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Chapter 1

An Empty Spot



Aaron bent his head to shield his face from the driving sleet as he and his brother Enos hurried toward the one-room country schoolhouse. The sleet spread a sheet of ice over the thick layer of snow that had covered all of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, since the year 1855 had begun. Enos was almost eleven and had attended several school terms, but this was Aaron's first term. He had reached the age of eight the previous August, and Memm said he must go to school whether he wanted to or not.

"I'm glad we don't have far to school when it's like this," Aaron said in their Pennsylvania German dialect.

"Me too," Enos agreed as they cut diagonally across the empty crossroad to reach the schoolhouse. "Pap made it handy for us when he gave this corner of the farm for the school."

The icy snow crunched under their feet as they hurried up the path to reach the shelter of the schoolhouse. Smoke curling from the chimney promised warmth inside.

The boys hung their plain, collarless coats and black hats on the nails of the coatrack and slid into their seats just as the teacher called school to order. Because he was a beginner, Aaron sat with his cousin Daniel Witmer in the front row of the boys' side. Enos sat in the row behind them. The girls sat on the other side of the schoolroom. The black stove that heated the room stood in the wide aisle between the boys and girls.

After the opening exercises, Aaron studied the lesson in his primer until the beginners were called to recite. Then he and Daniel slid off their seats and walked to the teacher's desk at the front of the room. The teacher gave him words to spell. They were short words, but because they were English words, Aaron struggled to spell them correctly. Pennsylvania German was the only language he had spoken before going to school, but there was a law that schools must be taught in English.

Aaron was always glad for recess, when he could run outside instead of sitting quietly at a desk. At recess he could speak freely in his first language. The girls went outside first for recess. After fifteen minutes the teacher called them back inside. Then the boys could go outside for fifteen minutes.

"Hi-yi!" Aaron yelled as he dashed through the school door and filled his lungs with the clear, cold air. The sleet had stopped during the morning, and the thick layer of ice that glittered in the sunlight begged the boys to skate on its smooth surface. The fifteen minutes flew by on wings as the boys skated and shouted in freedom.

"Come back here," Enos called when Aaron's feet carried him off the schoolyard. "You're not allowed to go to the church."

"I know," Aaron said as he turned around. "I just couldn't stop myself."

The church building had been the school until 1847, when the new schoolhouse had been built next to it. The year before Aaron was born, his father, Jacob W. Stauffer, had broken away from the Lancaster Conference and helped to establish a branch of the Mennonite church known as the Stauffer Mennonites. The church building was called the Pike Meetinghouse, because it stood along the Harrisburg and Downingtown Turnpike.¹ For this reason the Stauffer Mennonites had been nicknamed

1 Route 322

“the Pike people.” They had used the old schoolhouse for both school and worship services until Jacob and Lydia Stauffer had sold a small parcel of land from their farm for a new schoolhouse.² Now the old schoolhouse was used only for worship services.

Aaron was glad the meetinghouse stood squarely between the schoolyard and the cemetery so he did not have to look at the fresh hump of bare earth where his father had been buried on a cold January day four weeks before. The ground had already settled over the grave of Aaron’s fourteen-year-old brother Christian who had been thrown from a horse and died a year before his father.

Since they lived so close to the schoolhouse, Enos and Aaron walked home for dinner at noon. Aaron thought eating from a dinner pail at school would be more interesting than going home to the ordinary meal Memm cooked every day.

“Get to the table,” Memm said when the boys burst into the kitchen. “Dinner’s ready.”

Aaron slid across the bench along the wall to his place behind the table and bowed his head for the silent prayer that preceded every meal. He tried to eat quickly so he could get back to school before the noon recess ended.

A year earlier the table in the small kitchen had been crowded, with nine Stauffer sons elbowing each other for space. Now, with Pap and Christian missing, there was plenty of room for Memm and her remaining eight sons to sit comfortably at the table. David, the oldest son, was twenty and had taken the responsibility of running the farm with the help of his brothers

2 The deed for the new schoolhouse, dated April 1, 1847, granted a small plot of land from Jacob and Lydia Stauffer to David Stauffer, Daniel Weaver, and Michael Weaver, for the purpose of building a schoolhouse. It specified that the school was to be directed by three elected trustees who were required to be “actual members in full standing and communion with the society or religious sect now known and called by the name of Menonists.” The deed further specified that only Menonist males over twenty-one were entitled to vote in trustee elections.

Jacob and John. Their grandfather, whose name was also David Stauffer, still lived in one side of the house that he had built in 1833, so he was available to give advice to his grandsons on managing the farm. Enos and Aaron were the scholars. The little boys, Moses, Menno, and Daniel, were too young to go to school.

After school, Enos and Aaron went out to the barn, faintly warmed by the heat of the animals sheltered inside, to do their chores. David had already cleaned the stalls and was forking new bedding into them. Jacob was carrying fresh water to the animals while John milked the family cow. The boys knew what to do without being told. They climbed to the top of the pile of hay in the haymow and grabbed the wooden forks they had stuck in the loose hay the day before.

"I'm starving," Aaron groaned as he threw heaping forks of dusty-sweet hay down the hay hole.

"You and me both," Enos empathized. "But the animals must eat before we do."

When the hay hole was filled, the boys climbed down into the barn's lower level and forked the hay into the mangers. The barn was filled with the crunching sound of animals eating their suppers. Evening chores did not take long with each of the five brothers doing his share of the work.

Aaron took his turn at the washbasin before sliding onto the bench for supper. The hollow inside him slowly filled as he ate everything from the first thick slice of homemade bread slathered with yellow homemade butter to the final slice of dried-apple pie.

"It's your turn to dry dishes tonight," Memm told Aaron as she cleared the table after supper. She poured hot water from the teakettle into the dishpan and swished a bar of homemade soap in the dishwater to create a thin layer of suds.

Aaron picked up a linen dishtowel and began drying the dishes as Memm set them on a tin tray. Since there were no girls in the family, all of the boys had dried dishes for their mother when they were Aaron's age. He did not mind helping his mother, but if there was a knock at the door, he quickly deserted his post before a stranger could see him doing girls' work.

Because the kitchen was the only heated room in the house, everyone stayed there until bedtime on long winter evenings. They used this time to do things they were too busy to do in other seasons of the year when there were more daylight hours to work outdoors.

"Get your copybook and I'll give you another writing lesson," David told John as he turned up the wick of the camphene lamp in the middle of the table.³

John brought the inkstand, a quill pen, and the copybook that Memm had made for him by hand-sewing loose sheets of plain paper together. David carefully sharpened the point of the goose feather with the penknife to make a perfect pen nib.

David had never been able to go to school, but had been taught to read, write, and cipher by his parents at home. His father had tutored him in the fine art of fraktur writing, which he was now passing on to his brother.

"Now," David said when the quill was ready, "we'll use the orange ink tonight. That will add some color to the blue and brown already on this page."

John bent over the page, writing slowly and carefully as David coached him. The quill must be twisted and swung "just so" to make the wide and narrow lines of each letter. It must be dipped in the ink over and over in order to keep writing. Too

³ Camphene, the predecessor of kerosene, was the leading lamp fuel in the 1850s. Camphene was a combination of alcohol, turpentine, and camphor oil.