going to like this crop.”

“Probably some of the people who live in those houses will be Government workers,” Mother said. “It’ll all be city people.”

If he’d been allowed, Luke would have gone over to the kitchen window and peered out at the woods, trying for the umpteenth time to picture rows and rows of houses where the firs and maples and oaks now stood. Or had stood—Luke knew from a sneaked peek right before supper that half the trees were now toppled. Some already lay on the ground. Some hung at weird angles from their former lofty positions in the sky. Their absence made everything look different, like a fresh haircut exposing a band of untanned skin on a forehead. Even from deep inside the kitchen, Luke could tell the trees were

missing because everything was brighter, more open. Scarier.

~~“And then, when those people move in, I have to stay away from the windows?” Luke asked, though he knew the answer.~~

The question made Dad explode. He slammed his hand down on the table.

“Then? You gotta stay away *now*! Everybody and his brother’s going to be tramping around back there, to see what’s going on. They see you—” He waved his fork violently. Luke wasn’t sure what the gesture meant, but he knew it wasn’t good.

No one had ever told him exactly what would happen if anyone saw him. Death? Death was what happened to the runt pigs who got stepped on by their stronger brothers and sisters. Death was a fly that stopped buzzing when the swatter hit it. He had a hard time thinking about himself in connection with the smashed fly or the dead pig, gone stiff in the sun. It made his stomach feel funny even trying.

“I don’t think it’s fair we’ve got to do Luke’s chores now,” Luke’s other brother, Mark, grumbled. “Can’t he go outside some? Maybe at night?”

Luke waited hopefully for the answer. But Dad just said, “No,” without looking up.

“It’s not fair,” Mark said again. Mark was the second son—the lucky second, Luke thought when he was feeling sorry for himself. Mark was two years older than Luke and barely a year younger than Matthew, the oldest. Matthew and Mark were easily recognizable as brothers, with their dark hair and chiseled faces. Luke was fairer, smaller-boned, softer-looking. He often wondered if he’d ever look tougher, like them. Somehow he didn’t think so.

“Luke don’t do nothing nohow,” Matthew jeered. “We won’t miss his work at all.”

“It’s not my fault!” Luke protested. “I’d help more if—”

Mother laid her hands on his shoulders again. “Hush, all of you,” she said. “Luke will do what he can. He always has.”

The sound of tires on their gravel driveway came through the open window.

“Now, who—” Dad started. Luke knew the rest of the sentence. Who could that be? Why were they bothering him now, his first chance all day to sit down? It was a question Luke always heard the end of from the other side of a door. Today, skittish because of the woods coming down, he scrambled up faster than usual, dashing for the door to the back stairs. He knew without watching that Mother would take his plate from the table and hide it in a cupboard, would slide his chair back into the corner so he looked like an unneeded spare. In three seconds she would hide all evidence that Luke existed, just in time to step to the door and offer a weary smile to the fertilizer salesman or the Government inspector or whomever else had come to interrupt their supper.

There was a law against Luke.

Not him personally—everyone like him, kids who were born after their parents had already had two babies.

Actually, Luke didn't know if there was anyone else like him. He wasn't supposed to exist. Maybe he was the only one. They did things to women after they had their second baby, so they wouldn't have any more. And if there was a mistake, and a woman got pregnant anyway, she was supposed to get rid of it.

That was how Mother had explained it, years ago, the first and only time Luke had asked why he had to hide.

He had been six years old.

Before that, he had thought only very little kids had to stay out of sight. He had thought, as soon as he was as old as Matthew and Mark, he would get to go around like they did, riding to the backfield and even into town with Dad, hanging their heads and arms out the pickup window. He had thought, as soon as he got as old as Matthew and Mark, he could play in the front yard and kick the ball out in the road if he wanted. He had thought, as soon as he got as old as Matthew and Mark, he could go to school. They complained about it, whining, "Jeez, we gotta do homework!" and, "Who cares about spelling?" But they also talked about games at recess, and friends who shared candy at lunchtime or loaned them pocketknives to carve with.

Somehow, Luke never got as old as Matthew and Mark.

The day of his sixth birthday, Mother baked a cake, a special one with raspberry jam dripping down the sides. At supper that night she put six candles on the top and placed it in front of Luke and said, "Make a wish."

Staring into the ring of candles—proud that the number of his years finally made a ring, all around the cake—Luke suddenly remembered another cake, another ring of six candles. Mark's. He remembered Mark's sixth birthday. He remembered it because, even with the cake in front of him, Mark had been whining, "But I wanna have a party. Robert Joe had a party on his birthday. He got to have three friends over." Mother had said, "*Ssh*," and looked from Mark to Luke, saying something with her eyes that Luke didn't understand.

Startled by the memory, Luke let out his breath. Two of his candles flickered, and one went out. Matthew and Mark laughed.

"You ain't getting that wish," Mark said. "Baby. Can't even blow out candles."

Luke wanted to cry. He'd forgotten even to make a wish, and if he hadn't been surprised he would have been able to blow out all six candles. He knew he could have. And then he would have gotten—oh, he didn't know. A chance to ride to town in the pickup truck. A chance to play in the front yard. A chance to go to school. Instead, all he had was a strange memory that couldn't be right. Surely Luke was thinking about Mark's seventh birthday, or maybe his eighth. Mark couldn't have known Robert Joe when he was six, because he would have been hiding then, like Luke.

Luke thought about it for three days. He trailed along behind his mother as she hung wash out of

the line, made strawberry preserves, scrubbed the bathroom floor. Several times he started to ask, "How old do I have to be before people can see me?" But something stopped him every time.

Finally, on the fourth day, after Dad, Matthew, and Mark scraped back their chairs from the breakfast table and headed out to the barn, Luke crouched by the kitchen's side window—one he wasn't supposed to look out because people driving by might catch a glimpse of his face. He tilted his head to the side and raised up just enough that his left eye was above the level of the windowsill. He watched Matthew and Mark running in the sunlight, the tops of their hog boots thumping against their knees. They were in full sight of the whole world, it seemed, and they didn't care. They were racing to the front door of the barn, not the side one off the backyard that Luke always had to use because it was hidden from the road.

Luke turned around and slid to the floor, out of sight.

"Matthew and Mark never had to hide, did they?" he asked.

Mother was scrubbing the remains of scrambled eggs out of the skillet. She turned her head and looked at him carefully.

"No," she said.

"Then why do I?"

She dried her hands and left the sink, something Luke had almost never seen her do if there were still dirty dishes left to be washed. She crouched beside him and smoothed his hair back from his forehead.

"Oh, Lukie, do you really need to know? Isn't it enough to know—things are just different for you?"

He thought about that. Mother was always saying he was the only one who would ever sit on her lap and cuddle. She still read bedtime stories to him, and he knew Matthew and Mark thought that was silly. Was that what she meant? But he was just younger. He'd grow up. Wouldn't he be like them then?

With unusual stubbornness, Luke insisted, "I want to know why I'm different. I want to know why I have to hide."

So Mother told him.

Later, he wished he'd asked more questions. But at the time it was all he could do to listen to what she told him. He felt like he was drowning in the flow of her words.

"It just happened," she said. "You just happened. And we wanted you. I wouldn't even let your dad talk about . . . getting rid of you."

Luke pictured himself as a baby, left in a cardboard box by the side of a road somewhere, the way Dad said people used to do with kittens, back when people were allowed to have pets. But maybe that wasn't what Mother meant.

"The Population Law hadn't been around long, then, and I had always wanted lots of kids. Before, it meant. Getting pregnant with you was like—a miracle. I thought the Government would get over their foolishness, maybe even by the time you were born, and then I'd have a new baby to show everyone."

"But you didn't," Luke managed to say. "You hid me."

His voice sounded strangely hoarse, like it belonged to someone else.

Mother nodded. "Once I started showing, I didn't go anywhere. That wasn't hard to do—where do I go, anyway? I didn't let Matthew and Mark leave the farm, for fear they'd say something. I didn't even say anything about you in letters to my mother and sister. I wasn't really scared then. It was just superstition. I didn't want to brag. I thought I'd go to the hospital to give birth. I wasn't going to keep you secret forever. But then . . ."

"Then what?" Luke asked.

Mother wouldn't look at him.

~~“Then they started running all that on TV about the Population Police, how the Population Police had ways of finding out everything, how they'd do anything to enforce the law.”~~

Luke glanced toward the hulking television in the living room. He wasn't allowed to watch it. What was that why?

“And your dad started hearing rumors in town, about other babies . . .”

Luke shivered. Mother was looking far off into the distance, to where the rows of new corn plants met the horizon.

“I always wanted a John, too,” she said. “ ‘Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, bless the bed that I lie on.’ But then I thank the Lord that I have you, at least. And it's worked out, the hiding, hasn't it?”

The smile she offered him was wobbly. He felt he had to help her.

“Yes,” he said.

And somehow, after that, he didn't mind hiding so much anymore. Who wanted to meet strangers anyway? Who wanted to go to school, where—if Matthew and Mark were to be believed—the teacher yelled, and the other boys would double-cross you if you didn't watch out? He was special. He was a secret. He belonged at home—home, where his mother always let him have the first piece of apple pie because he was there and the other boys were away. Home, where he could cradle the new baby pigs in the barn, climb the trees at the edge of the woods, throw snowballs at the posts of the clothesline. Home, where the backyard always beckoned, always safe and protected by the house and the barn and the woods.

Until they took the woods away.

Luke lay on his stomach on the floor and idly ran the toy train back and forth on the track. The train had belonged to Dad when he was a little boy, and his own father before him. Luke could remember a time when his greatest longing had been for Mark to outgrow the train so Luke could have it all for himself. But it wasn't what he wanted to play with today. There was a beautiful day unfolding outside with fleecy clouds in a blue, blue sky, and a mild breeze rustling the grass in the backyard. He hadn't even left the house in a week now, and he could almost hear the outdoors calling to him. But now he wasn't even allowed in the same room as an uncovered window.

"Are you *trying* to be discovered?" Dad had bellowed at Luke just that morning, when he'd held the shade a few inches back from the kitchen window and peeked out longingly.

Luke jumped. He'd been so busy thinking about running barefoot through the grass that he'd half-forgotten there was anyone or anything behind him, in the house.

"No one's out there," he said, glancing again to be sure. He'd been trying not to look beyond the ragged edge of the backyard to the bulldozed mess of branches, trunks, leaves, and mud that had once been his beloved woods.

"Yeah?" Dad said. "Did it ever occur to you that if there is, they might see you before you see them?"

He grabbed Luke by the arm and jerked him back a good three feet. Freed from Luke's grasp, the bottom of the shade banged against the windowsill.

"You can't look out at all," Dad said. "I mean it. From now on, just stay away from the windows. And don't go into a room unless we've got the shades or curtains pulled."

"But then I can't see anything," Luke protested.

"Better that than to get turned in," Dad said.

Dad sounded like he might feel sorry for Luke, but that only made things worse. Luke turned around and left, scared he might cry in front of Dad.

Now he gave the toy train a shove, and it careened off the track. It landed upside down, wheels spinning.

"Who cares?" Luke muttered.

There was a harsh knock on his door.

"Population Police! Open up!"

Luke didn't move.

"That's not funny, Mark!" he shouted.

Mark opened the door and bounded up the stairs that led to Luke's room proper. Luke's room was also the attic, a fact he had never minded. Mother long ago had shoved all the trunks and boxes as far as they could go under the eaves, leaving prime space for Luke's brass bed and circular rag rug and books and toys. Luke had even heard Matthew and Mark grumble about Luke having the biggest room. But they had windows.

"Scared you this time, didn't I?" Mark asked.

"No," Luke said. Nothing would force him to admit that his heart had jumped. Mark had been playing the "Population Police" joke for years, always out of their parents' earshot. Usually Luke just

ignored Mark, but now, with Dad acting so skittish . . . What would Luke have done if it really had been the Population Police? What would they do to him?

“Matt and me, we’ve never told anyone about you,” Mark said, suddenly serious, which was strange for him. “And you know Mother and Dad don’t say anything. You’re good at hiding. So you’re safe, you know?”

“I know,” Luke muttered.

Mark kicked the toy train Luke had crashed. “Still playing with baby toys?” he asked, as if to make up for slipping and being nice.

Luke shrugged. Normally, he wouldn’t have wanted Mark to know he played with the train anymore. But today everything else was so bad that that didn’t matter.

“Did you come up here just to bug me?” Luke asked.

Mark put on an offended look.

“Thought you might want to play checkers,” he said.

Luke squinted.

“Mother told you to, right?” he asked.

“No.”

“You’re lying,” Luke said, not caring how nasty he sounded.

“Well, if you’re going to be that way—”

“Just leave me alone, okay?”

“Okay, okay.” Mark backed down the stairs. “Jeez!”

Alone again, Luke felt a little sorry he’d been so mean. Maybe Mark had told the truth. Luke should apologize. But he didn’t really feel like it.

Luke got up and started pacing his room. The squeak of the third board in from the stairs annoyed him. He hated having to duck under the rafters on the far side of his bed. Even his favorite model car lined up on the shelves in the corner, bothered him today. Why should he have model cars? He’d never even sat in a real one. He never would. He’d never get to do anything or go anywhere. He might as well just rot up here in the attic. He’d thought about that before, on the rare occasions when Mother, Dad, Matthew, and Mark all went somewhere and left him behind—what if something happened to them and they never came back? Would someone find him years from now, abandoned and dead? He’d read a story in one of the old books in the attic about a bunch of kids finding a deserted pirate ship, and then a skeleton in one of the rooms. He’d be like that skeleton. And now that he wasn’t allowed in the rooms with uncovered windows, he’d be a skeleton in the dark.

Luke looked up automatically, as if to remind himself that nothing lit the rafters but the single bulb over his head. Except—there was light at either end of the ceiling, leaking in under the peak of the roof.

Luke stood up and went to investigate. Of course. He should have remembered. There were vents at each end of the roof. Dad grumbled occasionally about heating the attic for Luke—“It’s just like throwing money out those vents”—but Mother always fixed him with one of her stares, and nothing changed.

Now Luke climbed on top of one of the largest trunks and looked down through the vent. He could see out! He could see a strip of the road and the cornfield beyond, its leaves waving in the breeze. The vent slanted down and limited his view, but at least he was sure nobody would ever be able to see him.

For a moment, Luke was excited, but that quickly faded. He didn’t want to spend the rest of his life watching the corn grow. Without much hope, he stepped down from the trunk and went to the other end of the attic, the portion that faced the backyard. He had to slide boxes around and drag an old ste

stool from the opposite end of the attic, but finally his eyes were level with the back vent.

The view was not of the backyard—it was too close—but of the former woods. He'd never realized before, but the land there sloped away from his family's house, so he had a clear view of acres and acres that once had been covered with trees. The land was abuzz with activity now. Huge yellow bulldozers shoved brush back from a rough road that had been traced out with gravel. Other vehicles Luke couldn't identify were digging holes for huge concrete pipes. Luke watched in fascination. He knew tractors and combines, of course, and had seen his dad's bush hog and manure spreader and gravel wagons up close, in the barn. But these machines were different, designed for different jobs. And they were all operated by different people.

Once, when Luke was younger, a tramp had walked up to the house and Luke had only had time to hide under the sink in the mudroom before the man was in the house, begging for food. The door of the cabinet was cracked, so Luke had been able to peek out and see the man's patched trousers and holey shoes. He'd heard his whiny voice: "I ain't got no job, and I ain't et in three days No, no, I can't do no farmwork for my food. What do you think I am? I'm sick. I'm starving"

Other than that tramp and pictures in books, Luke had never seen another human being besides his parents and Matthew and Mark. He'd never dreamed there was such variety.

Many of the people running the bulldozers and shovel contraptions were stripped of their shirts while others standing nearby even wore ties and coats. Some were fat and some were thin; some were browned by the sun and some were paler than Luke himself, who would never be tan again. They were all moving—shifting gears and lowering pipe, waving others into position or, at the very least, talking full speed. All that activity made Luke dizzy. The pictures in books always showed people still. Overwhelmed, Luke closed his eyes, then opened them again for fear of missing something.

"Luke?"

Reluctantly, Luke slid down from his step stool perch and scrambled over to recline innocently on his bed.

"Come in," he called to his mother.

She climbed the stairs heavily.

"You okay?"

Luke dangled his feet over the side of the bed.

"Sure. I'm fine."

Mother sat on the bed beside him and patted his leg.

"It's—" she swallowed hard. "It's not easy, the life you've got to live. I know you'd like to look outside. You'd like to go outside—"

"That's okay, Mother," Luke said. He could have told her then about the vents—he didn't see how anyone could object to him looking out there—but something stopped him. What if they took them away from him, too? What if Mother told Dad, and Dad said, "No, no, that's too much of a risk. I forbid it"? Luke wouldn't be able to stand it. He kept silent.

Mother ruffled his hair.

"You're a trooper," she said. "I knew you'd hold up all right."

Luke leaned against his mother's arm, and she moved her arm around his shoulders and hugged him tight to her side. He felt a little guilty for keeping a secret, but mostly reassured—loved and reassured.

Then, more to herself than to him, Mother added, "And things could be worse."

Somehow, that wasn't comforting. Luke didn't know why, but he had a feeling what she really meant was that things were going to get worse. He snuggled tighter against Mother, hoping he was wrong.

Luke found out what Mother meant a few days later when he came down for breakfast. As usual, he opened the door from the back stairs to the kitchen only a crack. He could remember barely a handful of times in his entire life when someone had dropped by before breakfast, and each time Mother had managed to send Matthew or Mark up to warn Luke to stay out of sight. But he always checked. Today he could see Dad and Matthew and Mark at the table, and knew from the sound of frying bacon that Mother must be at the stove.

“Are the shades closed?” he called softly.

Mother opened the door to the stairs. Luke started to step into the kitchen, but she put out her arm to keep him back. She handed him a plate full of scrambled eggs and bacon.

“Luke, honey? Can you eat sitting on the bottom step there?”

“What?” Luke asked.

Mother looked beseechingly over her shoulder.

“Dad thinks—I mean, it’s not safe anymore to have you in the kitchen. You can still eat with us, and talk to us and all, but you’ll be . . . over here.”

She waved her hand toward the stairs behind Luke.

“But with the shades pulled—” Luke started.

“One of those workers asked me yesterday, ‘Hey, farmer, you got air-conditioning in that house or yours?’” Dad said from the table. He didn’t turn around. He didn’t seem to want to look at Luke. “We keep the shades pulled, hot day like today, people get suspicious. This way is safer. I’m sorry.”

And then Dad did turn around and glance at Luke, once. Luke tried to keep from looking upset.

“So what’d you tell him?” Matthew asked, as if the worker’s question was only a matter of curiosity.

“Told him of course we don’t have air-conditioning. Farming don’t make nobody a millionaire.”

Dad took a long sip of coffee.

“Okay, Luke?” Mother asked.

“Yes,” he mumbled. He took the plate of eggs and bacon, but it didn’t look good to him now. He knew every bite he ate would stick in his throat. He sat down on the step, out of sight of both kitchen windows.

“We’ll leave the door open,” Mother said. She hovered over him, as if unwilling to return to the stove. “This isn’t too much different, is it?”

“Mother—” Dad said warningly.

Through the open windows, Luke could hear the rumble of several trucks and cars. The workers had arrived for the day. He knew from watching through the vent the past few days that the caravan of vehicles came up the road like a parade. The cars would peel off to the side and unload the nicer dressed men. The more rugged vehicles pulled on in to the muddiest sections, and the people inside would scatter to the bulldozers and backhoes that had been left outside overnight. But the vehicles barely had time to get cold, because the workers were there now from sunup to sundown. Someone was in a hurry for them to finish.

“Luke—I’m sorry,” Mother said, and scurried back to the stove. She loaded a plate for herself, the

sat down at the table, beside Luke's usual spot. His chair wasn't even in the kitchen anymore.

~~For a while, Luke watched Dad, Mother, Matthew, and Mark eating in silence, a complete family of four. Once, he cleared his throat, ready to protest again. *You can't do this—it's not fair—* Then he choked back the words, unspoken. They were only trying to protect him. What could he do?~~

Resolutely, Luke stuck his fork in the pile of scrambled eggs on his plate and took a bite. He ate the whole plateful of food without tasting any of it.

Luke ate every meal after that on the bottom step. It became a habit, but a hated one. He had never noticed before, but Mother often spoke too softly to be heard from any distance, and Matthew and Mark always made their nasty comments under their breath. So they would start laughing, often at Luke's expense, and he couldn't defend himself because he didn't know what they had said. He couldn't even hear Mother saying, "Now, be nice, boys." After a week or two, a lot of the time, he didn't even try to listen to the rest of the family's conversation.

But even he was curious the hot July day when the letter arrived about the pigs.

Matthew brought the mail in that day from the mailbox at the crossroads a mile away. (Luke had never seen them, of course, but Matthew and Mark had told him there were three mailboxes there, one for each of the families that lived on their road.) Usually the Garners' mail was just bills or the envelopes carrying curt orders from the Government about how much corn to plant, which fertilizer to use, and where to take their crop when it was harvested. A letter from a relative was a cause to celebrate, and Mother always dropped whatever she was doing and sat down to open it with trembling hands, calling out at intervals, "Oh, Aunt Effie's in the hospital again . . ." or, "Tsk, Lisabeth's going to marry that fellow after all . . ." Luke almost felt he knew his relatives, though they lived hundreds of miles away. And, of course, they didn't even know he existed. The letters Mother wrote back painstakingly, late at night, when she'd saved up enough money for a stamp, contained plenty of news of Matthew and Mark, but never once had mentioned Luke's name.

This letter was as thick as some from Luke's grandmother, but it bore an official seal, and the return address was an embossed DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN HABITATION, ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS DIVISION. Matthew held the letter at arm's length, the way Luke had seen him hold dead baby pigs when they had to be carried out of the barn.

Dad looked worried the minute he saw the letter in Matthew's hand. Matthew put the letter down beside Dad's silverware. Dad sighed.

"Can't be anything but bad news," Dad said. "No use ruining a good meal. It can wait."

He went back to eating chicken and dumplings. Only after his last belch did he turn the envelope over and run a dirt-rimmed fingernail under the flap. He unfolded the letter.

"'It has come to our attention . . .,'" he read aloud. "Well, so far I understand it." Then he read silently for a while, calling out at intervals, "Mother, what's 'offal'?" and, "Where's that dictionary? Matthew, look up 'reciprocity.'" Finally, he threw down the whole thick packet and proclaimed, "They're going to make us get rid of our hogs."

"What?" Matthew asked. More serious than Mark, he had talked for as long as anyone could remember about, "When I get my own farm, it's going to be all hogs. I'll make the Government let me do that, somehow . . ." Now he looked over Dad's shoulder. "You mean they're just going to make us sell a lot at one time, right? But we can build the herd back up—"

"Nope," Dad said. "Those people in them fancy new houses won't be able to stand pig smell. So we can't raise hogs no more." He threw the letter out into the center of the table for all to see. "What do they expect, building next to a farm?"

From his seat on the stairs, Luke had to hold himself back from going to fish the edge of the lettuce out of the chicken gravy and looking at it himself.

“They can’t do that, can they?” he asked.

Nobody answered. Nobody needed to. Luke felt like a fool for asking as soon as the words were out of his mouth. For once, he was glad of his hiding place.

Mother twisted a dishrag in her hand.

“Those hogs are our bread and butter,” she said. “With grain prices the way they are . . . what are we going to live on?”

Dad just looked at her. After a moment, so did Matthew and Mark. Luke didn’t know why.

The tax bill arrived two weeks later, the day that Dad, Matthew, and Mark loaded the hogs onto the livestock trailer and took them all away. Most were going to the slaughterhouse. The ones too young and too small to bring a decent price were going to an auction for feeder pigs. Luke watched through the vent at the front of the house as Dad drove by in the battered pickup with each load. Matthew and Mark sat in the back of the pickup, making sure the trailer stayed hitched right. Even three stories up, Luke could see Matthew's hangdog expression.

Then when the three of them came into the house for dinner, after washing the last of the hog sme off their hands in the mudroom, Dad handed Mother the tax bill without comment. She put down the wooden spoon she'd been using to stir the stew and unfolded the letter. Then she dropped it.

"Why, that's—" she seemed to be doing the math in her head as she bent to retrieve it. "That's three times what it usually is. There must be a mistake."

Dad shook his head grimly. "No mistake. I talked to Williker at the auction."

The Willikers were their nearest neighbors, with a house three miles down the road. Luke always pictured them with monster scales and fierce claws because of the number of times he'd been cautioned. "You don't want the Willikers to see you."

Dad went on. "Williker says they raised everyone's taxes because of them fancy houses. Makes our land worth more."

"Isn't that good?" Luke asked eagerly. It was strange—he should hate the new houses for replacing his woods and forcing him to stay indoors. But he'd half-fallen in love with them, having watched every foundation poured, every wooden skeleton of walls and roofs raised to the sky. They were his main entertainment, aside from talking to Mother when she came upstairs for what she called "my Luke breaks." Sometimes she pretended his room needed cleaning as badly as the bread needed baking or the garden needed weeding. Sometimes she just sat and talked.

Dad was shaking his head in disgust over Luke's question.

"No. It's only good if we're selling. And we ain't. All it means for us is that the Government thinks they can get more money out of us."

Matthew was slumped in his chair at the table. "How are we going to pay?" he asked. "That's more than we got for all the hogs, and that was supposed to carry us through for a long time—"

Dad didn't answer. Even Mark, who normally had a smart-alecky comeback for everything, was stupefied.

Mother had turned back to her stew.

"I got my work permit today," she said softly. "The factory's hiring. If I get on there, I can maybe get an advance on my paycheck."

Luke's jaw dropped.

"You can't go to work," he said. "Who will—" He wanted to say, *Who will stay with me? Who will talk to all day when everyone else is outside?* But that seemed too selfish. Luke looked around. No one else looked surprised by Mother's news. He shut his mouth.

By mid-September, Luke's days had fallen into a familiar pattern. He got up at dawn just for the chance to sit on the stairs and watch the rest of his family eat breakfast. They all rushed now. Mother had to be at the factory by seven. Dad was trying to get all the machinery in working order before harvest. And Matthew and Mark were back in school. Only Luke had time to linger over his undercooked bacon and dry toast. He didn't bother asking for butter because that meant someone would have to stand up and bring it over to him, all the while pretending for the sake of the open window that they'd just forgotten something upstairs.

As soon as the rest of his family had stomped out the door, Luke went back to his room and watched out the vents—first out the front, to see Matthew and Mark climb onto the school bus, then out the back, where the new houses were practically finished. They were mansions, as large as the Garner house and barn put together. They gleamed in the morning sunlight as though their walls were studded with precious jewels. For all Luke knew, maybe they were.

Hordes of workmen still arrived every morning, but almost all of them worked indoors now. They headed into the houses first thing, carrying rolls of carpet, stacks of drywall, cans of paint. Luke couldn't see much of them after that. He spent more time now watching a new kind of traffic: expensive-looking cars driving slowly down the newly paved streets. Sometimes they pulled into a driveway and went into one of the houses, usually trailing a woman who appeared to be talking nonstop. It had taken Luke a while to figure it out—he certainly hadn't dared ask anyone else in his family—but he thought maybe the people were thinking about buying the houses. Once he realized that, he studied each potential neighbor carefully. He'd overheard Mother and Dad marveling that the people moving into the new houses were not just going to be city people, but Barons. Barons were unbelievably rich, Luke knew. They had things ordinary people hadn't had in years. Luke wasn't sure how the Barons had gotten rich, when everybody else was poor. But Dad never said the word "Baron" without a curse word or two in front of it.

The people streaming through the houses did look different from anyone in Luke's family. They were mostly thin, beautiful women in formfitting dresses, and heavysset men in what Luke's dad and brothers called sissy clothes—shiny shoes and clean, dressy pants and jackets. Luke always felt a little embarrassed for them, showing up like that. Or maybe he was embarrassed for his family, that they never looked like any of the Barons. Luke preferred it when the adults had children with them and he could concentrate on them. The smallest ones were always as dressed up as their parents, with hair bows and suspenders and other geegaws Luke knew his parents would never buy. The older kids usually seemed to be wearing whatever they'd grabbed first out of their closet that morning.

Though he knew no one would dare show up with three kids, he always counted: "One, two . . ." "One . . ." "One, two . . ."

What if a family with just one kid moved in behind them, and he sneaked into their house and pretended to be their second child? He could go to school, go to town, act like Matthew and Mark . . .

What a joke—Luke living with Barons. More likely he'd be shot for trespassing. Or turned in.

When he began thinking things like that, he always jumped down from his perch by the vent and

grabbed a book from one of the dusty stacks by the eaves. Mother had taught him to read and do math as much as she knew herself. “At least we have a few books for you . . .,” she often mumbled sadly when she left in the morning. He’d read all their books dozens of times, even the ones with titles like *Diseases of the Porcine Species* and *Common Grasses of Our Countryside*. His favorites were the handful of adventure books, the ones that let him pretend he was a knight fighting a dragon to rescue a kidnapped princess, or an explorer sailing on the high seas, holding tight to a mast while a hurricane raged about him.

He liked to forget he was Luke Garner, third child hidden in the attic.

Sometime around noon he’d hear the door from the mudroom to the kitchen swing open and he’d go down and eat at the same time as his dad. Without Mother there were no homemade pies now, no mashed potatoes, no roasts that sent good smells throughout the house. Dad always made four sandwiches, checked to make sure no one could see him, then handed two of them to Luke in the stairwell.

Dad never talked—he’d explained that he didn’t want anyone overhearing him, and wondering. But he did turn the radio on for the noon farm report, and there was usually a song or two after that before Dad silenced the radio and went outside to work again.

When Dad left, Luke went back to his room to read or watch the houses again.

At six-thirty Mother came home, and she always stopped in and said hi to Luke before rushing off to do a whole day’s work in the few hours before bedtime. Usually Matthew or Mark came up to visit him, too, but they could never stay long, either. They had to help Dad before supper, then do homework afterwards. And they always had been nicest to Luke outdoors. Before the woods came down, the three of them often had played kickball or football or spud in the backyard, after school and chores. Matthew and Mark always fought about who got to have Luke on his team, because, even if Luke wasn’t very good, two boys together could always beat the third.

Now they played halfhearted games of cards or checkers with Luke, but Luke could tell they’d rather be outside.

So would he.

He tried not to think about it.

The best part of the day came at the end, when Mother tucked him in. She’d be relaxed then. She’d stay for an hour sometimes, asking him what he’d read that day, or telling him stories about the factory.

Then one night, when she was telling how her plastic glove had gotten stuck in a chicken she’d degutted that day, Mother suddenly stopped in the middle of a sentence.

“Mother?” Luke said.

She answered with a snore. She’d fallen asleep sitting up.

Luke studied her face, seeing lines of fatigue that hadn’t been there before, noticing that the hair around her face now held as much gray as brown.

“Mother?” he said again, gently shaking her arm.

She jerked. “—but I cleaned that chicken al—oh. Sorry, Luke. You need tucking in, don’t you?”

She fluffed his pillow, smoothed his sheet.

Luke sat up. “That’s okay, Mother. I’m getting too old for this any”—he swallowed a lump in his throat—“anyway. I bet you weren’t still tucking Matthew or Mark in when they were twelve.”

“No,” she said quietly.

“Then I don’t need it, either.”

“Okay,” she said.

She kissed his forehead, anyhow, then turned out the light. Luke turned his face to the wall until she

left.

One cool, rainy morning a few weeks later, Luke's family left in such a rush, they barely had time to say good-bye. They dashed out the door after breakfast, Matthew and Mark complaining about the packed lunches, Dad calling back, "I'm going to that auction up at Chytlesville. Won't be home until supper." Mother hurried back and handed Luke a bag of cracklings and three pears and some biscuits from the night before. She muttered, "So you won't get hungry," and gave him a quick kiss on the head. Then she was gone, too.

Luke peeked around the stairway door, surveying the chaos of dirty pans and crumb-covered plates left in the kitchen. He knew not to look out as far as the window, but he did, anyway. His heart gave a strange jump when he saw the window was covered. Someone must have pulled the shade the night before, to try to keep the kitchen warm, and then forgotten to raise it in the morning. Luke dared to lean out a little further—yes, the shade was down on the other window, too. For the first time in almost six months, he could step out into the kitchen and not worry about being seen. He could run, skip, jump—dance, even—on the vast linoleum without fear. He could clean up the kitchen and surprise Mother. He could do anything.

He put his right foot out, tentatively, not quite daring to put his full weight on it. The floor squeaked. He froze. Nothing happened, but he retreated, anyway. He went back up the stairs, crawled along the second-floor hallway to avoid the windows, then climbed the stairs to the attic. He was so disgusted with himself, he could taste it.

I am a coward. I am a chicken. I deserve to be locked away in the attic forever, ran through his head. *No, no,* he countered himself, *I'm cautious. I'm making a plan.*

He climbed up onto the stool on top of a trunk that served as his perch for watching out the back vents. The neighborhood behind his house was fully occupied now. He knew all the families and had come up with names for most of them. The Big Car Family had four expensive cars sitting in the driveway. The Gold Family all had hair the color of sunshine. The Birdbrain Family had set a row of thirty birdhouses along their backyard fence, even though Luke could have told them it was pointless to do that until spring. The house he could see best, right behind the Garners' backyard, was occupied by the Sports Family. Two teenaged boys lived there, and their deck overflowed with soccer balls, baseball bats, tennis rackets, basketballs, hockey sticks, and apparatus from games Luke could only guess at.

Today, he wasn't interested in games. He was interested in seeing the families leave.

He had noticed before that all of the houses were empty by nine in the morning, with kids off school and grown-ups off to work. Three or four of the women didn't seem to have jobs, but they left too, returning late in the afternoon with shopping bags. Today, he just had to make sure no one was staying home sick.

The Gold Family left first, two blond heads in one car, two blond heads in another. The Sports Family was next, the boys carrying football pads and helmets, their mother teetering on high heels. Then there was a flurry of cars streaming from every driveway onto the still-sparkling new streets. Luke counted each person, keeping track so carefully that he made scratches on the wall, and counted the scratches twice again at the end. Yes—twenty-eight people gone. He was safe.

Luke scrambled down from his chair, his head spinning with plans. First, he'd clean up the kitchen, then he'd start some bread for supper. He'd never made bread before, but he'd watched Mother a million times. Then maybe he could pull the shades in the rest of the house and clean it thoroughly. He couldn't vacuum—that'd be too loud—but he could dust and scrub and polish. Mother would be so pleased. Then, in the afternoon, before Matthew or Mark or the kids in the neighborhood got back, he could put something on for supper. Maybe potato soup. Why, he could do this every day. He'd never considered housework or cooking particularly thrilling before—Matthew and Mark always scoffed at it as women's work—but it was better than nothing. And maybe, just maybe, if this worked, he could convince Dad to let him sneak out to the barn and help there, too.

Luke was so excited, he stepped into the kitchen without a second thought this time. Who cared if the floor creaked? No one was there to hear it. He gathered up dishes from the table and piled them into the sink, scrubbing everything with extraordinary zeal. He measured out flour and lard and milk and yeast and was putting it all in a bowl when it occurred to him it might be okay to turn on the radio very softly. Nobody'd hear. And if they did, they'd just figure the family had forgotten to turn it off, just as they'd forgotten to raise the shades.

The bread was in the oven and Luke was picking up lint by hand from the living room rug when he heard tires on the gravel driveway. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, too early for the school bus or Mother or Dad. Luke sprinted for the stairs, hoping whoever it was would just go away.

No luck. He heard the side door creaking open, then Dad exclaiming, "What the—"

He was back early. That shouldn't matter. But hiding on the staircase, Luke suddenly felt like the radio was as loud as an entire orchestra, like the smell of baking bread could fill three counties.

"Luke!" Dad yelled.

Luke heard his father's hand on the doorknob. He opened the door.

"I was just trying to help," Luke blubbered. "I was safe. You left the shades down, so I thought it was okay, and I made sure everyone was gone from the neighborhood, and—"

Dad glared. "You can't be sure," he snapped. "People like that—they get deliveries all the time, they get sick and come home from work, they have maids come during the day—"

Luke could have protested, no, the maids never come before the kids get home from school. But he didn't want to give himself away any more than he already had.

"The shades were down," he said. "I didn't turn on a single light. Even if there were a thousand people back there, nobody would know I was here! Please—I've just got to do something. Look, I made bread, and cleaned up, and—"

"What if a Government inspector or someone had stopped by here?"

"I would have hidden. Like always."

Dad was shaking his head. "And leave them smelling bread baking in an empty house? You don't seem to understand," he said. "You can't take any chances. You can't. Because—"

At that precise moment, the buzzer on the oven went off, sounding as loud as a siren. Dad gave Luke a dirty look and stalked over to the oven. He pulled out the two bread pans and tossed them on the stove top. He flipped off the radio.

"I don't want you in the kitchen again," he said. "You stay hidden. That's an order."

He went out the door without looking back.

Luke fled up the stairs. He wanted to stomp, angrily, but he couldn't. No noise allowed. In his room he hesitated, too upset to read, too restless to do anything else. He kept hearing *You stay hidden. That's an order*, echoing in his ears. But he'd been hidden. He'd been careful. To prove his point—to himself—at least—he climbed back up on his perch by the back vents and looked out on the quiet neighborhood.

All the driveways were empty. Nothing moved, not even the flag on the Gold Family's flagpole or the spokes on the Birdbrain Family's fake windmill. And then, out of the corner of his eye, Luke caught a glimpse of something behind one window of the Sports Family's house.

A face. A child's face. In a house where two boys already lived.

Luke was so surprised, he lost his balance and almost fell backwards off the trunk. By the time he recovered and righted himself, the face was gone. Had he imagined it? Was it just one of the Sports Family brothers home early from school? Kids got sick, like Dad said, or they decided to play hooky? Luke tried to remember every detail of the face he'd seen, or thought he'd seen. It had been younger than either of the Sports Family brothers'. Softer. Hadn't it?

Maybe it was a thief. Or a maid, come early.

No. It had been a child. A—

He didn't even let himself think what another child in that house would be.

He stared for hours at the Sports Family's house, but no face reappeared. Nothing happened until six, when the two Sports Family boys drove in in their jeep, unloaded their football gear, and carried it into the house. They didn't run out screaming about being robbed.

And he'd seen no thief leave. He'd seen no maid leave.

At six-thirty, Luke reluctantly climbed down from his perch when he heard his mother's knock on the door. He sat down on his bed and muttered a distracted, "Come in."

She rushed to hug him.

"Luke—I'm sorry. I know you were just trying to help. And everything is amazingly clean. I'd love if you could do this every day. But your father thinks—I mean, you can't—"

Luke was so busy thinking about the face in the window that at first he couldn't figure out what she was talking about. Oh. The bread. The housecleaning. The radio.

"That's okay," Luke mumbled.

But it wasn't, and it never would be. His anger came back. Why did his parents have to be so careful? Why didn't they just lock him in one of the trunks in the attic and be done with it?

"Can't you talk to him?" Luke asked. "Can't you convince him—"

Mother pushed Luke's hair back from his face. "I'll try," she said. "But you know he's just trying to protect you. We can't take any chances."

Even if the face in the window of the Sports Family house was another third child, so what? Luke and the other kid could live right next door all their lives and never meet. Luke might never see the other kid again. And he'd certainly never see Luke.

Luke lowered his head.

"What am I supposed to do?" he asked. "There's nothing for me to do. Am I supposed to just sit in this room the rest of my life?"

Mother was stroking his hair now. It made him feel itchy and irritable.

"Oh, Lukie," she said. "You can do so much. Read and play and sleep whenever you want . . . Believe me, I'd like to live a day of your life right about now."

"No you wouldn't," Luke muttered, but he said it so softly, he was sure Mother couldn't hear. He knew she wouldn't understand.

If there was a third child in the Sports Family, would he understand? Did he feel the way Luke did?

When Luke went down to supper, he saw that Mother had set his two loaves of bread out on the china plate she used for holidays and special occasions. She was showing off the bread the way she used to tape up the crooked drawings Matthew and Mark brought home from school when they were little. But something had gone wrong—maybe Luke hadn't used enough yeast, or he'd kneaded the dough too much or too little—and the loaves had turned out flat. They looked lopsided and pathetic in the center of the table.

Luke wished Mother had just thrown them away.

"It's cold out now. Nobody'd notice if you pulled the shades. Why can't I sit at the table with all of you?" he asked when he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Oh, Luke—" Mother started. "Someone might see your shadow through the shade," Dad said.

"They wouldn't know it was mine," Luke said.

"But there'd be five. Someone might get suspicious," Mother said patiently. "Luke, we're just trying to protect you. How about a big slice of your bread? There's cold beef and canned beans, too."

Resignedly, Luke sat down on the stairs.

Matthew asked about the auction Dad had gone to.

"I drove all that way for nothing," Dad said disgustedly. "I waited four hours for the tractors to come up, and then I couldn't even afford the first bid."

"At least you got home in time to fix that back fence before dark," Mother said, cutting the bread.

And yell at me, Luke thought bitterly. What was wrong with him? Nothing had changed. Except he maybe seen a face that maybe belonged to someone like him—

Matthew and Mark suddenly noticed the bread Mother was doling out.

"What's wrong with that?" Mark asked.

"I'm sure it will taste fine," Mother said. "It's Luke's first try." Luke muttered, "And my last," too softly for anyone to hear. There were advantages to sitting on the other side of the room from everyone else.

"Luke made bread?" Mark said incredulously. "Yuck."

"Yeah. And I put special poison in one of the loaves, that only affects fourteen-year-olds," Luke said. He pantomimed death, clutching his hands around his own neck, letting his tongue hang out of his mouth, and lolling his head to the side. "If you're nice to me, I'll tell you which loaf is safe."

That shut Mark up but earned Luke a frown from Mother. Luke felt strange about the joke anyway. Of course he'd never poison anyone, but—if something happened to Matthew or Mark, would Luke have to hide anymore? Would he become the public second son, free to go to town and to school and everywhere else that Matthew and Mark went? Could his parents find some way to explain a "new" child already twelve years old?

It wasn't something Luke could ask. He felt guilty just thinking about it.

Mark was making a big ceremony out of bringing the bread to his mouth.

"I'm not scared of you," he taunted, and took a big bite. He swallowed with great difficulty and pretended to gag. "Water, water—quick!" He gulped down half his glass and glared at Luke. "Taste

like poison, all right.”

Luke bit into his bread. It was dry and crumbly and tasteless, not like Mother’s at all. And everybody knew it. Even Dad and Mother had pained expressions on their faces as they chewed. Dad finally pushed his slice away.

“That’s okay, Luke,” he said. “I’m not sure I’d want any son of mine getting too good at baking anyhow. That’s what a man gets married for.”

Matthew and Mark guffawed.

“Getting married soon, Luke?” Mark teased.

“Sure,” Luke said, struggling to sound as devil-may-care as Mark. “But don’t think I’d invite *you* to the wedding.”

He felt a cold, hard lump in his stomach that wasn’t the bread. Of course he’d never get married. Or do anything. He’d never leave the house.

Mark switched to teasing Matthew, who evidently did have a girlfriend. Luke watched the rest of his family laughing.

“May I be excused?” Luke asked.

Everyone turned to him in surprise. Usually he was the last one to make that request. Mother often begged Matthew and Mark, “Can’t you wait, and talk to Luke a little bit longer?”

“Done already?” Mother asked.

“I’m not very hungry,” Luke said.

Mother gave him a worried look but nodded, anyway.

Luke went to his room and climbed onto the stool by the back vents. In the dark, it was easier than ever to see into the houses of the new neighborhood. Their windows were lit up against the night. Some families were eating, like his. He could see one set of four people around a dining room table and one set of three. Some families had their curtains or shades drawn, but sometimes the material was thin and he could still see shadows of the people inside.

Only the Sports Family had all their windows totally blocked, covered by heavy blinds.

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