

Chapter 4

The Power of Sin

That Sunday morning service marked the end of the Kettle Methodist Church's nineteen and forty-six "Witness for Christ Week," a time to save souls, to bring folks to Jesus. The week-long revival stretched across two successive Sundays, with services on each of the six evenings between. Momma told me I had to attend each of the Sunday morning services and at least two of the weekday evening services, which I had done. William White's Momma had set up the same requirement. "Our Mommas are in cahoots," he observed.

When the "Witness for Christ Week" began I worried, as I had every February as far back as I could remember, that I'd be singled out by church elders to have my soul saved. Attending revival services with William White didn't reduce my fear any, for he had the annoying habit of remembering my past sins and reminding me of them. Like the time I fibbed to Momma when I told her I was helping out over at Grandpa's barn, when in fact William White and I had gone to the river for a swim. To make matters worse, he always seemed to have himself in a peck of trouble of one kind or another. "You're a sinner if ever there was one," I often told him, though I grinned when I said it.

The week of services featured a visiting revival preacher. At the end of each sermon he appealed to sinners to turn their lives over to Jesus, what we referred to as the altar call. That's when the elders of the church got organized and moved like a swarm of hornets chasing a dog that had disturbed their nest. Of one mind, single file they came after sinners.

William White once said, “God sends them church elders after sinners, Freddy. They’re charged with divine energy and the sinner is powerless to resist once the guns of God are turned on him. And they may be gunning for you, Freddy.”

“William White Wallace, though you are my best friend, if you say things like that, I hate to think what my enemies might say about me. Anyway, what about you? You fibbed that day when you told your Momma you had helped out over at Grandpa’s barn. You went swimming in the river with me. Maybe God and those men are after *you*.”

The final Sunday morning service of the Witness for Christ Week offered the elders their last chance to bring sinners into the fold. In past years the last service of revival meetings had produced large and special spiritual events. The presence of Jack P. Camm that Sunday, sitting quietly beside his wife and daughter in a rear pew, loomed large and special. Jack P’s reputation as a man who lived what some folks called a sporting life made him a prime target for being saved. Jack P and his shiny light blue nineteen and forty Plymouth convertible with its white canvas top, white sidewall tires, chrome polished to a high shine and a spotlight mounted just in front of the driver's door. Later I said to William White, “If folks at church could’ve taken both that car and Jack P to God, they would’ve.”

William White and I had voted Jack P’s convertible *the* car in Kettle. Sometimes I imagined what it might be like if William White and I had a car like that and drove it around Kettle. Girls walking along the street would wave to us, sometimes joining us for a ride. Maybe, when we got a little older, we’d drive across the Ohio River to a town where they had nightclubs. We’d listen to the swing sounds of big bands, jitterbug, drink beer.

On warm summer evenings Jack P would slowly drive up and down the streets of Kettle, the car's top lowered, nodding and waving to folks as his eyes scanned the sidewalks and front porches. William White said, "He looks like he's lost his puppy and figures it might be just about where I am."

Jack P always wore a freshly laundered shirt, had his crew cut trimmed, and grinned a slight smile that put a curve in his square-shaped face. I told William White, "When he grins like that I think Jack P knows something really nice about me but isn't going to tell what it is."

One morning on the street in front of the Post Office, I overheard Albert Newcomb talking with two of his friends about Jack P. Albert wore his peg leg with the face of Jesus carved on it. "I know for a fact that Jack P. Camm drove the twenty-one miles down highway ROUTE 42 to Huntington and visited the Dew Drop Inn in the early hours of this morning. Mr. Ludlow P. Word said he saw Jack P's Plymouth convertible parked there when he brought the United States mail from Huntington to Kettle."

The two fellows standing alongside Albert looked up from sharpening their pocket knives on the stone ledge of the Post Office window. One of them said, "I wouldn't mind taking a little trip to the Dew Drop myself."

When I told William White about the conversation, he said, "Not me, Freddy. The Dew Drop Inn is on Ninth Avenue where all the colored folks live. I read in the Huntington newspaper about a man getting killed, knifed, in the alley behind the Dew Drop. They'd probably go after me as soon as I put my foot inside the front door."

On a warm evening in June, William White and I, along with William White's Aunt Beatrice Gebhardt, sat in the green metal chairs on Miss Beatrice's front porch

drinking cool glasses of lemonade. We enjoyed the twilight of the day and said hello to folks as they walked by. There had been a thunderstorm just before supper and the air had cleared, become fresh. Miss Beatrice told us that lightning added sweetness to the air.

Jack P's convertible rolled down the street towards us, its top down. Jack P, alone, drove with his left hand on the wheel and his right arm extended along the top of the front seat, looking like a picture you might see in a *Saturday Evening Post* magazine advertisement. He wore a light blue shirt that matched the color of his car, and had his crew cut neatly trimmed. William White said Jack P used pomade to make the front of his crew cut stand up. Jack P couldn't have been much over thirty, but he had gray around his temples. William White called it a distinguished look.

His eyes seemed like tiny dark pinpoints, too small for his head, darting one way then another. Jack P slowed the Plymouth as he passed Miss Beatrice's porch. He looked up at us and nodded. Politely and emphasizing each of our names as he said them, his tone of voice making me believe he'd been thinking of us all the way down the street, Jack P said, "Evening, folks. Miss Beatrice. William White. Freddy."

Miss Beatrice answered first, "Good evening, Jack P."

Then William White, "Jack P."

By the time I said my "Jack P" the streetlight reflected off the polished surface of the Plymouth's trunk. We kept our eyes on the back of the car until elm branches overhanging the street blocked our view. Then Miss Beatrice, as if she spoke to no one in particular, asked, "I wonder what will become of him? I do worry about Mabel and the children."

Mabel was Jack P's wife. Miss Beatrice used that same tone of voice when she discussed one of her tenth-grade English students who she liked but had just failed a test. Or when a member of her church lost a loved one. I didn't know why she should worry about Mabel Camm.

One evening in our kitchen, in a quiet voice Momma said to Daddy, "I'm sure Jack P gallivants in places he shouldn't when he's out in that car. Hester Kinder said she saw him driving towards Blue Sage with a young woman in the car. It wasn't Mabel."

Daddy sighed and said, "I hope Mabel and the children don't run into him when he's out on an escapade. Maybe they'd all have been better off if Jack P's heart murmur hadn't kept him out of the Army."

On a Saturday afternoon in late January, just a few weeks before the beginning of this year's Witness for Christ Week, William White and I had stopped at Gruber's Store to get some red licorice and RC Colas. Some men stood near the pot-belly stove in the front of the store. Hartford Wilson, wearing his black wool cardigan sweater, Wallace 'Wink' Winkler in his blue gabardine suit, his "good luck sales suit," Barney Brammer in his bib overalls, and two other fellows I didn't know who wore wide-brimmed hats and looked like they'd come in from field work on their farms.

I had just opened my RC Cola when the conversation turned to Jack P. Camm's car. Wink, who earned his living principally in the trading of horses and cars, although he sometimes dealt in wagons, trucks, tractors, and cattle, said, "I heard first-hand from my brother-in-law, William Boyd Shunt, and he heard it from his cousin who lives in Huntington, that Clifford Odell his self, of Odell Chrysler Plymouth in Huntington, said,

‘That car’ll bring folks in the door.’ He offered Jack P nearly double what he had paid for that Plymouth in nineteen and forty. Clifford called it a real showpiece.” Then he gave a wink of his right eye, what folks called his trademark. Wink often looked most serious when he winked, as if he had to confirm an important truth he had just shared. When I talked with Wink, his winks made me feel appreciated. Daddy told me he figured Wink’s punctuation of his trading transactions with a serious wink had sealed many a deal.

Hartford Wilson asked, “Wink, if you was Jack P, would you take that deal?”

Wink’s face took on a serious look. “Yes sir, I’d make that swap real fast. It ain’t every day you can double your money.” Wink.

Barney Brammer put his thumbs under the buckles of the front straps of his bib overalls, “Wink, that might not be such a good deal after all, everything considered.” He paused, looked around the group and added, “That car brings Jack P such things as money can’t buy.” Another pause. “At least such things as none of us could afford to buy, though we sure would enjoy them.”

Everybody laughed. One fellow punched Wink on the shoulder. Wink laughed even more as he rolled into Hartford Wilson who stood next to him. Then Wink looked around the group and gave everybody his trademark.

I wondered what a car might bring that money couldn’t buy.

The final Sunday morning revival service had a packed house, with well over a hundred people in the sanctuary. More people than last Wednesday night when Arden Conner had been saved. At the end of that service at least half the congregation gathered

in front of the altar around Arden, who stood tall, running his hands through his long gray hair, beaming, a new man. He laughed and wept. Folks around him laughed and wept too.

William White whispered to me, “How do you laugh and cry at the same time? What does it feel like? Are you happy or sad?”

At the Dixie Palace, William White and I had seen the actress Veronica Lake laugh and cry at the same time. In a movie, her boyfriend, Van Johnson, had been an Army Air Corps pilot. He flew back to the airbase just outside of London after all the characters in the movie, as well as me and William White, thought his P-38 fighter had been shot down over the English Channel on his very last mission. Veronica Lake didn't wail and wave her arms in the air and say things like “Oh Jesus, I'm with you!” the way Arden did. She didn't talk about the love she felt for everybody around her, for she loved Van Johnson. She laughed and cried when Van's plane landed.

A lot of people, including Mr. Bertram Billups, the Reverend Aubrey Pierce Price, guest evangelist from Purdue, Kentucky, and Dr. Y. Younts Yoder, the minister of the Kettle Methodist Church, laughed and cried with Arden, and slapped him on the back, then slapped each other on the back. They reached up in the air to grab and shake each of Arden's hands as he waved them at God. Arden yelled, “I love you folks. I love Jesus. I thank you. I'm a saved man with a clean soul. And I'm just bustin' with love.”

As I entered the sanctuary as the choir sang the first verse of the opening hymn. I'd arrived a few minutes late. I scanned the congregation for Holbert Holcomb. I planned to sit beside him. Holbert represented a safe haven. Even though I didn't care much for him, by pairing up with Holbert during each revival service, I would closely associate

myself with a boy who, hands down and no questions asked, had the reputation of a Christian – safe territory. Even better, Holbert looked for sinners that needed to be saved. One of the hunters, not the hunted. And I didn't think he would hunt me if I sat beside him. On Monday of the week before our Witness for Christ Week, I even sat beside Holbert at noon in the school cafeteria, something nobody ever did voluntarily.

Holbert still had lots of baby fat, sweated a lot, and had a squeaky voice. And I didn't like his habit in church of probing his ears with the little finger of each hand and, when enough time had passed and he thought nobody would see him, in turn placing each of his little fingers in his mouth. Then he would stare towards the stained glass window behind the choir loft as if he wanted to contemplate Jesus, and use his lower front teeth to chisel out the earwax from beneath his fingernail. He chewed with so little movement, if I hadn't been watching him I would hardly have known what he had done. Then he'd swallow. Nasty, but I could put up with it. I needed an insurance policy.

I thought about Van Johnson up there in his P-38 with German fighter planes somewhere nearby, a menace to his life. What would he do?

Make a decision to fly a course, and then fly it. I banked the plane in a wide turn.

I scanned the sanctuary for Holbert. Not there! My stomach cringed and filled with a sudden worry, the kind I got when with no warning, a teacher said in a serious voice, "Go to the principal's office." Then I scanned again. There he sat, *behind the pulpit*, alongside the Reverend Aubrey Pierce Price and Dr. Y. Younts Yoder, all dressed in black suits. I made a quick turn towards the rear of the sanctuary, spotted William White and dove for a seat beside him. Folks had to scoot over to make room for me. Fourth pew from the rear of the church, and possibly a safe place – out of the line of fire?

At age twelve Holbert Holcomb had been elected Teen Christian Leader by the members of the Kettle Methodist Youth Fellowship, the youngest, and first technically non-teen, person to hold the position. At the time Holbert fell short of his thirteenth birthday by a couple of months. William White told me that his Aunt Beatrice, a Sunday School teacher, had confided to him during a family dinner, “The election was rigged. The Sunday School teachers put heavy pressure on everybody to make sure no candidate ran against Holbert.” She went on to tell William White she opposed Holbert’s becoming Teen Christian Leader because she didn’t think he had enough maturity to be respected by other young folks. “But,” she said, “I was unable to swing enough votes to move things my way.”

When I thought about my protection strategy and its central feature, Holbert, I worried that a few church elders might see through my plan. Or, that Holbert himself might turn on me. At one service in last year’s Witness for Christ Week, Holbert had sat along side Billy Johnson, then a sixth-grader. During the altar call, Holbert got up and brought Mr. Nathaniel R. Lawton, our Kettle High School principal and well-known Christian leader, back to the pew to talk with Billy. Billy’s father made no secret of drinking beer, and he swore and told jokes with four-letter words in them. Sometimes Billy told his Daddy’s jokes to boys at school. Holbert knelt beside Billy and prayed. In his prayers Holbert loudly described what he called Billy Johnson’s sins.

Mr. Lawton knelt along with Holbert, both of them dressed in suits, beside Billy, who wore blue jeans and a faded old orange shirt. They raised their voices and said, “Lord, we ask your blessing and grace on the soul of Billy Johnson.”

I'll bet five minutes hadn't passed until Holbert and Mr. Lawton escorted Billy to the altar. Billy knelt and cried and put his head on the altar rail. Holbert and Mr. Lawton knelt on either side of him. Each of them put a hand on Billy's back, like enemy soldiers with their captured prisoner. "There, but for the grace of God..." I whispered.

After the service people grinned at Billy, shook hands and congratulated him. Saved! Everyone grinned and shook hands with Holbert and Mr. Lawton, who shook hands and grinned at each other. I said to William White, "Folks seem happier for Holbert and Mr. Lawton than for Billy Johnson." In the war, when a fighter pilot like Van Johnson shot down an enemy airplane, he put a small German flag on the nose of his plane. Maybe Billy became a little marker in the mental lists of people like Holbert and Mr. Lawton. Billy, red-faced, stood in the middle of all the congratulating. At first he grinned as he watched all the laughing and hand-shaking. Then his grin faded. Billy stared at the floor and rubbed the toe of his right shoe around a spot on the carpet.

The last day – the last service. Dampness spread under my armpits and my stomach felt like it had a flock of Monarch butterflies in it. Did Van Johnson feel this way before his plane lifted off the ground on his final combat mission? In the movie, just before he left the barracks for the airfield, Van wrote a letter to his best friend, wounded in action and taken to a hospital. "If I can get through this one, then for me it's all over, over there."

If I could get through today's service, then it would all be over for me too. I would be home, free for another year.

*I settled into the plane's cockpit, revved the engine, and headed down the runway.
My last mission.*

Reverend Aubrey Pierce Price began his sermon. He stood tall behind the pulpit. The light of the chandelier reflected off his shiny bald head. In a soft voice he read a verse from Acts, "Men and brethren, what shall we do...." then boomed, "Repent and be saved in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord." Forty minutes later, in voice so powerful it must have been heard by God himself, Reverend Price told folks how to get right with God. He removed his suit jacket and hung it on the back of one of the tall oak chairs behind the pulpit. Sweat soaked his white shirt. Daddy called this kind of sermon a stem-winder.

From the congregation folks punctuated Reverend Price's sermon with calls of "A-men!" and "Yes, Lord!" They began to fidget and move back and forth in the pews.

The action would soon begin – the attack on sinners. The Altar Call. On Wednesday night Reverend Price had begun The Altar Call with a booming, "Find 'em! Pray 'em! Bring 'em home to Jesus!"

That Sunday morning Reverend Price began the attack on the sinners in a way I hadn't expected. While, ever so softly, the congregation sang "Lead Me Gently Home," he asked Christians in the congregation to please stand, walk around the sanctuary and locate sinners.

Surprise attack!

"Yes, go to your friends and loved ones who've sinned. Help 'em. Bring' em home to Jesus." Many Christian folks stood, walked through the church and dropped to their knees beside people. Aisle seats seemed to be a favorite spot for sinners. After a

Christian knelt beside a sinner, others would swarm in, kneel, put their arms around the sinner and each other, and pray.

How did the Christians identify sinners? I knew most of the folks singled out, for example Mr. Harmon Wilcox, a mechanic at the Harley Mount's Texaco Station and Garage, who got identified as a sinner at a service earlier in the week. Whenever my Momma stopped at the Texaco Station for gas, if Mr. Wilcox filled our tank he'd politely ask my Momma if he could check the oil. And he smiled and talked like everybody else when he shopped at Wilson's Dry Goods or Gruber's Department Store. He seemed like a regular person, but he'd been targeted as a sinner.

If folks viewed Mr. Wilcox as a sinner, maybe they viewed me as one too. Once I had stolen two cigarette butts from an ashtray at a cousin's house, and William White and I had smoked them out behind the elementary school. That Sunday morning, right then and there, I asked for forgiveness – put my prayer on record with Jesus. I added a request that Jesus protect me from the attack of the Christians. Even before I finished my prayer I wondered if I should pray to Jesus for Christians not to come after me. The Christians worked for Jesus, and I wanted to ask Jesus to call them off, protect me from his own people. My thoughts got all tangled up with themselves and I ended my prayer. I hoped that people seated on either side of my pew would give me some cover, some protection.

Follow Van Johnson's plane. Look for cloud cover.

Earlier in the service Holbert had led a prayer from the pulpit, and in it singled out the need for more young people in the Kettle Methodist Church to become witnesses for Christ. He looked directly at me when he said it. In his look, had he sent some kind of

signal about me to others? Would I be one of the youth that Christians, led by Holbert himself, would descend on? A young sinner targeted to be a witness for Christ.

Enemy guns firing, but not yet on target.

Holbert's prayer led me to take evasive action – I nodded my head in agreement and slumped to a lowered position.

Roll my plane to the right. Dive, change altitude.

I waited on the final hymn and prepared myself for the full force of The Altar Call. I focused my gaze and total, prayerful, attention on the stained glass window behind the choir loft, the look of a Christian, I hoped.

In the middle of a sentence, Reverend Price stopped speaking, closed his eyes and bowed his head. The church remained silent for perhaps a full minute, though it seemed like an eternity. Sitting behind and on either side of Reverend Price, Holbert and Dr. Yoder quickly bowed their heads.

The sudden silence, the change in the rhythm of the service, surprised people. Folks whirled their heads this way and that trying to figure out what had happened. Then, as they caught on, they did a quick forward neck bend and jerky head duck into a prayerful position. Mrs. Wanda Burnside, after a series of rapid side-to-side twists of her head, jerked and ducked so fast she banged her forehead against the pew in front of her and her large red hat fell off. She didn't seem hurt by the blow, though her face turned a deep scarlet and many people, including Holbert and Reverend Price, did another quick head jerk, this time upwards, to see what had happened.

Reverend Price ended the silence by asking in a soft voice, "Are there Christians out there who will stand and testify to the meaning of Jesus in their lives? Are you there?"

Will you speak?" In soft and quiet tones the choir began to sing, "On a hill far away, stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame..."

Mr. Ludlow P. Word, our local postmaster and long-time teacher of the men's Bible class at the Kettle Methodist Church, stood. He adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses and smoothed the lapels of his brown suit. In a voice loud enough to rise above the soft music he said, "Jesus has been my friend for over forty-five years. I found him and accepted him into my life as a young man. It happened one day while I worked in a field not far from this very church. I drove a wagon pulled by my horse John. Some of you may remember John. A snake appeared in John's path, coiled and ready to strike. It scared John and he bolted. The wagon was jerked off center. We'd been moving slowly, and I was standing in the wagon. The force of John's sudden move threw me out of the wagon. As I fell, in midair I heard the word, 'Jesus.' To this day I don't know where it came from. Well sir, I yelled that word. Jesus! A honeysuckle bush I had never before seen broke my fall. A divine power had entered my life. Lying safely in the soft branches of that bush I pledged to take Jesus as a partner in my life. Since then many of my life's falls have been softened by His help. He will soften your falls, too."

Mr. Word's face wore a concerned expression. I'd seen that look once before – at the Post Office after I mailed a letter without enough postage. Mr. Word found the letter and the next time I went into the Post Office he took me into a back room filled with mail bags. He sat me down, peered over the top of his glasses and said he knew I hadn't deliberately tried to cheat the government. But I needed to understand the importance of the rules of life, including the rules of the United States Post Office, and obey them. For a long time afterwards, I didn't do anything, not even turn on the radio, without wondering

about the rules that covered my actions. One day when William White started to walk on the left side of the sidewalk on Main Street, I pulled his arm and told him I thought the rules said we had to walk on the right side.

After all the “Amen's” recognized the value of Mr. Word’s testimonial, other people stood and testified about Jesus in their lives. Listening to them I wondered, could I gain protection from being singled out as a sinner by standing up and saying things like, “Jesus kept me from drowning when I went for a swim in the culvert where Cedar Creek goes under highway ROUTE 42”? It would be tough to do without blushing and appearing to have made it all up, but it might work. In a movie Robert Ryan did something like that after his plane had been shot down over Germany – he put on a German Army uniform and walked past a whole bunch of German soldiers. They would have shot him dead if they’d recognized his trickery. I wondered what folks might do if they discovered me in an act of spiritual trickery. And some people in the congregation knew a lot about me, including my second-grade teacher, Miss Ball, who had caught William White and me smoking the cigarette butts behind the elementary school. I decided to keep my mouth shut.

Keep flying. Use cloud cover.

Reverend Price issued his final Altar Call – the all-out search to find sinners and bring them to the altar.

Guns firing. Explosions around me. The battle has begun.

Reverend Price boomed in a sincere voice, “Come forward and let Jesus enter your heart. Begin a new life, one filled with Christian love.” The choir sang, “Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling,” in a way even I thought should be attractive to sinners.

Nobody moved. Time passed. The choir sang two more hymns. Reverend Price gazed at the congregation, prayed aloud, gazed some more. I caught one gaze straight on.

Direct hit.

Reverend Price shifted his look to a side pew.

Direct hit but no major damage.

Reverend Price called in reinforcements. “Christians, you who have found friends and loved ones to bring to Jesus, walk with them to the altar. Help them build the foundation of a joyous hereafter in a wondrous eternity.” Two members of the congregation walked friends to the altar. Then two more.

Mr. Word, Mr. Lawton, and other Christian leaders, including Holbert, massed in a group at the front of the church. They faced the congregation and scanned the pews. Then they turned and whispered among themselves.

I shut my eyes shut tight and scrunched my eyebrows towards each other. I hoped I looked prayerful. Light bursts appeared on the insides of my eyelids. My heart raced.

Anti-aircraft shells exploding around me. Hold the course. Steady.

I peeked through my eyelids and saw Holbert lead the knot of men with long and sober faces up the aisle, my aisle. They approached me.

Enemy aircraft at ten o'clock!

Holbert walked at the front of the group, moving with the familiar waddle that kids at Sunday School tried to imitate. The Teen Christian Leader stared straight at me, nodded, and held eye contact with me. The group moved ever closer.

I bowed my head, prayed.

Enemy planes, dead ahead.

Would the Teen Christian Leader open fire, shoot me down? One more sinner, gone?

Bullets from the German machine gun fire tore through my P-38. What to do? Bail out, parachute? Keep flying?

Teen Christian Leader Holcomb and the band of Christian men neared my pew. Then Holbert stopped and knelt beside me. The men stood behind him, their eyes on me.

“Dive, dive, dive!”

Holbert opened his mouth to speak.

“Roll!”

“Brother Freddy, do you want to join us to talk with a sinner?”

My eyes still closed in prayer, I shook my head, “No.”

I pulled out of the dive, dipped each wing twice, the OK signal.

Holbert stood, he and the men moved on.

The rounds from the German planes streaked into the darkness. I flew on.

Holbert Holcomb and the pack of Christian men rounded the rear pew and massed on their target – Jack P. Camm.

The German planes had their target in sight. All guns firing.

"Wwhhoooo-aaaahhhhHHHH!" pierced the prayerful but tense silence of the Kettle Methodist Church sanctuary. The sound resembled a blast from the horn of a paddleboat pushing coal barges down the Kanawha River. It must have blammed shock waves into every bubble of air in every crack and cranny in the church.

I flinched, along with William White and most everybody else in the congregation. Goose bumps rose along the surfaces of my arms. William White said in a shushed voice, “Freddy, what was that?”

Everybody looked towards the source of the sound – Jack P. Camm. He knelt in front of his dark oak pew, his outstretched arms reaching towards the ceiling. Behind him bright sunlight passed through the large stained glass window in the rear wall of the church, spreading rays of deep red, blue and gold across Jack P and the men kneeling in a huddle around him. Folks who turned quickly enough saw the splintering of the huddle when Jack P sprang from his kneeling position and leaped into the aisle, much like the quarterback he’d been on the nineteen and thirty-four Kettle High football team. Jack P banged into and nearly knocked over Mr. Bertram Billips, who since nineteen and twenty had rung the church's bell to announce the beginning of Sunday morning services and such special occasions as the end of World War II.

Jack P wailed again, "Wwhhooo-aaaaAAAHHHH!"

He waved his arms and ran full speed down the long green-carpeted aisle past rows of pews filled with worshipers. Jack P knelt at the center of the walnut altar, below the oak pulpit. Behind the pulpit the choir loft rose at an upwards angle. The choir, in their royal blue robes, sang the hymn, “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling.” Behind the choir maroon velvet drapes clothed the walls except for a small round stained glass window. Jack P bowed his head and spread his arms along the altar rail. Then he removed the coat of his dark blue suit, held it in his right hand and raised both arms towards the ornate silver chandelier above the pulpit.

William White whispered, “Jack P’s handing his coat to Jesus.”

Head back, his eyes looking upwards, Jack P's deep voice boomed, "Take me! Take me! Jesus, take me!"

"If not me, take my coat," William White said.

I leaned towards William White, "Shush. Jack P. Camm is being saved. It could have been you they came after. Or me."

The group of men and one teenager who, a few minutes ago had walked up the aisle and huddled around Jack P, now knelt around Jack P at the altar. Two of the men put their arms on his shoulders.

Warmth, even laughter, spread through me. Safe! A voice inside me said, "Thank you, Jesus."

I turned my plane, headed home. Soon the lights of the airbase dotted the ground below me. It was over, over there. For the first time that night I allowed myself to think ahead. The guys at the barracks. An evening at the officers club. Van Johnson. I wondered if Veronica Lake had a friend. Then I thought, one that looks like Beverly.

* * * * *

Early one Saturday morning a few weeks later William White barged into my bedroom. "Up, Freddy, get up! We've got to do this and you have to help."

I rubbed my eyes. "What's going on?"

"Jack P has put his car up for sale. We've got to scrape up the money and buy it. Let's figure out how to do it. I can see us, Freddy, moving through the streets of Kettle early in the evenings, top down, that light blue body all waxed to a high gloss, the chrome spotlight polished. Think about it, Freddy. We might even date cheerleaders. We got to buy that car, Freddy."

I became infected with William White's enthusiasm. I could see myself driving that sweet blue machine with the top down on a summer evening, Beverly sitting next to me. Maybe I'd get a crew cut and some pomade.

Momma yelled from downstairs, "Freddy, time to get up, chores to do."

I shook my head, "William White, we are sixteen years old. We earn a little money mowing lawns in the summertime. That is a serious car. Buying it will require serious money. And we don't even have our driver's licenses yet."

Wink Winkler bought Jack P's nineteen and forty Plymouth convertible. Not long afterwards, Clifford Odell Chrysler-Plymouth in Huntington had the car on display in their downtown showroom.

At Gruber's Department Store, Wink told everybody he had it first-hand from his brother-in-law, William Boyd Shunt, who heard it from his cousin who lives in Huntington, that people came to the Clifford Odell Chrysler-Plymouth showroom every day just to stand and look at that car.

One evening during supper our conversation drifted to the sale of Jack P's Plymouth convertible. I brought myself to the forward edge of telling my folks about how William White and I had admired that car, and how excited we got over William White's idea that the two of us might buy it.

Just then Daddy said in a quiet voice, "That car was no good, not for Jack P, not for anybody. And I don't mean mechanically. We're better off having it out of Kettle."

Momma nodded.

I drank my milk.