

**Jeremy and the General A Novel by JOHN IBBITSON**  
**Maxwell Macmillan Canada**

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This book was written for Grandma Boyd, and in memory of Grandma Ibbitson.

They were expecting me to cry. I had seen tears in Uncle Will's eyes and Aunt Amy had been crying since Tuesday. I should have cried too. She was my mother. But I couldn't. "Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts...." Mr. Morrison was no minister—his farm was up the road. But he knew the service and there wasn't a minister for miles, so he said the words. "We therefore commit her body to the ground—earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" Dirt dribbled from his hand and rattled across the rough pine wood. The women stepped away, took each other's arms, and began the walk back to Uncle Will's house. The rest of us reached for the spades that leaned against the elm. Uncle Will took my arm. 'You don't have to, son.' "I want to." No one spoke after that. We sank our shovels into the soft spring earth beside the grave and heaved the earth into the grave below. There were six of us, and it didn't take

long. I never noticed when the last of the coffin disappeared. When it was finished I stood over the two graves for a moment—the fresh, new one of my mother, the old grey earth beside it where my father was buried—and pretended to say a prayer. The wind tugged at my coat, and a fine drizzle began to darken the earth. I turned away and joined the men walking across the field to the house. Most of the farmers along Yonge Street still lived in the log cabins they'd built the year they cleared the land. Our log cabin hadn't changed much in the fifteen years since I was born in it. But Uncle Will and Aunt Amy lived in a proper house, with two bedrooms and a stove inside and even lanterns at night. It was crowded now in the main room, but not too crowded to hold the dozen neighbours who stood uncomfortably and sipped on tea and tried not to show how long it had been since they'd tasted sugar cookies. People talked among themselves—about the late spring, the crops, the war we might have with the States, but not about death. "You'll stay with us tonight, Jeremy." Aunt Amy dabbed a handkerchief across her eyes. "I think I'll stay at the farm." "Ohno." She lowered her handkerchief. "You can't stay there all alone. Will..." She pulled at his sleeve. "Jeremy wants to go back to the farm. To his—to his parents' farm. He mustn't do that." "Wouldn't you rather stay with us for a bit, son?" Uncle Will offered. "You know you're welcome." "Someone has to feed the animals. And I want to be alone tonight." And I did.

"Well, he's fifteen, he can take care of himself." Uncle Will smiled. "I'm sure he'll manage." "I don't know, I don't know." Aunt Amy's handkerchief fluttered about her face. "It doesn't seem right." But she began drifting toward the tray of cookies, which meant she'd given up. "I don't blame you, son," said Uncle Will, as I pulled on my coat. "I'd want to get away from all this, too. We've put cheese and some meat in the root cellar. Be sure you eat." "Thanks." I wanted to leave, but he stepped forward and took my arm. Uncle Will was a big man—tall and broad and heavy. He always stood close to other men when he talked to them, as though he wanted to remind them of his strength. I didn't like it. "We have to go to Richmond Hill tomorrow," he said quietly. "There are . . . some legal matters. Your mother gave Mr. Robinson the papers." I nodded. Legal matters. I hadn't thought about that. What were we going to do—about the farm, about me? It was a muddy walk home. I wasn't used to wearing shoes. Boots were what you needed for open fields in May. But I ignored the mud. There were things to consider. What were we going to do about the farm? I couldn't run it alone. And I didn't want to run it. I hated the farm. I stopped in the field. *I hated the farm.* It echoed inside me. I'd never known that before. Oh, I'd said it every day. *I hate this farm,* I'd say to myself, as I struggled with the hay for the cows, or spread the manure across the fields, or fought with a chicken for her egg. *I hate this farm.* It was like part of breathing.

But I'd never really known it until now. Known it absolutely. I hated the farm. I hated farming. I'd always hated it. So had my father. My family came to Upper Canada in 1784, after the American colonies rebelled against England. My father and my Uncle Will were the sons of a farmer in New York. The two brothers stayed loyal to the King when rebellion came, and because they were loyal the Yankees threatened to put them in jail as traitors. So they left, both still in their teens, and came to Upper Canada. The Americans who came north after the war were called Loyalists, and they got grants of land. I don't know much about their first farm, but it must have been poor, because when the government began opening the land north of York for settlement, they sold the farm and took land on Yonge Street, about twenty miles north of the town. They each had two hundred acres, side by side. But you'd have thought their farms were on opposite ends of the earth. My Uncle Will was born to farm. His crops ripened faster, his cows were fatter, his children were fatter too. My father worked from dawn to dark and it never seemed to do any good. I heard someone whisper once that the only luck he ever had was getting mama as his wife. He met her in York. She was the daughter of a miller, and people thought she was too good for him (I heard Aunt Amy say that once), but she married him anyway. I don't know if she knew what she was getting into. We lived in a one-room cabin. The stone fireplace gave us light

and heat for food—and smoke to choke us until our eyes watered. She kept the house clean, and looked after the cow and the chickens and the pig while my father fought with the land and lost. One day he was working in the field when suddenly he grabbed his chest and fell down and didn't get up. That was seven years ago. I don't have much of a memory of him. All I remember is a man sitting at the table at night, his face shadowy in the firelight, staring silently at his hands. Mama should have given up the farm and gone back to York, but she stayed. This was where God had put her, she said. She worked from before the sun was up till after it set. She worked in the field and in the house and in the barn until the lines on her face seemed to deepen as you watched her. She didn't talk much when she worked, and she never sang, but I sometimes heard her humming to herself, some song I didn't know. I worked too. At first there wasn't much I was good for, except bringing in the eggs and sweeping the floor. But I was always big for my age—I had my Uncle Will's shoulders, mama used to say—and by the time I was ten I was doing a man's work. Uncle Will would lend a hand when he could, or send his son Seth. We'd help each other with the harvest, mama working in the fields beside the men while Aunt Amy shook her head and muttered that it wasn't right. There was no school I could go to, so mama taught me to read and write and do sums. We had only the Bible to read, but we read it every night. I guess there wasn't much laughter on the farm—mama didn't think much of people

who cackled like hens, as she said. But it was comfortable at night, the two of us together, me reading the Bible out loud, or writing out sentences with chalk on an old slate, mama correcting my mistakes. I'd noticed her getting thinner, and she held her side sometimes and set her face against showing the pain, but she never said anything about it, and I never asked. Then last Thursday, we'd just finished getting the field ready for the spring planting when she leaned on her hoe and said she felt dizzy. I helped her to the house, then ran to get Aunt Amy. Mama lasted less than a week, getting weaker and weaker. She was hurting inside, but there was nothing we could do. By the end we were just hoping she'd stop being in pain. So they were both gone now, buried on their own land, at the foot of a hill beneath an elm tree. And I was alone. I stood in the yard between the house and the barn. The low grey clouds had created an early twilight. The tree beside the house creaked in the wind that curled around me and made me shiver. The drizzle had turned to rain, a thin, cutting rain that stung my cheeks. I turned away from the wind and rain and walked to the house. Inside it was dark, and that was fine. I stoked the fire and pulled a chair up beside it, then wrapped a blanket around me and sat in the chair, waiting for the warmth from the fire to reach inside me. The grey light from the window out- lined the shadow of the table. I looked at the table and thought of my mother and cried.



The light from the morning sun woke me. I uncurled myself from the chair and stretched stiffly. There were chores to do—the cow had to be milked, the chickens and the pig fed. I was still in my good clothes; the wool trousers scratched against my legs and I was anxious to get out of them. But Uncle Will had said we were going to Richmond Hill for some business, so I left them on. I was just coming out of the barn with the milk when Uncle Will's cart trundled down the twin ruts of our path, pulled by a dapple-grey mare Uncle Will owned and everybody envied. "Are you ready, son?" He seemed impatient, restless. "Right there." I hurried to the root cellar with the milk, slopping half of it over the sides of the pail and some of it onto me. I ran to the house, where my cheese and bread sat waiting on the table. No matter how restless Uncle Will was I needed that cheese and bread—I hadn't eaten properly in days. It was the first good morning after a week of bitter weather. The air was moist and fresh, the rain from the

night before glinting off the grass and fences in the cool May sun. I munched on my bread and breathed in the scented air. It seemed hard to believe there'd been a yesterday, with a funeral and rain and cold tears. But Uncle Will seemed gloomier today than ever. Worse—at the grave, he had tried to comfort me. Now he just made me feel uncomfortable. He gripped the reins tight in his hands and stared silently at the back of the horse's head. "Why are we going to Richmond Hill, Uncle Will?" I asked finally, more to break the silence than anything. "I told you yesterday, there are some legal things to settle." Uncle Will glanced at me quickly, then back at the horse. "Your parents left a will with Mr. Robinson." The Robinson mill was the only mill for miles. People brought the grain they grew in their fields there, sometimes in carts, sometimes on their backs. They went away with ground flour—the only real reward for a season of work. James Robinson built the mill in the nineties, and grinding people's grain for them had made him the richest man in the township. What's more, he could read and write and do sums, which most people couldn't, so he took care of a lot of personal business, too. "What's in the will?" I'd never seen a will before. "I don't know. Nobody knows what's in a will, until it's opened." He shrugged. "Though of course, everything will have been left to you." I knew that shrug. It was the shrug a farmer gave just before he tried to steal your cow from you. It was the shrug everyone gave when they wanted you to believe they didn't

care, but they did. I knew that shrug—something was going on. "Have you thought about what you're going to do, Jeremy?" Uncle Will asked, gazing ahead down the road. I gazed down the road too. "Nope. Not really." "Well, you're fifteen, now. And you're full grown. You're big for your age, and strong, and ready to work." I nodded. Around here, as soon you were big enough to work you worked. Maybe on your own farm, maybe on someone else's. There wasn't any other choice, unless you left and went to work in a village. And what would I do in a village? What was I good for? I could get work as an apprentice, maybe, at a blacksmith's or merchant's. None of it sounded better than farming. "... and of course there's the question of the farm." I blinked. I hadn't been listening. "Sorry?" "I said—" Uncle Will gripped the reins tighter. "I said, there is the question of the farm. I mean, it's yours now " I nodded. It was mine. Only I didn't want it. "But..." Uncle Will rubbed his forehead. I'm not sure what you're going to do with it." "Whatcha mean?" I gave him a swift look. He'd been thinking about this. "Well, you're a strong boy of course, no doubt about it." Uncle Will slapped my knee. 'You've got your grandfather's build—you must be near six feet, now—and his eyes." I grimaced to myself. Why did people always talk about your eyes? My mother said I had her father's eyes. My father'd said I had *his* father's eyes. They were just eyes—

sort of grey and too wide apart, if you ask me. "Though you remind me of your mother, too." Uncle Will continued. I groaned. Another adult comparing me to other adults. "You have her hair of course. Fair, like hers, and wild— do you ever get a comb through it?" I ran my hand through my hair, which I did a hundred times a day, though it never did any good. "And you've got her cheekbones and her nose." He chuckled. "Your father always said the thing he loved most about your mother was her nose. I told him— well, never mind." He blushed slightly. "About the farm " "I was saying you're big for your age, and strong, but you can't run a farm, now can you?" Uncle Will raised a skeptical eyebrow. "I mean, you're too young. And you're all alone." The question was back again. What was I going to do? I waited for Uncle Will to go on, but he didn't have anything more to say. "What should I do?" He shrugged again. "I'm not sure. I've been thinking about it, but I'm not sure." He shook the reins. "Let's wait until we see Mr. Robinson." We didn't speak after that. Uncle Will went back to staring at the road, and I stared at my hands. I'd always known what was going to happen to me—I was going to work on the farm I hated until mama was too old, then I would take it over. Now she was gone, and I didn't know what my future held. It was only a few miles from the farm to the mill, but

Yonge Street was never easy to get along, especially in the spring. We probably would have got there faster walking, but Uncle Will was over fifty now, and men over fifty liked to sit, even if it meant taking longer to get someplace. But we reached the mill finally. It was a wooden building, two storeys high and narrow, with a large wheel on one side. We climbed out, and walked inside. We were in a storeroom full of great bags of oats and flour, and air full of dust that drifted in the sunlight streaming through the window. "Hello!" Uncle Will shouted, and in a moment Mr. Robinson came out—a thin, grey little man in a black coat. "Hello, Mr. Fields." He shook Uncle Will's hand. "A pleasure as always." "This is my nephew, Jeremy," said Uncle Will. "Thelma's boy." "I'm so very sorry to hear of your loss." Robinson tilted his head to one side. "Your mother's father and my father were the best of friends. She was a brave woman." "I told Jeremy that his parents entrusted you with their will." Uncle Will seemed restless. "Yes, it's in the office. Follow me." Robinson disappeared through a door near the back, and we followed. Just as we were about to go in Uncle Will stopped, and gripped my arm. "Jeremy..." He swallowed. "I want you to know—I loved your father and your mother. They were part of our family, and my family means more to me than anything in the world." I nodded to show I understood, but I didn't. It seemed

to me such a strange thing to say. We went in, and found Robinson sitting at a desk piled with papers, most of them rolled up and tied with red string. He motioned Uncle Will to sit, but my uncle went over to the small window, and looked out. This room was too small for him. Robinson pulled one of the pieces of paper from the pile, and cleared his throat. "Your mother left a will, Jeremy, and asked me to take possession of it. I'll open it now, if you wish." I nodded. He untied the string and opened the letter. Quickly he scanned the lines, then passed it to me. "It was drawn up in York, and of course it's all in legal language, but briefly, your mother willed her estate—that is, the farm and all her worldly possessions—to you." He offered me a thin smile. "The will also provides that, in the event of her death before you reach the age of twenty- one, I am to act as trustee for the estate." Uncle Will stepped toward the desk. "Jeremy and I were talking on the ride in. We agreed that it would be quite impossible for him to manage the farm on his own." I looked sharply at Uncle Will. I may have thought that, but I'd never said it. "Quite so, quite so," Robinson agreed. "We have a dilemma, in this regard." Uncle Will cleared his throat. "Jeremy, I would be willing to purchase the farm from you. With the money, you could get a start of your own in life. You could help me farm, if you liked, or learn a trade, or " His voice trailed off. "As your trustee, Jeremy, I must say I think this would be

for the best." Robinson smiled. "Selling the farm would surely be the wisest thing to do." "I think ... twenty pounds would be a fair price, don't you?" Uncle Will looked to Robinson. "Yes," Robinson nodded. "Twenty pounds would be fair indeed." Twenty pounds! The farm was worth five times that. On bad days Mama would talk about selling—she'd say she was tempted to take the hundred pounds some man had offered her and go back to York. "Twenty pounds is too low." I glared at Uncle Will. He turned away and looked out the window again. I swivelled around to Robinson. "It's too low." Robinson rubbed the side of his nose. "Under normal circumstances, I would say yes. But," he smiled apologetically, "the farm is not in prime condition. Your parents were unable to clear much of the land. And it would not be easy to find anyone with the capital to purchase a farm in the middle of spring planting." "I think it's quite reasonable, Jeremy." Uncle Will moved and reached out a hand, but I shrank back. "It's quite reasonable under the circumstances." "You must also understand, these are difficult times." Robinson stepped from behind his desk. "You know there is talk of war. The British and French are at each other's throats. And now the Americans are involved. If hostilities should break out, we could be invaded, our villages torched, our farms burned by Yankee troops." "You'd do all right," I shot back. Anger flushed my face. I could hardly breathe. I could hardly think. I hated the

farm. I didn't want it. That's what I'd said to myself. But this ... this was wrong. They were stealing the farm from me. They were *stealing my* mother's farm. "I won't do it. I won't sell." I swung from one to the other. "You can't do this to my mother. You're taking her land from her." 'Jeremy...' Uncle Will reached out his hand again, but I shrunk back. "Your mother's dead. I wish that weren't so, but it is. This is the best thing now." "No! I won't let you do it!" My shout echoed against the bare walls of the empty room. The two men stared at me, shocked. Robinson cast a quick glance at Uncle Will, who nodded. Robinson walked back to his desk and held up the will. 'Jeremy, under the terms of this will, I have full power of attorney as your trustee. That means I can do whatever I feel is best for you, with or without your consent. I'm sorry you don't agree, but I feel your uncle's solution is in your best interest.' Uncle Will took a leather pouch from his coat and walked over to Robinson's desk. "I took the liberty of bringing money with me. I believe you'll find twenty pounds there." He dropped the pouch quickly on the desk as though the leather were burning his hand. "Oh excellent! I've drawn up the necessary papers. If you'll just sign...." Robinson held out a sheet of paper to Uncle Will. He paused for a moment, his eyes closed, his face tight. Then he grabbed a quill from Robinson's desk, dipped it in a bottle of ink, and scrawled his name across the



bottom. Robinson handed him a worn-looking slip of paper. "Here is the deed to the farm. I'll have the contract witnessed later. The property is yours." Robinson picked up the pouch, removed several coins, and slipped them into his vest pocket. Then he turned to me. "And here, Jeremy, is fifteen pounds. My services in this matter entitle me to a small commission, but the rest is your inheritance." "I don't want your money!" I backed toward the door. The room seemed to be tilting. I was just standing there watching as they took away mama's farm. I was so helpless, so useless.... "Jeremy, let's go home." Uncle Will reached for his coat. "We can talk about this on the way back." "No, not with you. I hate you!" My hand, groping behind me, found the door knob. I flung the door open. "You thieves! "I screamed. "You stole our farm! Damn you, you dirty thieves!" I ran through the storeroom and out into the morning sunshine. The light was blinding. I shielded my eyes, and stumbled along the road toward my home. I cried out curses against Uncle Will, against Robinson, against the world. I swore revenge against them, swore I'd kill them, swore I'd win back my farm. But I knew the words were empty. There was nothing I could do.

For a while I half-ran, half-stumbled down the road back to the farm. Rage washed down me, and back up again. Traitor! Liar and traitor! Thief! Lying thief. It was exhausting, and I finally had to stop. There was a tree beside the road and I leaned against it, slid my back down the rough bark, and cradled my head in my hands. Memories and emotions swirled around inside and collided. My mother . . . the funeral. . . Robinson's grey, thin hand ... Uncle Will closing his eyes before he signed . . . the farm .... I had to stop. I had to get control. There was no good in this, no good in just hating and running. I had to think, to plan. But it was so hard. I clenched my fists, tightened the muscles of my face, tried to push down the feelings. But I couldn't. They were too strong. I sobbed, choked, my chest shuddering with each breath. I don't know how long it went on. When it was over I felt empty, drained. I wanted to sleep. But I couldn't give in to sleep. I forced myself to

straighten up. It was an hour's walk back to the farm, and standing here wouldn't make it any shorter. I sweated as I trudged down the road. The spring rains had turned much of it to mud, which sucked at my shoes and made it harder to walk. There was no wind, and no company except the blackflies that swirled around my head. Blackflies in May could drive you mad, but I ignored them. Sometimes, as I passed the farms, I could see a farmer walking along the furrowed rows of his field, casting seed from the pouch hanging at his side. Sometimes his wife would be with him, or she'd be moving about the farmyard, tending to the animals. No one waved. Farmers are too busy in the spring to notice strangers on the road. My mind was clearing. I'd never felt rage until today, and I was embarrassed. Mama would have been angry at me. She always said that nothing was worse than losing yourself to your feelings. I cleared my throat loudly. I had an hour free, and I might as well use it. It was time to make a list. Mama always told me there was no such thing as a bad decision. The only bad thing was not to make one. She said if you looked at things clearly and made a choice, and stuck to that choice, everything would turn out all right in the end. And if it looked as though you'd made the wrong choice, ignore it, because you can never know how things would have turned out, really. Mama never had time for people who complained. We weren't put here to be happy, she said. We were put here to serve the Lord and not act like fools.

*Just know your mind.* I could hear her words in my head. *Just know your mind and stick to it.* That's why, for as long as I could remember, whenever I had a problem I made a list. Once you made a list, I found, you'd know what choice you wanted to make. You'd be ready to choose, and once you chose, like mama said, the rest just happened. I started my list. What was the first thing to put on it? *You don't want to farm.* That's what I'd been thinking about most since the funeral. That had to go at the top. What next? *You 'we lost the farm to your uncle.* I clenched my teeth and pushed down the anger. It was a fact. It had to go on the list. *You want revenge.* I thought about that. I did want revenge—I could taste the need for it in the back of my throat. I wanted to hurt my uncle. I think I wanted to kill him. But what could I do? They hung you for killing people, and I didn't want to hang. I couldn't fight him legally—he and Robinson had all the signed papers; what did I know about the law? "You can't get revenge." I said it out loud, to the blackflies I guess. It was hard to say, but I had to say it. Things only became true once you said them out loud. There was nothing I could do to my uncle that wouldn't make things worse than they were now. *You can't get revenge.* I added it to the list. *You want to get out of here.* I stopped in the road. I hadn't thought about that before, but I knew instantly it was true. I had to leave, leave the farm, leave everything around here, get out.

My mama had a map that her father gave her. She kept it folded up at the back of the family Bible, but sometimes she'd take it out and spread it on the table and show me the world—England, France, Russia, even Japan. I learned all the countries and their capitals off that map. I used to dream in my bed in the loft of our cabin of going to Europe and seeing London. Or Paris—where Napoleon ruled France and most of Europe. I thought of the map on the table. All the strange countries. What I would give to see them all! Maybe the army or the navy ... I shuddered. I'd heard stories about life in the British navy. They treated you like a dog and you died like one. The army probably wasn't much better. But maybe there were other ways. Maybe I could get on a merchant ship. Or go into the fur trade! Everyone knew tales of the traders who crossed the continent in canoes and lived with the Indians, and lived like the Indians too. It thrilled me to think of it. No more farming! No more fields and animals and manure. I'd be free. My walk turned into a trot. I wanted to get home—no, not home, the farm wasn't home any more. But I wanted to get there, get my things. I'd made my list. I'd made my choice. It was time to get away from here. I was somewhere in the North, punching my canoe through a cauldron of whirlpools and rapids, when the sound of horse's hooves pushed into my dreams. I whirled around. Uncle Will's cart was right behind me. I hopped to the side of the road and swore at myself. I didn't want to see him. I'd been determined to get off the

road and hide if he came along. I was too angry, too ashamed at what he'd done to me. But here he was. I had to face him. "Whoa!" He pulled on the reins and the cart slowed and stopped. The sun was behind him and his dark form loomed over me. I shaded my eyes against the glare. "Get in." He gestured to the seat beside him. "No." "It's a long walk." "I'll walk it." "I know you're angry—" he began. I cut him off. "I'm more than angry." I took a step toward him, raised my fist, then dropped it. What was I doing? What could I hope to do? "Get out of here." I jerked my fist at the road. "Go on, get out." He raised himself off the seat. "Don't you talk to me like that." His voice hardened. "I don't take that from anyone." "What are you going to do?" I tried to keep my voice from cracking. "What more can you do to me?" He paused, half out of his seat, one foot out of the cart. Then he sat back down. "I'd feel the same way," he said tonelessly. "I'd want to kill me, if I were you." "I do want to kill you." The fury was stirring in my gut again, rising up through my chest. "You know why I did it?" he asked. It stopped me. I hadn't expected that. "Why?"

"Survival." He leaned back against his seat and tilted his head to the sky. I could see his face now, lined and weary and hard. "We're all just hanging on here, all of us. Even me. I've done well, but I have debts, and I have a family to feed, and I have things I want in my life before I die. I need that farm. I need it more than you do. You're like your father—you don't have a feel for the land. It doesn't mean anything to you, like it does to me. I need that land. And now I've got it. I don't like how I got it, but that will fade." "It won't for me." He looked back down at me. "Maybe it won't. But it's over. There's nothing either of us can do." We stared at each other for a moment, looked into each other's face, read each other's mind. I did understand. It didn't make me hate him less, but I knew him now. He wasn't my uncle anymore. He was my enemy. And I was his. We seemed to agree on that together, silently, as though we were forming our own contract. "What are you going to do?" he asked finally. "Leave," I replied. "Go south, maybe to York. Maybe travel." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the pouch with the money. "You'll need this." I took a step back. "I don't want it." He smiled. "Very noble, but you'll need it anyway." He threw the pouch to the ground and took up the reins. "You'll be gone in the morning?" The cart lurched forward.

"Yes." "Don't bother to feed the animals," he called back. "I'll have Seth look after it." And he was gone. The pouch lay in the mud at my feet. Fifteen pounds. Dirty money. They'd raped my inheritance and left me with fifteen pounds. I picked up the pouch, wiped off the mud, and shoved it into my hip pocket. I tried not to think of it as I continued down the road.



It was hard to sleep, but when I did the wear of the past days caught up to me. The sun was high in the sky when I opened my eyes. I washed myself quickly in the big metal basin we used for keeping ourselves and everything else clean, shivering as the cold water ran down my back. I only had two woollen shirts and a couple of pairs of rough woollen pants to my name. One pair had a hole in the knee, and I pulled them on, and the oldest shirt. The good clothes went into a satchel, along with my mud-caked shoes (I'd been wearing my father's leather boots around the farm for years), my wool coat, a knife, a tin cup, a hard bar of my mother's soap, the rest of the bread and cheese, and the money. What else? I looked around the room that I had lived in all my life. There were things I wanted to take—my mother's Bible, which listed the births and marriages and deaths of everyone in her family for four generations, the hand-held mirror she would look into each night before bed, shaking her head at what she saw, the picture of Christ the Shepherd and his flock that was the only thing on our walls that had no purpose—but I left them where they were.

They belonged here, and I didn't. Not anymore. It was well past noon when I stepped out of the house. I stopped once, swung my eyes across the yard between our house and the barn, then turned my back on it. At the end of our path I paused. Yonge Street twisted and curved its rutted way both north and south. North it led to the Quaker farms and then to Lake Simcoe. Beyond that was only forest. South it led to York, only twenty miles, but slow going. My parents had made the trip in Uncle Will's cart a few times, but they'd left me to tend the farm. Now I'd see it for myself. I shifted my satchel on my back, and started out. I planned to take my time; there was no hurry. There were villages on the road, and inns I could stop at if I wanted. I'd go as far as I felt like, then stop at an inn, stay there for the night, and go on to York the next morning. After that... who could know what came after that? Walking was pleasant. A cool breeze cut the heat of the sun. Yonge Street was little more than two ruts, and some times it was even less, just logs laid together that could knock the teeth out of anyone riding a cart over it. But it made no difference to feet, and I walked along without trouble, craning my neck to make out the robins and blackbirds and crows that filled the air with their calls. The land was like that around my own farm: low hills with farms on either side of the road, and dark forest beyond. Not all the land was cleared, and sometimes I walked under canopies of branches that arched across the road and blocked the sun. I didn't meet a soul. This was a busy time of year for settlers, and no one left their land

unless there was good reason. The road was mine. When I reached Richmond Hill I ducked my head and ran past the mill and the half-dozen other buildings that were there. It felt good to have Robinson behind me. After a couple of hours walking I came to a creek, swollen with the spring runoff. The crude wooden bridge—just some logs tied together—had been washed out. I took off my socks and boots and waded across the creek. The tug of the water almost knocked me over, even though it only came up to my knees. On the other side I sat down in the shade of an oak tree and ate my cheese and bread. The water from the stream was cold and fresh. I dunked my head in it, and laughed for no reason when I shook my head and the water sprayed around me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed. As the afternoon wore on and my legs began to wear out the walking became less fun. I'd passed several inns, but hadn't stopped. Now that looked like a mistake, for the next one seemed a long time coming, and I was ready to quit. I started to worry. This was strange country—every thing from here on in would be strange. Who did I think I was, running off like this? I was only fifteen years old—too young for adventure. I began to think of the farm. I wished I'd taken the Bible with me. I'd never cared much for it before—it was what I had to study from—but now, for some reason, I wanted to look at it, look at the names inscribed in the front, the names of my father and mother and me, look at the map with all the capitals.

Maybe I should go back to the farm. I could work for my uncle, maybe get the farm back some day. At least I knew the farm, knew the people there. It was home. These thoughts came back to me more and more as I walked, and each time I shook my head and tried to walk a little faster. There was no going back. I had made my list and my decision. I had to stick to it. I would never work for a man who had cheated me. The future was down this road. An inn would appear soon. Keep walking. But walking was getting harder. My right foot was rubbing against the rough leather of my boot; the thin wool sock gave little protection. With each step it became more painful. I stopped at a tree stump and took my boot and sock off. A large blister had formed on the side of my foot, just below the big toe. There was nothing I could do. I put the boot and sock back on and kept going. Before long I was limping, trying to rest my weight on the right side of my foot to keep the pressure off the blister. The fields were grey and the sky darkening when I finally reached the crest of a ridge and looked down into a deep valley, where lights glowed just beyond the bottom. I felt like shouting for joy, but I only whispered a thank you to the sky and began stumbling toward the lights. It was dark in the valley when I reached the bottom. The lights were closer now—I could make out an inn up ahead, maybe a couple of houses, too. I was hungry, and the thought of supper made me walk faster and ignore the pain of the blister. It had been a long day, but the day was almost over. I heard the stream before I saw it. The water rushed over

rocks, fast and dangerous. In July it would be just a creek, wandering south to the big lake. In May it was a torrent. But I could see a bridge, and as long as there was a bridge, the river could roar all it wanted. When I reached it I rested one foot warily on a log and pushed. The wood creaked and rocked. This wasn't safe. I should go back. But the lights of the inn glowed on the other side. It would be warm there, and there would be a bed and food. The bridge had survived floods before. Surely it could stand the weight of one more traveler. I stepped carefully, ready to jump back in a second. But the bridge held. I walked forward slowly, grasping the rail. Water flecked beneath me in the moonlight, inches from my feet. And then . . . I'm not sure. There was a crack, and suddenly the logs were sliding out from under me. I teetered, tried to get my balance, saw the stars swirling in the dark sky above. And then there was water, all about me, cold, sucking at my breath. I fought back at it, kicked my legs, clawed myself toward the sky. And then a sharp pain pierced my head, and a brilliant light flashed across my eyes. And then I remember nothing.

Three or four different kinds of pain arrived at once. My head pulsed with pain. Pain stabbed at my side. And a wet, chill pain crawled across my skin. I was half awake, half unconscious, completely confused. The voices seemed to come from far away, maybe from a dream. "I heard something ... there ... it's just an animal... no ... there!... something there! ... Dickson, Spruce, go see.... Yes, sir There's a boy down here! He's hurt... Ward, lend a hand " Arms reached around me and pulled. The pain in my side stabbed sharply. I cried out. "Careful with him. He's hurt " I was lifted up, handed to one set of arms, then another, until I felt the hard earth under my back. I opened my eyes, tried to lift my head. "Are you all right, boy?" I touched my side and winced. A bruise maybe, maybe worse. My head throbbed, but the fog was clearing. "I'm all right." I looked up. A half-dozen figures clustered around me. One of them held a torch. In the

flickering light I caught the dull glow of brass buttons and red cloth. "You're soldiers?" "Second company, first battalion, His Majesty's 41st regiment. Now who are you?" His accent was strange—like a Methodist preacher who'd come by one summer and preached in a field for hours. English accent, mama had said, different from ours. A tall man stepped forward and looked down at me. "Yes—who are you?" I could see him clearly in the light of a torch. His coat was red, brilliant red, and his trousers were snow white. A long, silver sword glinted at his side. There were rows of brass buttons, and gold braid on his shoulder, and on his head a tall, tubular black hat with a capped front. He was the most magnificent-looking person I'd ever seen. And his voice. Low, calm, a different, cleaner accent than the others. Everything about him said command. I tried to rise, but my knees were rubber. Two soldiers hoisted me upright. Once I was standing, my legs seemed to get their bearings. I'm Jeremy Fields. Sir." He seemed the sort of man who was used to "Sir." "You should be dead, young man. We found you wrapped around an old tree, beside the river. Did you fall in?" He was about thirty years old, maybe more, with fair skin and dark hair. Something of a smile played around the edge of his mouth, as though he found this all a bit amusing, as though he found everything a bit amusing. "I was crossing the bridge." I rubbed my head. "And it

gave way. I tried to swim " Suddenly I felt, or didn't feel the satchel. It should have been on my back. I reached around, groping behind me. "My satchel! Did you see my satchel?" "Nothing, sir," a soldier replied. "There was just him." I groaned. The money was in the satchel. And my clothes. Now I had nothing. "Bad luck," the officer shrugged. "Never mind. We'll find something dry for you to wear. You can sleep with the men tonight. At any rate ..." He turned to a soldier who had stripes on his arm. "We can't go any farther with the bridge out. We'll have to return to the inn. Sergeant, form the detachment." "Yes sir!" Muskets rattled and clinked as the men arranged themselves in a single line. I hadn't noticed the horse, black as the night, standing silently a few feet away. The officer took the reins and swung himself into the saddle. "Maitland, look after the boy." "Aye, sir. Detachment, quick—march!" The men moved forward as one. The sergeant grabbed my arm and half-dragged me along. It was hard to match their steady pace, but I did my best. It was only a matter of minutes before we reached the inn. I cursed my luck. I had gotten so close.... The detachment halted before the door of the inn. Maybe half a dozen horses and oxen and carts were tethered in front, and a babble of voices drifted through the door to the outside. Strange, so many people in one place, and not a church.



"Detachment, at ease." The men lowered their muskets. The officer dismounted and turned to the old sergeant. "You're in charge, Maitland." "Sir!" The officer opened the door to the inn. I glimpsed faces and food and mugs, and then the door shut again. Some men leaned up against a post, some others rested on their haunches. I stared in fascination. All these men, in these beautiful clothes, handling their guns like walking sticks, laughing and swearing quietly at each other, as though they'd seen all the world and this place was the dullest part of it. Maybe they had. Probably it was. Maitland, older than the rest, with a red face and grey hair, paced slowly about, his head down, occasionally glancing up and peering into the night. When he got close to me I decided to speak. "What's the officer's name?" Maitland glanced at me. "He's Captain William Stanton, but you can call him 'Sir.'" "I call everyone older than me 'Sir.'" Maitland grinned. "Do you? Well brought up, are you? Well don't call me 'Sir,' because I'm a sergeant, and if you call a sergeant 'Sir' you'll soon have an aching head." "I already have an aching head." It was the wrong way to talk to a soldier, I guess, but I was too tired and sore to care. Maitland didn't seem to mind. The door opened. The officer—Stanton—appeared. "Maitland. Bring the lad in."

"Sir!" He motioned to me and we stepped forward together. I had never seen anything like this room. There were half a dozen long tables, each with ten chairs, and most of the chairs were full. A large stone fireplace crackled with flames from birch and maple logs. On one side of the room there was a short wooden bar with kegs and mugs behind it, and a woman—thin, grim, with black hair in a bun and no smile. Stanton motioned me to follow him and we wound our way through the tables to the bar. "Madam, this is the boy I was telling you about." The woman glared at me. "You say the bridge is out?" I felt as though I were to blame. "Yes. It gave out from under me." The woman shook her head. "Well, that's it. There's nothing we can do until the river goes down. I'll have no travelers from the north for a while. Or any going north, either. Damn the luck." I'd never heard a woman swear before. "Bad luck for us both. I wanted to go north." Stanton nodded to the men at the tables. "May I speak to these men?" "We always welcome an officer of His Majesty's infantry. "It sounded to me as though she didn't mean it. But she reached up and rang a brass bell hanging over the bar. "Gentlemen! Your attention, please! Captain William Stanton, of His Majesty's 41st regiment, would speak with you." A hush fell over the room. "Gentlemen." Stanton's eyes swept across the room.

Some men gazed back at him curiously. Others kept their eyes on their food. "Gentlemen, I am pleased to be able to speak to you. My men and I have tried to reach as many farms as we could over the past two days, but there is too little time and there are too many farms. "Gentlemen, we may soon be at war." There was little reaction. A few heads bowed lower. Someone muttered a request to God for help. There'd been talk of war, of course. Britain was fighting for its life against Napoleon in Europe. They were trying to starve him, blockading his ports. Except the Americans were neutral, and traded with who they liked. So the British were stopping American ships bound for Europe. Some times they boarded Yankee merchant ships and took back British sailors who'd run away and were now American sailors. The Americans threatened war unless they stopped. That was the reason the Americans gave. Most people around here figured the real reason was that the Yankees wanted to grab British territory in North America while the British were too busy in Europe to fight back. And no one really thought the British could stop them. "For those of you who haven't heard," Stanton continued, "The United States of America has threatened war against Britain over our naval blockade of Europe. Already there are reports of state militias forming to march against Upper Canada. We could be invaded in a matter of weeks. Every man will be needed if we are to repel the invasion." The men at the tables shifted and looked at each other.

They knew that if there was war they'd be called to fight, and they didn't seem too eager. "And what," came a voice from near the fire, "makes you think we can 'repel the invasion'?" Stanton paused for a moment, seemed about to speak, then stopped. He looked at the man near the fire. "I know what you're thinking. There are ten of them for every one of us. Their president has told his people victory will be 'a mere matter of marching.' You wonder why we should fight, when the fight is clearly lost." He paused. Only the crackling flames of the fire disturbed the perfect silence. The British officer had asked the only question that really mattered. "I know that is what you think," Stanton continued, "and my answer to you is this: With all my heart I believe we can defeat the invaders." "Defeat them? How?" came a voice from the back. "We have four advantages over the Americans." Stanton counted them on his fingers. "First, we are defending, they are attacking. They must meet us on our own soil, far from their homes. If once their advance is checked, their enthusiasm for this war will quickly fade. "Second, they are a volunteer army. They have not been properly at war since their secession nearly forty years ago. They will be facing trained, experienced British troops. "Third, the Indian tribes have joined us. The Shawnee chieftain Tecumseh has formed a confederation of all the Indian tribes of the mid-West. They have promised to fight with us. The Americans are terrified of the Indians.

"And finally—" Stanton lowered his hands and stared straight at the men. "Their generals are either old and tired veterans, or ambitious politicians after glory and votes. "We, on the other hand, have General Brock." Brock. I'd heard the name. General Isaac Brock, the man in charge of the British troops in Upper Canada. Nobody knew much about him. "I have served under Brock in Europe and in the West Indies." Stanton gazed about the room. "He is a great leader, loved by his troops, decisive and brave. If there is any man who can destroy the Yankee armies, he is that man." "This is no time for us to be making war," said a farmer with a thin black beard huddled over his plate of stew. "We have farms to tend to." Stanton looked at him impatiently. "Your crops are planted, aren't they? You have families to look after things. What will become of your farm if the Americans conquer us?" "It'll become an American farm." The farmer shrugged, and returned to his stew. Stanton looked from table to table. "If you're afraid that I'm here to call you to arms, then fear not. Your own militia officers will see to that when the time comes. Whether you fight is not my concern. Although," he said quietly, "many of you have parents or grandparents who came to Upper Canada to escape being American. They loved their king and the country of their ancestors. Perhaps that love has died."

He paused for a second, then squared his shoulders. "I am here, gentlemen, to look for volunteers to join His Majesty's army." "What?" The men looked startled. "We're farmers, not soldiers," someone called out. "Indeed you are, but what of your sons?" The half smile that seemed always to play around the edges of Stanton's mouth returned. "Perhaps you've been wondering what will happen when you're gone, with too many children to share too little land. "I am offering you a solution. We need volunteers to fill our ranks, especially now. Any able-bodied man who wishes to join the army will receive clothing, food, wages, and a chance to serve his king—often in climates much more hospitable than this one. "I will stay at this inn until three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Speak to your sons. Speak to the sons of your neighbours. Have anyone who wishes to enlist come here. 'Thank you gentlemen. God save the King.'" "God save the King." A few called out the words stoutly, a few muttered them, the rest were silent.

I slept with the soldiers in the stable that night. Only officers enjoyed rooms in inns. Someone brought me some food, and someone looked at my side and head and told me I'd live. Maitland rubbed some oil on my blister, which he said would help. I didn't think I would be able to sleep. I had so much to think about. My money was gone—what was I going to do

tomorrow? Where would I eat? Where would I go? "Maitland?" I whispered, to the dark figure that huddled in the straw beside me. "Go to sleep, boy," he grumbled back. "Maitland, would they take me in the army?" He was silent for a moment. "How old are you?" "Eighteen." He chuckled. "I said I was eighteen, too, and they decided to believe me. Yes, lad, I've no doubt they'll take you. Do you want to die?" "No!" I was startled. "Soldiers die. Before that they eat bad food and sleep on damp ground and march from dawn to dusk. Then they fight and die. Is that what you want?" I looked into the darkness. "What else is there for me?" "Nothing, I suppose," he sighed. "There was nothing else for me. You only become a soldier when there's nothing else. Now sleep." And I slept.

"How old is he?" "Eighteen, sir." "Hah." Stanton looked me over suspiciously, as though I were a piece of livestock not worth the asking price. "So." He offered me a mock bow. "You've decided to join His Majesty's army. In search of glory and honour, and a shiny red uniform?" I shook my head. "No sir. I've got no money." The smile darted across his face and was gone. "Well, an honest answer. Still..." He frowned. "I should reject you. You're too young and too impertinent." "Please, sir." I tried to stand the way the soldiers stood when called to attention. "I work hard. You won't be sorry." "Won't I?" He sighed. "Well, I suppose we are in no position to turn away volunteers. It would seem you're the only one we've got." All day we'd waited for men to arrive. None had. I'd overheard the innkeeper grumble that farmers were so afraid of being forced to join the army that even regular customers were staying away.



"Very well," Stanton shrugged. "Maitland, you seem to have adopted this boy. Do keep him out of trouble, won't you?" "Adopted...?" The sergeant started to protest, but gave up at a glance from Stanton. "Yes sir." He glared at me, but I just grinned back. I liked this sergeant.

"Sergeant, if you would" Stanton turned his back to the men and walked over to the innkeeper.

"Detachment, sling arms! Move to the right in columns of route!" The soldiers fell crisply in to formation. Maitland pointed to the back, and I trotted to the end of the line. Stanton ended his conversation and strode over to his horse. Maitland stepped forward and saluted. "Detachment formed ... *sir!*" "Thank you sergeant." He nodded to the innkeeper, and raised his right arm.

"Detachment... forward ... *march!*" We were off to York. My side ached, and it wasn't long before the blister on my right foot reminded me it was there, though Maitland's oil had helped. The road often gave way to deep ravines, dark and swarming with mosquitos, that we seemed to plunge into and crawl out of. Still, Yonge Street was in better shape here than north of the inn, and I was getting used to walking. There were more farms along this road, and every now and then we were halted and moved to the side to let a cart pass. Once we passed an old farmer in his field who dropped his hoe and stood stiffly at attention, hand raised in salute, until we had gone by. Stanton saluted gravely in return.

More than once we passed young farmers who turned their backs and tried to ignore us. If Stanton had hoped the sons of the Loyalists would rise to join the army and defend their homes, he must have known now he was wrong. And I knew he would have done worse the farther north he went. Most of the farms near my home weren't even settled by Loyalists. They were Americans who came up here looking for land. If Upper Canada became part of the States, they'd go back to being American, just like they'd been before. Not something worth fighting about. Late in the afternoon Stanton called a halt and ordered a thirty-minute rest. The soldiers dug into their knapsacks for food, but I had no knapsack. Maitland grudgingly shared the last of his food with me. All anyone had was some hard biscuit and some tough beef you had to chew forever before you could get it down your throat. "Learn to enjoy it, lad," Maitland grinned. "You'll be eating enough of it, from now on." "How far to York?" I asked him. "An hour's march until we see it. An hour more to the garrison. Eat and be quiet." The sergeant was almost right. Not long after we started marching again the farms ended, and we walked through a broad swath of forest, untouched by an axe. Then suddenly we were on the other side, at the crest of a ridge. In the far distance a spire poked into the hazy air. York. To the south the sky merged with the darker blue of a lake, a huge lake with no southern shore. This would be Lake Ontario, one of the great inland seas that stretched

from Lower Canada all the way to the middle of the continent. I had seen them on the map, but never thought about what they looked like. I knew this lake was one of the smallest, but I had never imagined there could be so much water. If it had been up to me, we'd have run. I wanted to explore this capital of Upper Canada that I'd heard so much about and walked so far to reach. But it wasn't up to me, and no one else seemed in a hurry. The sun was almost behind the trees when we approached the first farmhouses that marked the outer limit of the town. "Look smart, men," Stanton called out. "They're counting on us to save them. Let's be soldiers." Much of the land now was just open field, with the odd road crossing Yonge Street east and west, and the odd house where the corner formed. I'd expected more. The houses were grander than our log cabins, with wood clapboarding and shingled roofs, but still they were just houses. I'd never seen a city, but I expected busy streets and grand buildings. One of the men said the main part of town was to the east, and I could see buildings off in the distance. But we wouldn't be going near there—the garrison where the troops lived was well to the west of the town. When we did pass a house people would come out to look at us. Stanton would nod his head to the women. The rest of us were told to keep our eyes front. We were almost at the lake when we turned west onto a narrow road. Suddenly Stanton ordered us to halt. Another column of troops was approaching. And what a

column! It seemed to go on forever. I counted fifty men. An army! "Where are they going?" I asked Maitland, as they marched by. "It doesn't matter where they're going," he shot back. "When they get there, they'll turn around and march back. And stop asking questions. It's impertinent, as the captain says." Soon we reached the garrison. A wall—they called it a palisade—of wooden poles maybe twelve feet high stretched from the lake to the road, and then west. We passed through wooden gates into a large yard about two hundred yards wide by one hundred yards deep. There were a dozen buildings, mostly large log houses with a door and two windows. Near the edge of the lake was an even larger building, two storeys high, called the blockhouse. A Union Jack fluttered in the breeze beside it. Most of this I discovered later. My first impression was of noise and movement, of soldiers marching, turning, of sergeants shouting orders, of officers striding purposefully from one building to another. They all looked as though they knew exactly what they were doing, but what they were doing was impossible to tell. "Detachment... *halt!*" We were standing in front of one of the log buildings. "Sergeant." Maitland stepped forward and saluted Stanton, who dismounted. "I suppose you will have to find our new recruit a home." Maitland looked glum. "Yes, sir." Stanton turned to me. "You will be asked to swear an oath, and once you have sworn it you will be a soldier. You

will also be given a shilling, which I am sure you will not spend well. Do you understand?" I nodded. "Say 'Yes sir.'" "Yes sir." "Good. You will be a private in the 41st Regiment of Foot. It is a proud regiment, and I expect you not to disgrace it." "No sir." "You are the only recruit in this garrison and so Sergeant Maitland will have to train you as best he can. What matters is, you will be a soldier, and will be treated like a soldier and expected to act like a soldier." "Yes sir." He locked his eyes on mine. "I do not normally accord such attention to a recruit. But you are the first colonial from Upper Canada to join this regiment. Perhaps you will show us how much—or how little—your people are made of." I forced myself to meet his gaze, but said nothing. For an instant, his half-smile returned. Then he looked away. "Sergeant, dismiss the men." "Sir!" Stanton stalked across the yard to the blockhouse. The men headed for one of the log houses. Maitland called it a barracks, and when I entered it smelled of sweat and leather. Beds lined each wall, enough to sleep twenty men. But there were already twenty men in this barracks, and I was twenty-one. Maitland pointed to the floor by a stove at one end. "There's your bed, lad. There'll be a blanket for you, but pallets are in short supply. I hope you're not a restless sleeper." He grinned and left.

I sat myself down on the floor beside the stove and tried to be comfortable, but I knew comfort was a long way from here. Still, at least I was by the stove. "Hey, you!" I looked up. He was big, with a red face and muscles straining the cloth of his tunic. "What makes you think you can sleep by the stove?" "The sergeant said I could." "You'll block the heat. Go crawl into the far corner." I flushed. Who was he, to order me about? "No." He leaned over me. "You'll go crawl into the corner, and if the sergeant asks you'll say you like it there. Do you understand?" I looked at the other men. They watched, but said nothing. A couple of them grinned. I got up and walked to the other end of the barracks. The man laughed. My skin burned with anger, but I said nothing. I was the stranger here, and he was bigger than me. This was no time for fighting. I crawled into the corner and took off my boots. The blister was bigger than the day before. I stretched out on the floor and closed my eyes. The rough boards stuck into my shoulder blades. *Get used to it, I thought, it's your new bed.* The men began to clean their boots, unpack their knapsacks, joke with each other. Many of them just lay on their beds, staring at the roof. There'd be food, sometime, and nothing to do till then but wait. "Welcome to the army, lad," someone called out. "It only gets worse from here." I wondered what he knew.

Mostly I remember feeling tired. The first goal of any soldier is to find a way to rest, and recruits get less rest than regular soldiers. The hours weren't so bad—I was used to rising at dawn on the farm. It's what you did during those hours. Every minute there was work, hauling logs to build a barracks, cleaning your uniform and polishing your boots, dragging garbage to the lake, painting, cutting, scraping, brushing .... And marching. We marched everywhere and back. We marched wearing packs on our backs that left you aching or numb. The other men were used to it, though they hated every second. I hated every second and I wasn't used to it. I was constantly falling behind, constantly hearing the lash of Maitland's tongue. "Come on, Fields, get going! You think you're on a stroll? This is the army, you useless sod!" I had to learn to load a musket in less than a minute— and there are twenty steps to loading a musket. I had to learn to pack a kit, and unpack it, and polish boots until my

eyes shone in them, and get used to saluting anyone who looked important. To be honest, I think I liked it. I enjoyed learning the precision of foot drill—each step exact, precise, each soldier doing the very thing he was supposed to, when he was supposed to do it. I enjoyed taking orders. It meant I didn't have to make any decisions. So much had happened, so many things I'd had to decide. I was tired of deciding. It was good to just work and sleep and march and let someone else do the deciding. I had two complaints. One was my bed, or rather the floor with one thin blanket that I slept on. On cold nights I slept on the floor with the blanket over me. On hot nights I slept on the floor with the blanket under me. Either way, I ached in the morning. The other complaint was MacPherson. He was the one who had forced me to sleep away from the stove, and it seemed to be a sport for him to make life difficult for me. MacPherson was the kind of man who'd stick a foot out to trip you when you passed, then roar with laughter when you fell, as though it were funny. He loved to steal my food or mess up my kit, then tease me about it all night. I tried to ignore him. I had too much to learn and too much work to get through to let him bother me. And anyway, he was the biggest man in the regiment, as well as the ugliest. But there were worse things in the world than being teased by a stupid man. And I had my own uniform and my own musket. I had to wait three weeks for the uniform, but



it was worth it. I'll never forget that afternoon when I pulled my arms through the tunic and felt the rough wool scratch my back, and felt the brass buttons rub against my fingers. "Well look at him," someone grinned. "You'd think he was a soldier." The musket—"Brown Bess" the soldiers called it—took even longer to get, but that was because Maitland didn't trust me with it. Week after week I practised, pouring in the powder, ramming the ball and wadding down the muzzle, aiming, firing, doing it again, but I was always too slow for Maitland, and too poor a shot. "The safest place to stand in a battle would be wherever your musket was pointing," he'd say in disgust, and make me do it again. Then one day, near the end of June, we were in a field firing at targets when Maitland came up behind me. "You'd better keep that one, Fields," he said finally. "It seems to like you." "You mean it's mine, Sarge?" "You're a soldier, aren't you?" he growled. "You need a musket. Haven't you heard we're at war?" "War?" The men lowered their weapons and stared at Maitland. "That's what I said. The Yankees declared war. Well, it's what we expected, isn't it? Now get back to your practice. And aim well, this time." From that moment on we lived on gossip and rumour. Where were the Americans? What were they doing? Where were the British reinforcements? Everyone was a general. Some said we'd retreat right

away to Kingston and give up Upper Canada. Others said no, we'd retreat right back to Quebec City and wait for the war in Europe to end. Others thought we'd fight for York. No one seemed happy about our chances of winning, which is bad news if you're a soldier. The Americans, we heard, had two great armies preparing to invade. One was forming on the Niagara frontier, the other was on its way to Fort Detroit. It was hard to say which threat was greater. If the Yankees crossed at Detroit and took Fort Maiden at Amherstburg, people said everything west of York would have to be abandoned. If they crossed at Niagara, York itself would fall. Whatever was going to happen, we wanted it to happen soon. June was almost over. The days were hot and getting hotter and there was nothing to do but practise and wait. Waiting made tempers short. There were fights among the men. Sometimes they were planned, behind the barracks when the officers were out of sight. Men would bet on the winner. Sometimes they weren't planned, and two men would hammer at each other in the barracks with their comrades shouting and cheering them on until a sergeant arrived and broke it up. I kept out of the fights. There was no point to them. And I had no experience in fighting. So when I did get into the brawl with MacPherson, I was as surprised as anyone. - Things were going from bad to worse with him. In a hundred ways he tried to make life hard—making fun of me, pushing me, stealing things and hiding them. Some of the older men tried to watch out for me—maybe they

had sons of their own—but mostly the soldiers kept to themselves. But I could live with MacPherson, or thought I could. Until the blanket disappeared. I noticed it as soon as we returned to the barracks after evening drill. I always kept the blanket folded against the wall. But it was gone. The only thing I had to put over me or under me at night was gone. MacPherson was sitting on his bunk, taking off his boots. I walked over to him. "Give me back my blanket." He looked up. "What're you talking about?" "My blanket's gone. I want it back." He grinned. "Is your blanket gone? Poor lad." I felt the anger rise from my stomach. I'd put up with this great, stupid man long enough. "Give it back. Now." He got up, slowly, still grinning. Standing together, facing each other, he seemed as wide as he was tall. I may have been big for my age, but no one was as big as MacPherson. "I don' t have your bleeding blanket," he said slowly, still grinning. "And if I did, I'd never give it back." "Give him his blanket, MacPherson," someone called out irritably. "Go on, MacPherson, give it back." MacPherson spread his arms. "If it's gone, it's gone. There's nothing I can do." I didn't think, didn't plan anything. I just threw myself at him. It caught him by surprise. He staggered back. I flung my arms around his waist and pushed. Off balance, he couldn't stop himself. We lurched down the length of

the barracks, like two crazy dancers, while the other men watched in amazement. We fell together in a heap by the door. I started hitting at his face, pounding at him. He tried to hit back, but I had his arms pinned to the floor with my knees. I was on top, and winning. It was hard to tell which of us was more surprised. "Atten ... *shun!*" Maitland's bark cut through the air like a whip. The men leaped to their feet. MacPherson and I untangled ourselves and jumped up, puffing heavily. Blood dripped from MacPherson's nose. Maitland stared at the two of us in disgust. "I don't care what started it. All I want to know is who started it." I stepped forward. "I did." He couldn't hide the surprise. "*You?*" He scowled. "I told you men if there was one more fight in this barracks I'd make you pay. I meant it You're confined to barracks until further notice. Fields, grab your kit and come with me." I avoided the eyes of the men as I walked back to pick up my knapsack. There'd be plenty of marching for them tomorrow, thanks to me. But when I turned back, they all seemed to be grinning. Maybe they thought it was worth it to see MacPherson go down. Maitland paused at the door. "I don't want to hear a whisper from this barracks. If I do, there'll be trouble. And MacPherson—" MacPherson stiffened. "Yes, sergeant." Maitland's voice was gentle, almost kind. "MacPherson, how does it feel, to be licked by a fifteen-year-old boy?" He didn't wait for an answer, but grabbed me by the arm and hauled me out the door.

"Now you've done it," Maitland snapped, as we marched across the parade ground. "I warned you all I'd report the next man caught fighting, and it would have to be you. And the captain told me to keep you out of trouble. We're both in for it now." "Shut up! I don't want to hear it. I've heard them all, and it's always the same." We reached the blockhouse. Maitland marched inside, leaving me to wait outside and think about what was in store for me. Then he came to the door and motioned me inside. Captain Stanton was seated at a desk in a small room at the back of the blockhouse. His eyebrows raised when he saw me. "Sergeant Maitland, what have we here?" "Private Fields is charged with disorderly conduct, sir. I entered Barracks Four to discover a fight in progress. The fight was between Private Fields and Private MacPherson. Private Fields admitted starting it. Sir!" "*You* started it." Why did everyone seem so surprised that I was in a fight? "Yes sir," I nodded. "Against MacPherson?" "Yes sir." "You seem to have come out of it remarkably unscathed." "The same cannot be said of MacPherson, sir," Maitland offered, deadpan. Stanton's smile played across his mouth, but he forced it back into hiding. "This is a serious offence, Fields. Striking a fellow soldier. Quite grave. And you were coming along so well."

He gazed at me for a long moment. "We can hardly send him back to barracks. He's clearly a bad influence on the men. Maitland, you know what I was talking to you about?" Maitland's eyes widened. "*Him*, sir?" Stanton nodded. "Possibly. What do you think?" Maitland's face clouded. "I'm not sure, sir. He's very young." "Agreed. But he said to choose one of the men, and Private Fields is one of the men." He turned back to me. "Tell me, private, can you sew?" I shook my head. "No sir." "Can you cook?" "Not really, sir." Stanton frowned. "Can you at least make a pot of tea?" "I think so, sir." "Hardly ideal," Stanton sighed. "Still, very little is ideal in this war, and he learns quickly, you said." Maitland nodded. "He does sir. Quicker than anyone I've seen." Stanton shrugged slightly. "Well, all we can do is try. If he says no, we'll find someone else." Stanton rose. "Fields, your sentence is suspended due to the requirements of the service. I want you to come with me." "Yes sir." I was confused. Nothing these men had said, or the questions they'd asked, made any sense. I was relieved I wasn't going to be punished, but at least punishment was predictable. This was impossible to understand. "Confused, Private Fields?" Stanton reached for his hat.

"Yes sir." "Well, you shouldn't be." He turned to me. "It's all very simple, really. "You're going to meet General Brock."

"Do you know what a batman is, private?" Stanton and I marched across the parade grounds to the garrison gate. "No sir." "A batman is the personal assistant to an officer. A servant, really. He cleans the officer's boots, lays out his uniform, cares for his equipment, fetches him whatever needs fetching. Do you understand?" "Yes sir," I lied. "General Brock's batman died last year. The general was very fond of him. Porter had been the general's servant for years, ever since the general was in the West Indies. He has had no batman since." We walked out the front gate of the fort and west to a small creek with a bridge. On the other side, I knew, was Government House, where Brock stayed. "The general is now both commander of all forces in Upper Canada and president of the council," Stanton continued. "That means he is both the military and political head of this colony. Which is a rather large job." "Yes sir."



"The general has decided—reluctantly—that he requires a new batman until this war is over. He asked me to choose one for him from the ranks. I have chosen you. What do you think?" I didn't know what I thought. "Why me, sir?" I asked. "Why indeed," he replied. "I'm not sure why. You're far too young, really, and not much of a conversationalist. Why *did* I pick you?" He stopped, put his hands on his hips, and stared at me. "I picked you because you remind me of what I like best about the people here," he said finally. "You don't say much, you don't ask for much, but you're proud just the same, and stubborn. The best among you have those qualities. I admire them. I think the general does, too." He shrugged. "At any rate, we'll soon see." We walked in silence. I don't know what Stanton was thinking. I was trying not to think. I had gotten into a fight, and as a result I was being taken to General Brock to see if he wanted me as his batman. It made no sense. It made even less sense because I noticed when I picked up my kit that the blanket was in it. I'd put it in there when I got up this morning, and forgotten. All the times MacPherson deserved a bloody nose, and I'd given him one when he was innocent. We arrived at Government House. It looked a bit like a very large barracks. The building was all one storey, in the shape of a U, with wood clapboarding on the outside—no fancy stone. There were lots of windows and chimneys, and a verandah, but it looked more like a soldier's house than a politician's.

A sentry at the front door saluted Stanton. Stanton returned the salute. "Captain Stanton to speak to the general's orderly." "One moment, sir." The sentry turned and rapped on the front door. The door opened, and an officer stepped outside, a thin and gloomy little man. For a moment I thought this was General Brock, but he was only an aide. Stanton saluted. "Captain William Stanton, to speak with General Brock." The orderly nodded and disappeared. A few moments later he returned. "The general will see you." Stanton nodded and stepped inside, motioning me to follow. We were in a hallway. Wood panelling lined the walls partway, with dark blue wallpaper covering the rest. Candles flickered from their holders on the walls. It was a rare thing for me to see candles—they were too expensive for most farmers. We'd always used a lamp with fat in it, or just relied on a fire. "The general is in the library." The orderly nodded toward one of the closed doors. "Thank you." Stanton turned to me. "Wait here." He stepped to the door and knocked gently. A voice from inside told him to come in. Stanton opened the door, gave me a quick smile, then disappeared inside. The orderly and I stood there, not looking at each other. I could feel his disapproval of me—one brief glance at my private's uniform said everything he wanted to know. I ignored him, and tried to make out the conversation going on inside. Their voices were muffled, but by listening

hard I was able to catch the odd word or two. "...Just a boy?..." "... Quite clever, sir ... " "... I'm not sure I need ..." "... You had asked, sir ..." "... But a mere boy..." The library door slid open and Stanton appeared. "Come in, Private Fields." I took a breath, held it, and stepped into a room full of old books and rich furniture. A man in a crimson coat and white trousers stood by the fireplace holding a sheet of paper. He turned to look at me, and I looked at him. He was tall, well over six feet, and broad, though not fat. His face was wide, with a strong jaw and a firm mouth. But his fine, blond hair and pale skin made him seem almost delicate. I'd seen officers, of course, but not like this. Gold epaulettes glinted on his shoulders, his white shirt was ruffled and rich-looking, his boots were jet black. He was a gentleman. I'm not sure I noticed all this at once. I do remember being overwhelmed by him. He was so clearly a powerful man, a man used to power. "I suppose I should have got him to comb his hair," Stanton smiled apologetically. "It doesn't matter." Brock's voice was quiet and smooth, but not soft. It reminded me of Stanton's voice, the voice people get when they have education and influence. He stepped forward. "Captain Stanton is an officer with a singular talent for knowing good men from bad, and he

thinks you are a good man. What do you think?" I flushed. My mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out. "Do you think you are a good man, Private Fields." "I ... I don't know, sir." He frowned. 'You don't know if you're good?' I was lost, helpless. "I... I don't know, sir. I hope I'm good enough." "Well," he smiled, "an honest answer. You said you're eighteen." 'Yes sir.' "Is that true?" Lying seemed impossible in front of this man. "No sir." "How old are you?" "Almost sixteen, sir." "Almost sixteen." He turned to Stanton. "He shouldn't even be in the army." "No sir," Stanton agreed. "But he seemed better off with us than where we found him. He has acquitted himself well in training." The general folded his arms and shook his head. "I don't know, Stanton." Suddenly I resented this man. It was a ridiculous feeling, but I resented him. Who were these people, to stand over me as though I were some piece of livestock, to be bought and slaughtered? I raised my head and looked at him. He seemed startled. We stared at each other for a second. I forced myself not to look away. Finally he turned to Stanton. "If you think so, we'll try. Thank you, Stanton."

Stanton stiffened. "Very good, sir." He picked up his hat, marched to the door. "Good night, sir." "Good night, Stanton." Stanton shot me a parting look. I think he winked. And then I was alone with Brock. "We'll go into your duties in the morning. For now, you'll sleep in the kitchen. It's getting on, you'll probably want to sleep. Thompson!" The orderly appeared in the doorway. "Sir." "Look after the boy. He is to be my new batman." The orderly's eyes widened momentarily. "Your batman, sir?" Brock's face clouded. "That is what I said. Make a bed for him in the kitchen." The orderly nodded. "Very good, sir." "That will be all, Fields." "Yes sir." I saluted. "You don't need to salute me inside the house." "Yes sir." I followed Thompson down a long hall to a large kitchen. He disappeared, then returned with a straw mattress and some blankets. He threw them in a far corner of the kitchen, by the back door, then wheeled about and left. I pulled the blankets over the mattress, blew out the candle on the table, and lay down. Sleep was impossible, but there was nothing else to do but try. What had I gotten into? I was to serve this man, the general of all the troops in the army? How? I thought of the farm. I belonged there. That's where I was born, and I should never have left. No matter what

Uncle Will had done, at least I knew him. I didn't know this man. For the first time since I joined the army I felt homesick. Great waves of it washed over me. I found myself crying, and couldn't even remember when it started. Figures moved about the house. Doors were closed, the light in the hallway went out. Things became quiet. I hoped no one could hear me. Maybe an hour passed, maybe two. I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling. I thought about running away, going back home. But that would be deserting. They shot you for that. I couldn't run away. I'd made decisions. All of them bad, all of them wrong, but I was stuck with it. A bell rang in the kitchen. I jumped up. It rang again. What was I supposed to do? It must be the general wanting something, but what did he want? Did he want me? Where was he? I scrambled out of bed. The bell rang again. I stumbled down the hallway to the front entrance. Everything was dark. The general must be in the other wing. I groped along the hall, then turned right, down another hall. It seemed to go on forever. At the far end I saw a light, glowing from the bottom of a door. I walked toward it, tripped over a table and stubbed my toe, groaned to myself, and got the table right-side-up again. At the door I paused. This wasn't right. Maybe the bell was for someone else. Maybe I should already have done something.

There was only one way to find out. I knocked. "Come." I opened the door and stepped inside. Brock was seated at a small table, writing on a sheet of parchment. His coat was off and he looked almost like an average person. He looked up. "Ah, Fields, good. I'm rather hungry. There should be some cold roast beef in the pantry. Fix me a sandwich and a glass of beer." He returned to his writing. I stepped back out of the room, then cursed myself for forgetting to salute or say "Yes sir." But then, he said I didn't have to salute. But surely you should *say* something. I hurried back to the kitchen. How did you light the candles? Where were the matches? Ah, there. Now the pantry. Is that the pantry? Yes. And there's the roast beef. And bread. Now... how do you make a sandwich? I'd never eaten a sandwich, and certainly never made one. At home we ate our meat with the bread on the side. I knew that in a sandwich the meat went in between two slices of bread. How do you cut the meat? Get a knife. Right. Now, cut off a hunk of the beef. Like so. Now the bread. Good. Put the beef on one slice, put the other slice on top. Good. That looks like a sandwich. Now the beer. Where is it? There it is. Damn! Nevermind, clean it up later. I put the sandwich on a plate and, balancing plate and glass, navigated back along the hall, and then down the other hall. I couldn't knock, but the door was ajar, so I pushed it open with my foot. "Your sandwich, sir." "Ah, good. "Brock leaned back and stretched. "Put it here."

I set the sandwich and beer on the table. He looked at the sandwich, raised the top piece of bread, lowered it, and looked at me. "Have you ever made a sandwich before, Fields?" "No, sir." Maybe it was better like this. Instant disgrace. I'd get a whipping, be sent back to my barracks, and this nightmare would be over. Brock stood up. "Follow me." I followed him all the way back to the kitchen. He went to the pantry, took out the bread and roast beef. "I am going to teach you how to make a sandwich. Please observe. First, I sharpen the knife on the stone, like this. Then I cut the bread, thinly. It is important that it be thin. Now I apply butter to one piece of the bread. I spread it like so. Then I slice the beef. Again, thinly. Then I place the beef on the unbuttered piece of bread. Then I take the horseradish. Have you ever had horseradish, Fields? It's quite delicious on beef. I spread the horseradish over the beef, like so. Then I place the buttered piece of bread over the beef. "That, Fields, is a sandwich." He took a large bite, chewed it several times, swallowed, and sighed. "Go back to bed, Fields. We'll continue your education in the morning." Carrying his sandwich, he disappeared down the hall. I cleaned up the spilled beer, then got back into bed. He hadn't seemed angry. It almost seemed as though he enjoyed the whole thing. The general in charge of all Upper Canada had just taught me how to make a sandwich. It was too much to understand. I went to sleep.