

Bratty Becky
and the
Firecracker Kid

-a novel-

by

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This book is dedicated to my family.

“ . . . a tree is recognized by its fruit.”

-Matthew 12:33

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Rebecca O'Toole and this is the story of the bad things that my brother Freddy and I did at school to get kicked out and why we wanted to get kicked out. All of it is true and I didn't exaggerate any of it.

-Miss Rebecca O'Toole

Chapter One

My brother Freddy and I were raised by my Ma and Pa on our farm. Pa is still raising us but Ma isn't. She's dead though so it isn't her fault she can't raise us anymore. She died a long time ago and I was really little but Freddy and Pa answer my questions about her because I can't remember her on my own.

Pa, Freddy and I have a really big farm out on Grant's Road about a mile out of town. We've got cows and pigs and horses and we grow corn. We've got a whole bunch of apple trees and a big coop full of chickens and we've got a vegetable garden, too.

Aunt Vera lives kind of close to our farm with Uncle Billy and their little boy Baby Bucky. Aunt Vera's kind of like our fake Ma but Pa takes real good care of us. She checks in on us a time or two a week which is nice of her.

I guess you could say that this whole big story got started a long time ago. A couple of months at least, maybe even longer than that. I was never really big on book learning, and Pa said that it wasn't any big deal. He says if you can own a piece of land and farm it, and teach your kids to do the same then you can feed your family forever that way. That's pretty much what Pa did and Freddy and I turned out just fine. One time the school master, Mr. Ellis, told Pa that school was really important and that he should send Freddy and me to his school in town, but Pa gave him the speech about teaching farming to your kids instead. Mr. Ellis said that was true but that some book learning wouldn't hurt us any, either. Pa said that books were fine, but if all you could do was read and write and count, if times got really hard all that the book-learned people would be able to do would be to read the printing on the pages before they ate them right out of the books. Pa said he didn't want his kids eating pages out of books so he was just going to teach us about farming and getting by in life. Mr. Ellis laughed at Pa's joke about eating pages, but I think it was because he knew there was a lot of sense in what Pa was saying and he couldn't think up a good enough answer to argue him on it.

Pa had told us ever since we were old enough to go to school that we could go to school if we wanted to. I didn't want to go because I thought it would be really boring having to sit still all day like that. Freddy said that he thought that if he had to go to school it would make him feel like a little kid. Freddy always says stuff like that. He thinks he's a man but he isn't because he's only eleven which is only two years older than me. Of course I wouldn't tell Freddy that he isn't old enough to be a grownup because I don't want to hurt his feelings. Besides that he might get mad at me. Freddy's a good egg but you don't want to get him mad.

I guess I thought about going to school a time or two, but I was never too keen on the idea. I thought that the only good part about going to school would be going to town every day. We go to town a couple of days a month to eat at Molly's restaurant, shop at Mr. Jacobs' store, and we go to church every Sunday. Mr. Jacobs' store is really neat and you can get just about anything there. Pa takes us there to spend our allowance and our Granddaddy is there just about every day. Granddaddy and the other men who are too old to work anymore like Earl Duke and Sarge (who's the mayor) and some others sit inside and talk and laugh quite a bit. Mr. Jacobs is friends with all of them so he likes having them there at his store. I guess they keep him company, especially since his wife died of some sort of heart ailment a few years back.

I figured that seeing Granddaddy and going to the store were things we did often enough without having to go to school. I just didn't want to go to school because how could sitting still all day long be any fun? I knew a lot of kids in town didn't like school. Pa taught us at home and that's how I liked it. Lots of people like Pa a whole lot because he's really nice to us and he's nice to them, too. I knew that some folks in town felt bad for Freddy and I because our Ma died of a fever when I was really little. Freddy remembers Ma, but just a little bit. He says that Ma used to sing to us when she tucked us into bed at night. He said her hair was real long and pretty, all yellow-colored like sunshine is in the early morning. He can't remember what color her eyes were, but Pa says they were blue. Sometimes I kind of wish I could remember her but maybe it's better I don't because then I'd miss her even more.

After awhile we moved on from Ma's death and now we're real happy together. We've been happy for a long time, a lot of years. I'm nine now and Freddy's eleven so we're both pretty big kids.

My Pa can do just about anything and he can even cook, too. Aunt Vera came over every day after Ma died to cook for us and she taught Pa how to cook over the next few weeks. When I got old enough to know how to cook Pa taught me and I'm a pretty good cook. I make us eggs and biscuits and ham for breakfast in the morning. We eat breakfast and drink either coffee or fresh milk to go with it. Pa says there isn't any finer breakfast in the world than one that has fresh eggs and fresh milk. Maybe that's why he never makes us eat mush like some folks make their kids eat. I've always liked my Pa and I think a lot of him. He's a real tall man, with fiery Irish red hair and green eyes as green as green tomatoes. He doesn't talk like an Irishman though because he was born and raised here in America. Our granddaddy, who is Pa's Pa, is from

Ireland and he talks like a real Irishman. He came to America on a great big wooden boat as soon as he was grown.

My Pa runs the best farm in the valley and he can hunt better than any man around. They had a rifle shooting contest at the fair last year and Pa won first prize and they said he's the best shot in the county and probably one of the best in the whole state. They gave him a ribbon and he keeps it on the mantle next to Ma's picture. Maybe since Pa put the ribbon next to Ma's picture if she ever looks down from Heaven she can see it and know that Pa won it. I don't know if people in Heaven can look down and see what their family has been doing since they died but I kind of like to think so. I guess there's something kind of cozy about the idea.

All three of us work on the farm and Pa hires men to help him do the work. Out of all the things on the farm, I think the apple orchard is my favorite. Every year we harvest a lot of crates full of apples. We sell a lot of them and the rest we keep in the root cellar. We always keep more than what we need, though, because Pa lets Freddy and I sell apples to the people that live on our road if we want some extra money. Besides earning money by selling apples, Pa gives us money on Saturday since we do so much to help him around the farm. He said if we didn't help him out with all the farm chores that he'd have to pay someone else to do our chores for him. Pa figures it isn't fair for us to do all that work and not give us something for it. He said that parents shouldn't make their kids do a ton a work just because they're parents and they get to boss their kids around, but most people do that. Pa told us not to tell other kids that he gives us money the way he does because they would get jealous and be mad at us or they'd get mad at their own folks. One time at Mr. Jacobs' store Ahab Ruffer asked Pa how come Freddy and I buy candy so often and Pa told him that we get an allowance and Mr. Ruffer got mad at Pa and said it was a foolish idea giving kids money. Pa said that he didn't see any harm in it and it wasn't any of Ahab's business anyway. Mr. Ruffer told Pa that the Irish were getting too high an opinion of themselves. Pa said there wasn't anything wrong with being Irish and the fact that Pa was Irish had nothing to do with it and besides, he was an American. Pa said that the reason that he gave his kids money was so that they could see that hard work pays off and that if his kids wanted a couple of pieces of candy they earned the means to buy it instead of stealing it like two of Mr. Ruffer's boys got caught doing a couple a months before. Mr. Ruffer didn't answer and I think it was because he knew that Pa was right and was probably embarrassed because his boys got caught stealing. Pa's not a mean man and he wouldn't have said anything about if Mr. Ruffer hadn't started picking at him the way that he did.

Some people assumed that since Pa ran such a good farm that he didn't have any time for us, but he did. Most folks don't know this, but Pa was the one that taught us how to read and write and do arithmetic. He said that we couldn't ever run a house if we didn't know how to do those couple of things. He taught us after supper and we each had a slate and some chalk and Pa bought some books for us so we could learn. I like to learn in the evenings because it's nice and quiet and I don't have to worry about all the stuff I've got to do that day because the day's work

is already done. Everything was going good, and I never guessed that things were about to change very quickly.

Chapter Two

One day in November word came around town that the school teacher, Mr. Ellis, had an uncle that died back east somewhere and the uncle left him a really big house and some stocks. Folks around town said that the uncle was pretty rich when he died because he built a great big house and stuff but since the uncle was dead he couldn't spend his money anymore and I guess he must have figured that maybe Mr. Ellis would like to have all that money. But I don't understand how those oil stocks worked because we got thousands of stalks of corn growing out in the fields. Our stalks don't make us rich but at harvest time Pa sells most of it for a pretty good price and we keep the rest of the corn for us. We live nice but we aren't rich and I don't really care because I'm happy with the way things are. I heard that rich kids go to schools far away and they have to live there and I wouldn't want to do that so I'm glad that I'm not rich. But even if we were I bet Pa wouldn't make us go to far away schools like that.

Townfolk were saying that the stocks that Mr. Ellis got were from John D. Rockefeller's oil company. Oil comes from the ground and you have to dig it up with pipes or something and how that's stocks is beyond me. I wonder if Mr. Ellis could get as rich as John D. Rockefeller. If Mr. Ellis was really rich good for him, I always liked him because he was nice for book-learned folks. Some book-learned folks are snotty but Pa's got as much money and more than some of them so I don't why they think they're really something. But some folks are weird so I think that they would be snotty even if they didn't have any book learning.

I think that if I was really rich I'd give some money away to people that need money. Pa gives away a lot of food that we get from our farm because we have lots more than we can eat, and Pa makes a lot of money by selling most of his corn crop. I guess that's why some of the widows and poor folks like my Pa so much. They're the ones that don't feel bad for us not having a Ma anymore. At least I think they don't feel bad because they don't act like it. I'm glad, too, because I hate it when I walk past certain town ladies and I hear them whispering about how isn't it a shame that the poor little thing doesn't have a mother. Pa takes good enough care

of me and then Aunt Vera teaches me all the things I need to know like sewing and things like that.

After Mr. Ellis found out he was getting that big house and the oil stocks he finished out the winter term at school, since there was only four or five weeks left and he said that he'd be the school teacher for the town because he didn't feel right about walking off and leaving before the term ended. Some of the people at Mr. Jacobs' store were talking about it and said that they thought that was a fine and decent thing for Mr. Ellis to stay and finish the term. Others said there wasn't anything decent about it since he signed a contract and was bound by the law to finish out the term. Then my Granddaddy said that it would be okay if they sued him because now he could afford fines and a lawyer and that sort of stuff. Then Miss Krahkor, the town bigmouth that no one likes said that he'd go to jail and it would serve him right because rich people always think they can break their word and get away with it just because they're rich. I don't know if that's true or not, but nobody likes Miss Krahkor so no one cares what she thinks anyway. Granddaddy said, "Yeah, but as rich as he is he could afford to bribe the prison guards to let him out." Everyone started laughing and Miss Krahkor got mad and left in a huff.

Earl Duke slapped Granddaddy on the back and said, "That's telling the old windbag!" Sarge didn't say anything (probably because he's the mayor) but he had a really big smile on his face and I could tell he was trying not to laugh.

The school board tried to find someone new to teach school but they couldn't find anybody for the spring term because all the teachers anywhere around here already had contracts at other schools. The board even wrote a letter to the Teacher's College in Webber City to see if someone would come, but everyone around town said that no one with a college education was going to come to these parts to teach at a one room school house, those people would go to big fancy private schools like in New York or Chicago or Philadelphia or places like that. So then they decided to see if they could find someone who used to be a teacher but got too old. They figured an old lady could teach the spring term and then they'd find someone else in the summer, or so they hoped.

Since the school board couldn't find anybody to fill the spot they decided that they'd hire Miss Krahkor! She had been the school teacher years ago but the school board was desperate and they asked her to teach and she agreed. So ugly old Miss Krahkor, with her scrunched up face and long pointy nose and even pointier chin was going to be the teacher. I wondered why, because Miss Krahkor doesn't like anybody so why she'd want to be stuck in a room full of twenty kids for hours and hours a day is beyond me. Miss Krahkor was an old maid, but if I was her I think I would have gotten married just so my last name wouldn't be Krahkor anymore. You say Krahkor like "cracker" and cracker means white trash. Now I figured that if anyone started to bug Pa about Freddy and me not going to school Pa could just say he didn't want white trash teaching his kids. Most people's last names come from what their ancestors did for a living, like Miller, Cooper, Baker, Shoemaker, or Farmer. I thought it was funny that her

ancestors must have been white trash. I told Pa that but he said that even though it was sort of funny that I shouldn't make fun of her because she never did me any harm and that it isn't nice to laugh at people for stuff they can't help.

We went about our own business and the town folks went about their business but then the government decided that it would be a good idea if they made a law saying that all kids had to be in school all day until they were fourteen. Pa said it was a good idea for big cities like New York because a lot of little kids worked in factories there and some of them get killed in accidents. I figured that law would take some time to go into effect and for all the schools to listen to it so we shouldn't worry about it because maybe we'd be more than fourteen by then anyway. We stayed at home and felt bad for all the kids who had to go to school with Miss Krahkor. Pa told us that the reason she quit being a teacher all those years ago was because she was really mean and used to hit little kids with wooden rulers. One day there was this little boy named Louis Match who misspelled a word on his homework that he was supposed to have learned to spell already. She cracked him on the back of his hands so hard that she broke one of the bones in his knuckles and his finger was crooked after that because it never healed right. The man who was mayor at that time said that Miss Krahkor wasn't allowed to teach school anymore after that because rapping a five-year-old's knuckles was one thing but breaking a child's bones was something else entirely. But the man who was mayor all those years ago has been dead a really long time so the school board said that Miss Krahkor could teach again, but she wasn't ever allowed to hit a student. Louis Match is all grown up now and he owns the lumber mill and he got so mad at the town meeting and said that that old battle ax shouldn't be allowed to be around kids ever again and once they decided she could teach but not hit he said if she ever hit a child again he'd run her ugly old face out of town on a rail. So Miss Krahkor taught school that spring, and since she didn't hit anybody they decided to let her stay and teach the next year because she was a poor old maid and she'd work for cheaper than someone else would. I didn't think that was fair because the school board could have hired somebody nice for a few extra dollars a month but they decided to keep Miss Krahkor. I felt bad for all the kids whose parents made them go to school. Louis Match, who was the reason that Miss Krahkor got fired all those years ago has a boy named David and he wouldn't let David go to school anymore because no son of his would be at the mercy of the likes of her.

As it turns out the county judge took Washington law pretty seriously and said we all had to start going to school that fall. Me and Freddy didn't want to go and we begged and we pleaded with Pa not to make us go but he said we had to because it was the law. If me and Freddy didn't go to school we'd be criminals and so would Pa. I didn't want to go to jail but I didn't think that they put girls in jail but Granddaddy said in the big cities they do put girls in jail. I got kind of scared because city folks put girls in jail but Granddaddy said don't worry because only girls that break the law get put in jail but he said they don't put kids in jail for not going to school, only the parents get in trouble. I was glad he said that because at first I thought he meant that in the cities they put all girls in jail. Granddaddy just laughed and asked why I

thought that they would put girls in jail just for being girls and I said I didn't know why I thought that but city folks are real weird. He asked me how I knew that since I haven't ever been to a city but I said that I knew it because that's what everyone said. Granddaddy told me not to believe everything I was told.

Chapter Three

The first day of school came and Freddy and I had to go, even though we didn't want to. Pa said to be nice and polite to the teacher and he took an apple out of one of the crates and said to give it to her. I asked if it was because she couldn't afford to bring her own lunch but Pa said it's always a nice thing to give apples to teachers. I didn't know why we ought to bring her an apple but Pa said to so we did.

Freddy and I walked a mile to town with a new metal lunch bucket. I packed our lunches and left some cold lunch for Pa since I wouldn't be there to cook him anything. Pa found an old hankie and tied it to the handle of our lunch bucket so we wouldn't get ours confused with the other kids. Pa always thinks of nice things like that.

When we got to school we said hello to the other kids, most of whom we already knew. Then the teacher came out of the schoolhouse and rang a little bell and everyone went inside so Freddy and I did too. We walked up to Miss Krahkor's desk and gave her the apple. She set it off to the side and opened up a book and told us to tell her our names and how old we were and who our Pa and Ma were and where we lived. We told her that our names were Frederick and Rebecca O'Toole.

She asked, "Neither of you have ever been to school before?"

Freddy answered, "No, ma'am, our Pa taught us at home."

Miss Krahkor said, "Well, Frederick, you sit in the front row with the boys, and Rebecca, you sit in the front row with the girls."

"Yes, ma'am, but everyone calls me Freddy, and everyone calls my sister Becky and you can just call us by those names, ma'am."

Freddy said it respectfully so I was surprised when Miss Krahkor said in a mean tone, "I most certainly will not. You were given proper names and I shall call you by your proper names."

That is how it is done in school.” I didn’t get the point about why we had to be called by our proper names but since she seemed kind of mad I didn’t ask her. I turned around and went to sit in the front row like I was told. I thought about how the teacher’s proper name was White Trash.

All the kids in the front row were little so Freddy and I looked kind of dumb sitting there. Miss Krahkor teaches us in little groups one at a time. The little kids up in the front can’t read or write or do math yet, and some of them don’t even know the letters or numbers. There are eight forms, and we were in the first. So until the day was over Miss Krahkor moved us both up to the fourth form. I figured that counting this year, we were stuck in school for the next five years.

School was really boring and I hated it. Pa taught us stuff at home so a lot of school was repeating stuff that we already knew anyway. Some kids at recess said school should be really easy for us but it just made it even more boring than it would have been otherwise.

When Pa asked us how we liked school we both told him that it was boring and we hated it and since we went today we didn’t want to go back anymore. Pa told us we had to go back because the law said that was what we had to do.

We went to school for a couple of weeks and then one particular Saturday came and Pa, Freddy and I went to town like we always do. Amos Spry was sitting out on the porch steps of Mr. Jacobs’ store looking at a newspaper. There was a big picture of a train wreck drawn on the front page and Amos said to Pa, “Hey, Hiram, did you know about this train wreck?”

Pa said, “No.”

Amos asked, “Where’d this happen at?”

Pa said, “Nebraska.”

Amos asked, “Did anyone get killed?”

Pa read the headline, “Seventeen Killed, Dozens Injured When Two Trains Collide in Nebraska.”

Amos said, “Thanks, Hiram,” and went back to looking at the drawing in the newspaper. We walked in the store and I asked Pa why Amos was asking all those questions and Pa whispered at me to hush and he’d tell me later.

Granddaddy was in the store and I ran over and gave him a big hug and he said, “Well, hey, there’s my favorite granddaughter.” Granddaddy always called me that but I’m his only granddaughter. “How do you like school?”

“It’s terribly boring and I hate it.”

Freddy came over and Granddaddy patted him on the back because Freddy doesn't like to be hugged because that's how boys are. "How's my favorite grandson?" Freddy is his only grandson.

Freddy shrugged, "Pretty good."

Granddaddy said, "How do you like school?"

"I hate it," Freddy said.

Granddaddy looked surprised and said, "Well, is there anything good about school? Do you like the other pupils?"

"What are pupils?" asked Freddy.

"Pupils are school children. Have you met any interesting pupils?" he asked.

"There's a cross-eyed pupil named Iris," I said.

"Is that so?" asked Granddaddy, who looked kind of like he was trying not to laugh.

Pa came over and he and Granddaddy shook hands and started talking. Freddy and I bought some candy with our money that Pa gave us and we looked at some of the new toys that Mr. Jacobs had for sale. Freddy doesn't play with toys a whole lot but he still likes to play with lead soldiers. There was a really neat painted tin top that we both liked.

On the way home we were riding in the wagon and eating our candy when I asked Pa, "How come Amos was asking you about the train wreck in the newspaper?"

Pa said, "Amos can't read."

I asked Pa why not and he told me and Freddy that a long time ago when Pa and Amos were little they went to school together and one winter day a whole bunch of boys got into a snowball fight. Amos is a really tall man with big muscles and Pa said that when Amos was little he was a really big boy. All the boys were throwing snowballs and Amos threw one at someone and he missed the kid and the snowball hit one of the schoolhouse windows and put a big crack in it. Pa said that the snow was really thick and heavy but there must have been some ice in the snowball or something because Pa said it would take a heck of a throw to crack a window with a snowball. The bad part was that since it would be so unusual to break a window with a snowball that the teacher figured he must have done it on purpose. Miss Krahkor told Amos that he had to go home and never come back to school again. Amos was really upset and he told the teacher how sorry he was and that he didn't mean to break the window. Pa said that Amos didn't have a mean bone in his body and would never hurt anybody or anything on purpose but the teacher threw him out of school just the same. Amos' Pa and Ma went to talk to the teacher and said that they would pay for a new window but the teacher said that her decision

was final. Amos' Pa got so mad that he said if that's how the school teacher was going to be she could just pay for the window her own self. His parents were awfully sorry that he was thrown out of school because they wanted him to learn how to read and stuff because neither one of them could.

"But why didn't she say that Amos could go back?" asked Freddy.

Pa said, "Well, if a child misbehaves badly enough the teacher has the right to say that they can't come back to school anymore. But what Amos did wasn't bad and Miss Krahkor didn't like poor kids. Amos was poor when he was little because his parents couldn't read. But no one liked Miss Krahkor anyway because she was city folk and really persnickety and she didn't like farm towns or farm people."

I asked Pa, "So you're saying that children that don't behave don't have to go to school?"

"If a child behaves badly enough to cause disruptions in school then the teacher does have the right to say that the child is no longer allowed to attend school. But I would hardly call a boy accidentally breaking a window grounds for expulsion," he answered.

I was riding on the seat with Pa and Freddy was sitting in the back of the wagon and Freddy gave me a big smile and I smiled back at him. Pa didn't know what we were thinking but I could tell by Freddy's face that we were both thinking the same thing: we wanted to be so bad that we didn't have to go to school anymore. But we couldn't say anything about it though because if Pa knew that we wanted to do bad stuff on purpose he never would have allowed it. Pa asked, "What should we eat for supper?" so I knew that he didn't know what me and Freddy were thinking.

We ended up eating fried chicken for supper and after supper me and Freddy went out to the barn to do some chores. Pa was in the house when Freddy said to me, "Let's think of some really bad things to do so we can get kicked out of school."

I said, "That's a real good idea." The only problem was that me and Freddy always minded Pa and did what he said so we weren't exactly sure how to be bad. It's tough trying to figure out how to do something that's bad but not wrong. We didn't want to do anything wrong, we just wanted to get kicked out of school.

Freddy said, "If we can do something bad that means no more school."

We talked and wondered if we should do one big bad thing or do a whole bunch of little bad things. We decided to do both. We figured that the worse we acted would mean the quicker we'd get thrown out.

Chapter Four

The first bad thing was my idea. We bought a box of crackers from Mr. Jacobs at the general store one day after school. We took the crackers home but hid them from Pa. The next day we went to school early and we climbed in the back window. The teacher's desk was flat and it opened up with a hinge. We opened the box of crackers and laid them out one by one all over her whole desk so that she wouldn't be able to open the desk without spilling crackers all over the floor. Since the teacher's name is Miss Krahkor we thought it would be funny.

We climbed back out the window and threw the box from the crackers into the little crick behind the school.

We had about a half hour until school started so we went to Mr. Jacobs' store and visited Granddaddy. Earl Duke was telling everybody about how he killed eighty-six Indians with three bullets and two sticks. I knew that was a lie but he's so good at telling stories that no one cares that those stories aren't true. That one might be a little bit true because he really did fight in the Indian campaigns when he was a young man.

We had to go to school and Freddy and I were among the first kids there and Miss Krahkor looked like she was real mad but trying to pretend that she wasn't. All the kids came in and Miss Krahkor pointed at her desk and said, "Who is responsible for this?"

Freddy didn't even raise his hand to talk; he just gave a big smart aleck smile and said, "We are."

Miss Krahkor asked, "Who is 'we'?"

So I gave her a big a smart aleck smile, too, and I said, "Me."

Miss Krahkor said, "I demand an explanation at once!"

So I said in a voice that was all smart-alecky, "We thought you'd be getting tired of apples and since your name's Miss Krahkor you'd like crackers."

Miss Krahkor's face started to get really red and Freddy says, "Do you like our surprise?" and all the kids were laughing and she knew that we were being sassy.

She said, "It's a shameful thing to waste perfectly good food in such a manner. There are starving children on the other side of the world. Now you go throw them away!"

Freddy said, "It isn't right to throw kids away just because they're starving."

All us kids started laughing really hard and Freddy stood there with a great big smile. Freddy can be really clever with words and jokes. Besides, that was a pretty dumb thing for a teacher to say. But she didn't think it was funny and her face got even redder and she said, "You knew perfectly well what I meant! Now get busy cleaning up!"

So we went up to the front of the classroom and then I got a good idea. I opened up the window and threw a handful of crackers outside. Miss Krahkor got really mad and yelled in a screechy voice "Rebecca O'Toole! That is uncalled for!"

So I turned around and looked at her and I tried to look surprised and said, "But teacher, you said to throw the crackers out, so I did. Out the window was the only way I knew. I don't think I can throw the whole way out the back door."

All the kids were laughing and Freddy was too. I could tell he was proud of me and that made me feel pretty good.

Miss Krahkor said, "Listen, you little trouble makers, you've just gotten yourselves in a whole lot of trouble and you're only digging yourselves a deeper hole. I suggest you pick up those crackers and carry them outside and throw them away! Then you get back in here!" As we were walking out Freddy ate a cracker and I did too, hoping that the teacher would get even more mad than she already was.

We walked outside and Freddy said, "I guess that wasn't bad enough to get kicked out of school. She wants us to go back in."

"Cheer up, Freddy," I said, "maybe she's going to make us go back in so she can tell us to get out."

"I hope so," Freddy said. We threw all the crackers in the creek because we figured that the fish would like to eat them.

We went back in the school and Miss Krahkor was standing behind her desk with a really nasty look on her face. She had a sentence written on the board that said, *Good children do not cause disruptions in school.* We had to write it fifty times each.

Writing those sentences wasn't any fun because my arm got really tired trying to reach the higher part of the chalkboard. We finished before lunch time was over but before we were

allowed to go outside Miss Krahkor said that she would be going to our house that evening to talk to Pa.

Freddy and I went outside to the schoolyard and ate lunch. It was nice to sit down after having to stand up all morning. We had cheese and bread and apples and cookies. All the kids were telling us that what we did was really funny but we didn't tell them that we were trying to get kicked out of school. We figured that if we said it that someone would tell Pa and then Pa would make us behave and then we couldn't get kicked out.

All the kids sit together in the yard when we eat, except these two twin sisters. Their names are Hester and Esther Perry but they're snotty and they think they're better than the rest of us because they're twins. All the other kids said they were tattletales and pains in the neck so that's why all the kids called them Hester and Esther Pester. Besides the twins there is a girl named Iris (she's got crossed eyes so you can never tell what she's looking at), David Baker, Ezra and Gilbert Jones, Maryanne and Malachi Tobey, Darlene, Irene, and Josephine Goode, Billy, Michael, Lester and Earl Coate, David Match, Alexander, Bessie and Myrtle Doan, and Percival Weggins. I liked all the kids at school except the Pester twins. When the lunch period was over we spent the rest of the afternoon in school, really bored, and looking forward to the end of the school day. I was really hoping that when Miss Krahkor came to our house she would tell Pa that we weren't allowed to come back to school anymore.

After school we started walking home and sure enough Miss Krahkor was right there walking along with us. We were passing along the side of Mr. Jacobs' store and the windows were open and I yelled, "Hi, Granddaddy!"

Granddaddy waved at me but then he looked kind of confused when he saw Miss Krahkor walking along with us, especially since her face looked madder than it usually did. He jumped up out of his seat and came out the front door yelling, "Hey! Hold up a minute!"

Miss Krahkor looked really mad as Granddaddy walked over to us. Granddaddy asked, "What's going on here?"

Miss Krahkor said, "Your grandchildren have been behaving horribly!"

Granddaddy just smiled a really big smile and said, "Well now, isn't that lovely?"

Freddy and I just started laughing. "Don't you encourage them! I'm walking them home to speak to their father this minute!" Miss Krahkor snapped.

"Hold on a second there, Aggie. Supposing you tell me what the problem is?" Granddaddy said.

"How about you keep your two cents out?" Miss Krahkor said.

"I suppose I can – can if you want me too," Granddaddy said.

Miss Krahkor looked really surprised and sort of mad and maybe even a little bit scared all at once and I couldn't figure out why. He continued, "But perhaps this is something that you and I could discuss privately for a moment so I don't have to get angry and say a few things that you might regret."

Miss Krahkor said stiffly, "Perhaps we should speak about it then, if that's how you feel."

Granddaddy handed some money to me and Freddy and said, "Here's a nickel for each of you. How about going in there and buying some candy while I talk to your teacher for a minute?"

"Thank you, Granddaddy!" Freddy and I said at the same time. We ran into the store and I spent my whole nickel on lots of shoestring licorice and Freddy got some peppermint sticks and some gumdrops.

Earl Duke said, "We saw you walking along with that old windbag. Please tell me you got in trouble at school today and that you weren't walking with her for the pleasure of her company."

Before Freddy or I had a chance to say something another man said, "I'd rather have the company of a three hundred pound hog."

Earl Duke said, "If she was two hundred pounds heavier that's exactly what she'd be!"

Everyone started laughing, even Sarge. Probably not many mayors laugh at school teachers but no one could blame him since it was Miss Krahkor.

We ate our candy and Earl Duke asked, "Do you know how that woman ended up in this town?"

"No," I said with a shrug.

"The rat followed the Pied Piper in from the East. And after the Pied Piper realized what he'd done to the poor folks of this town by bringing her here he walked himself all the way to California and drowned himself in shame. All the rats except for Haggie Aggie followed him, too."

The men were laughing and I knew that it was just one of those joke lies but I asked, "Why did all the rats kill themselves?"

"Just to be rid of her!" he said with a laugh. I couldn't help but wish that Earl Duke was a little kid in school. He'd be really good at helping me and Freddy get kicked out.

About that time Granddaddy came to the door and said, "Alright you two, can I speak with you for a minute?"

Freddy and I went outside. Granddaddy walked us around the corner of the store and said, “Aggie tells me you two gave her a hard time in school.”

I nodded. What else could I do? I wasn’t going to stand there and lie, and I especially wouldn’t lie to Granddaddy.

Granddaddy said, “I imagine school must be pretty rough having a teacher like her.”

“It’s terrible, Granddaddy,” I said.

“Yeah, she’s mean and school isn’t any fun at all,” Freddy said.

“I told Aggie that I didn’t want her talking to your Pa,” said Granddaddy.

“Thank you, Granddaddy,” Freddy said.

“Thank you, Granddaddy,” I said.

“You have been well-behaved kids your whole life. If school isn’t doing you any good, or if you’re not learning anything new I’d say that’s the fault of the teacher. I told her not to say anything to your Pa about you two not behaving.”

“And she listened?” I asked.

“Yes, she did. Believe it or not your old Granddaddy can be quite the intimidating fellow when he wants to be,” he said with a wink. “Now as far as you two not behaving, I really don’t care about that. I can’t stand Aggie Krahkor and I wouldn’t give that woman two cents worth of pity if a pack of wolverines chewed her face off.” Freddy and I started laughing. Granddaddy continued, “If most women got their faces bit off it would be a sad thing but if Haggie Aggie got her face bitten off it would probably improve her looks quite a lot. Now I don’t know why you’re giving her such a hard time but I don’t want to see you get into trouble with your father. But if you act up again then your Pa’s going to hear about it eventually, maybe from her or maybe from one of the parents of your classmates. So maybe it would be best for you to calm down a bit and do your lessons, alright?”

I looked at Freddy. Freddy looked at me. We didn’t say anything. We just stood there a couple of seconds and Granddaddy said, “I know it’s not any fun to have a grownup ask you to behave, but I just don’t want to see you get in trouble because you two are the best kids in town. You know that right?”

“I know,” I said. I didn’t really think we probably were but that’s what Granddaddy said and he had such a big smile on his face I couldn’t help but believe him. Granddaddy hugged us both and said, “Now you two run along home before we’re all in trouble with your Pa.”

We thanked Granddaddy for the candy and we walked home. Between bites of shoe string licorice I asked Freddy, “So now what? Granddaddy just got us out of trouble.”

“Well, maybe that was the best thing. We won’t get into trouble with Pa, but now Miss Krahkor is afraid of Granddaddy so maybe we can do enough bad stuff to get kicked out of school before Pa finds out. Then we won’t have to go back at all.”

I nodded and said, “I never thought about it like that but it looks like that probably was the best thing that could have happened.”

“Do you want to trade me some of your candy?” Freddy asked.

“Okay,” I said. We walked home together eating candy and watched bright yellow leaves fall slowly from the trees. Fall was arriving, and it was the prettiest time of the year.

Chapter Five

There's an old stray cat that lives somewhere in the woods that are between town and our farm. I'm not sure if the cat ever had a name or not but we always just called him Scurfy because he's kind of dirty-looking even though cats are supposed to be clean. Scurfy's about the ugliest cat in the whole wide world and that's why Freddy and I like him so much. Scurfy's got one eye and half a tail. Well, I guess he really does have two eyes but one's got this big gristly white thing growing in it and it kind of looks like a knotted up string. You can't see the pupil in his eye because it's all covered up. The other thing about Scurfy is that he's bald on the whole right side of his body and no one knows why. One of the boys at school said that Scurfy probably jumped up on the table saw at the timber mill and the big blade shaved half his fur off. None of us really believed him though because if that was all his fur would have grown back.

I remember last year I felt bad for Scurfy since winter was coming and I knew he'd be really cold with only half his fur but then this medicine man came to town and he stopped by the house when Pa was out in the field so I asked if he sold cat medicine and he said he sold medicine for people and every kind of animal knowed to man. He asked what kind of cat medicine I wanted and I said I wanted something to make a bald cat grow his fur back. He sold me a bottle of stuff that smelled funny and said it would make Scurfy's fur grow back in about a week. I paid fifty cents for the cat medicine.

Later that night Scurfy came out of the woods like he usually does looking for scraps and Freddy helped me catch him. Freddy held Scurfy down because cats don't like to get wet and I poured the tonic all over Scurfy's bald spot and spread it around with a paint brush because I was afraid that if I got it on my skin it would make me grow cat fur. Scurfy didn't like it much. The only bad part was that Scurfy never did grow any fur, the tonic just turned him green for about two weeks and then he got this red rashy looking thing and I felt kind of sorry but mostly I just got mad at the dumb peddler. I told Pa about it but he said don't ever buy anything from a medicine peddler. I told Pa that the next time Dr. D. Link Wint comes to town I'm going to tell him his stuff doesn't work but Pa says the guy already knows his stuff doesn't work and most

dishonest peddlers never go to the same town twice, and he probably isn't a real doctor at all. I was mad that I wasted fifty cents because that's a lot of money. Pa said try not to worry too much because I tried to do something nice for Scurfy, and then Pa gave me fifty cents to make up for what I gave the peddler. When I showed Pa the tonic he smelled it and said it smelled like liquor and turpentine mixed together and watered down and that wouldn't cure anybody of anything. Pa also said the bottle didn't say anything about being cat medicine but that bald men were supposed to rub it on their bald head to make hair grow back again. I told Pa he could keep it in case he ever went bald but he said it wouldn't do any good anyway. Pa said it wouldn't make anybody grow hair and it would probably make someone go bald before it would cure being bald. Pa isn't bald yet but Granddaddy is a little bit, he has two bald patches, one above each eyebrow, but he still has his hair on the top of his head and on the sides and around the back of his head.

Scurfy still comes back around our farm a lot and the school yard sometimes and most all of us kids like him but some of the grownups around town don't like him and say his fur fell out because he has some sort of fungus or something. I don't know if I believe that though because I have pet him lots of times and I never got any fungus from him.

One evening Freddy and I were heading out to the barn to milk the cows and we saw Scurfy walking towards us. "Here, Scurfy," I called, and he walked over to me. Scurfy lets me pick him up and hold him, and Freddy said, "I've got an idea to get kicked out of school and Scurfy can help us."

"What?" I asked.

"You know that ribbon Pa's got on the mantle that he won at that shooting contest?"

"Yeah," I nodded.

"Well, let's make a ribbon for Scurfy that says, 'Way prettier than Miss Krahkor.' We could make a collar for him and he could wear it and everyone would see it the next time he comes around the schoolyard," Freddy explained.

"I don't know, Freddy," I said.

"Why not?" he asked. "Scurfy's pretty ugly so I bet that would make Miss Krahkor mad enough to kick us out."

"Because where are we going to get a ribbon?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe we could make one somehow," Freddy said.

"Even if we could the letters on it would be too small to see," I told him.

Freddy shrugged. "Yeah, maybe you're right."

“It was a good idea, though,” I said. I patted poor Scurfy’s bald spot and then thought of something.

“Hey, Freddy, I just got the best idea!” I said.

“What?” he asked excitedly.

“Let’s paint ‘Way prettier than Miss Krahkor’ on Scurfy’s bald spot!” I told him.

“That’s a great idea!” he said. “But we better milk the cows first.”

A lot of times Scurfy will come into the barn when we’re milking cows, I think because Scurfy gets cold in the woods. While we were milking the cows Freddy asked, “Won’t paint hurt him?”

“We won’t use regular paint. We can use war paint like Indians use,” I said.

Freddy asked, “How are we supposed to get Indian war paint? There aren’t any Indians around here.”

“Indians make war paint. We’ll just make some of our own,” I told Freddy.

“I heard that Indians make war paint out berries and stuff, but how are we going to find berries this time of year?” he asked.

“There’s a whole bunch of those blueberry preserves that Aunt Vera gave us. Let’s just paint him with that. Blueberries won’t hurt him.”

After Freddy and I were done milking the cows I snuck into the pantry and got a jar of preserves. Freddy found a paint brush and I poured some preserves out for Scurfy to eat so he’d stand still while I painted, “Way prettier than Miss Krahkor” on his bald spot.

It took me a little while but when I was done the jam paint letters looked pretty nice. Freddy said that the letters were big enough that people would be able to see them from far away. Freddy had to give him more preserves a couple of times because Scurfy ate them up pretty quick. But then once I finished painting him Scurfy licked all the jam letters off of his bald spot and so we knew we would have to come up with something else to get kicked out of school.