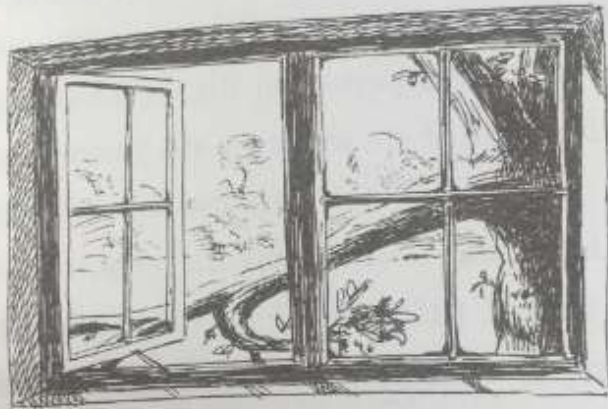


Four

Stranger



After supper Aunt Millie said, 'Well, I imagine you would like to get unpacked. I never even thought about that until this minute. Come on.'

We went upstairs and Aunt Millie walked to a room down at the end of the hall and said, 'There! I thought you would like to stay in Bubba's old room because it is just like it was when he left. I

keep saying that I'm going to clean out this room and throw away all the junk, but I never do.'

I went into the room slowly and put my suitcase down on the rug. I knew right away what kind of boy Bubba had been by looking at that room. There was not a person in the world who could have thought the room was mine. Just one glance at me and *anyone* would know that I had never shouldered the shotgun on the rack, that I had never stuffed the squirrel on the bookcase, that I had never collected all those different bird eggs and nests in the bookcase.

Aunt Millie was saying, 'I have been after Fred for weeks to hammer those screens in. I know how boys love to climb out their windows at night. Come here.'

I went over, and she pointed to the huge tree beside the window. 'Look, there. See those smooth spots on the branches? Just like steps?

Well, that's how often my boys came up and down that old tree – their feet wore down the bark. They wouldn't use the stairs for anything. And I said, "Fred, I am through worrying about boys falling out of trees. You hammer the screens into those upstairs windows." '

'I won't climb out,' I assured her.

'Oh, go along with you. I know boys.'

'No, I'm afraid of heights.'

'Don't tell *me*. You'll be out there first chance you get. I know! Only, like Fred says, if you want to climb out, there's not a screen in the world could stop you, so I guess it doesn't matter.' She crossed to the chest and pulled out two drawers. 'Now I cleared out these drawers for you. Put your things right in here.' She patted the bottom of the drawer so I wouldn't make any mistake.

'Now, I'll be downstairs if you want anything.'

'I won't.'

'Well, if you do, I'll be downstairs.'

She went out, and I opened my suitcase and put my clothes in the drawers, and then I opened the other drawers and looked at all the things in them. There were different kinds of rocks in shoeboxes, and bullets, and an old card box with coins in it, and a big stack of 4-H project books, and in the bottom drawer were some old hunting clothes and bathing suits with life-saving emblems on them.

I closed the drawers and sat down on the edge of the bed. I had not been able to eat any supper at all. Aunt Millie had been watching me the whole time and she had said over and over, 'Don't you like the supper?' Finally I had managed to hide some food in my pocket so she would think I had eaten something. Now I reached into my pocket and took out the crumpled-up sandwich and two broken peanut-butter crackers.