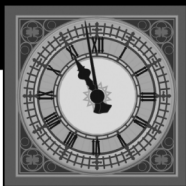


PASSAGES™

MANUSCRIPT

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DRAVEN'S DEFIANCE



PAUL MCCUSKER
FROM ADVENTURES IN ODYSSEY®



TYNDALE

Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
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DRAVEN'S DEFIANCE

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PROLOGUE



The old man sat in a plastic lawn chair next to the empty fountain. Stone angels watched silently over a stone sea monster that should have been spitting water into the air. Matted leaves collected around the clawed feet of the leviathan.

It was only a little after 10 in the morning, and the air was crisp and clean. The old man, bundled up in a heavy overcoat, lifted his face to the warm sun. Sunglasses perched on his wrinkled nose. Thin strands of white hair fell across the lenses, and he brushed them away as if he still had a full head of hair. His chapped lips were turned up in a practiced smile. Tucked under his chin was a scarf, knotted by his own hand. He looked for all the world like an eccentric college professor.

John Avery Whittaker, or Whit as he was best known, and his good friend Jack Allen watched the old man. They had met him only a few minutes before, and after an exchange of hellos and some idle talk about the weather, they had sat down on the patio behind the sprawling mansion called Hillingdale Haven. That's where their conversation now took an unexpected turn. The old man wanted to tell them about this place that had become his home.

“Hillingdale Haven is an architect's nightmare,” the old man

said, hooking a thumb toward the building behind them. "It's a pompous mansion built with all the excessiveness of the Victorians. Just look at the size of those red stones! They were imported all the way from Colorado, I understand. It's so ugly that it's beautiful." The old man stopped to cough. He sipped some water through a straw from a plastic cup.

Whit and Jack glanced back at the building. The old man was right. The mansion looked overblown somehow, as if whoever built it were trying to prove something to someone. But Whit and Jack hadn't come out from Odyssey to hear a lecture about the rest home where the old man lived. They had come to ask him about the Marus Chronicles, the four notebooks they'd read over the past few days about a parallel world that kids from Odyssey said they had visited. This was James Curtis, after all, the mysterious author of the manuscripts. And if what he'd written was to be believed, he had been to Marus himself. But the two men thought it would be better to let him talk at his own pace for a while before they bombarded him with all the questions they wanted to ask. They had to be patient, they knew. They didn't want to offend him.

James Curtis continued his lecture. "Hillingdale Haven was built in 1897 and '98 by the railway tycoon Harold Hillingdale. At the time, it boasted several enormous rooms on the ground floor that served as reception and dining halls, a library, a study, a pool and billiards room, a play room for the children, and an

assortment of other rooms with no stated purpose. The second floor contained 27 bedrooms of various sizes and shapes. The servants slept in another seven bedrooms tucked away in the attic on the third floor.” He suddenly asked, “Did you look around when you came in?”

Whit shook his head. “The receptionist brought us straight out to you,” he replied. Then he added, “I’ve been here before.”

“Oh, yeah, the wife of your friend is here,” James acknowledged. “Tom Riley’s wife, Agnes. We talk sometimes. She’s a sweet woman.”

Whit nodded. Tom Riley’s wife lived at Hillingdale Haven because she suffered from depression. It often left her unable to do even the most basic functions, so she and Tom had agreed that she’d be better off with professional care. Hillingdale Haven became her home.

James stared at the fountain. “Hillingdale Haven was Harold Hillingdale’s ‘country home,’ you see. It’s where he brought his family to escape from the rigors of life in the big city of Cincinnati.” James smiled. “It was also convenient that Hillingdale owned the train line from Cincinnati to Con-
nellsville, with a stop in Odyssey. That made it easy to get his family here. Then Hillingdale died in 1924, and his family decided to get rid of the mansion. It was sold to a firm that thought the mansion was the perfect place for a sanatorium.

"I remember sneaking onto the grounds as a boy, looking at the people as they walked around, hoping to catch a glimpse of someone barking at the moon or wearing a straitjacket. Then I learned that it wasn't an asylum for the insane but a place for those suffering from specific diseases and nonthreatening mental illnesses to rest and recover. When I was young, I often wondered what it was like for people to be so old that they couldn't live in normal houses." The old man paused for a moment, his face filled with sadness. "And now here I am."

Whit and Jack exchanged glances. They both wondered at that moment if James Curtis was at Hillingdale Haven because he'd grown old or because he suffered from a mental illness.

James sighed. "The ensuing years brought many changes to the mansion as new wings with more rooms were added to the sides and the back. That's how they can fit so many of us in here. It's a nice place, I think. I'm comfortable. But I don't expect to be here much longer."

"Are you going somewhere?" Jack asked.

James smiled. "If my prayers are answered, I'll go back to Marus."

That was Whit's cue. "May we talk to you about Marus now?" he inquired.

"Of course," James answered. "I know you didn't come to hear me jabber about Hillingdale Haven. I only gave you that little history lesson so you'll know my brain is working all

right. I'm not a senile old man. I pay attention to my world. I know where I am. Ask me anything you want."

Whit and Jack looked at each other and suddenly laughed. Now that they had the chance, neither knew where to start.

"I'll tell you what," James offered. "How about if I tell you how I wound up here?"

"That's a good place to start," Whit agreed.

"Well, you know from the story about Glennall that I went to Marus. After I came back to Odyssey, I took my 'call' from the Unseen One very seriously. You see, I didn't think I'd been given gifts to use for Marus alone. I figured the Unseen One—God—wanted me to use my gifts and talents in *this* world as well."

"You thought you'd continue to have dreams in this world as you did there?" Jack asked.

"I didn't know. I thought I might, but I never did." James shrugged, then said, "But that didn't matter. I thought that, in time, God would help me understand what He wanted me to do for Him. So I threw myself into studying at school and going to church. That's how I met Maude McCutcheon. She taught English and was my Sunday school teacher, too. One day in school, she asked us to write a story about anywhere we'd ever been or would like to be. I wrote about Marus. It was the first time I did."

Whit asked, "You didn't tell anyone about Marus before? Not even your Aunt Edna?"

"Nope," replied James. "When I came back, I had a feeling deep in my gut that no one would believe me. Or they'd think I was crazy and lock me up. So I decided to keep it to myself." He looked thoughtful. "I sometimes wonder why I took the chance to write about it. I think I trusted Maude McCutcheon. She was a good teacher. I never believed she would laugh at me."

"So what happened?" Jack inquired.

James chuckled as he remembered. "Oh, you should have seen the expression on her face when she walked into class the next day! Her eyes were wide, and she looked excited about something. She asked me to stay after school. Then, when all the other students had gone home, she told me she thought I was a gifted writer. She said my paper about Marus made it seem real to her. Then she asked if it *was* real."

"Did you tell her?" Whit asked.

"Yes. Like I said, I trusted her. And then she pulled out an old diary of her own that told all about *her* adventure in Marus."

"You must've been surprised," Jack observed.

"You could've knocked me over with a feather," James acknowledged with a nod. "It never occurred to me that I'd meet someone else who'd been to Marus. So we compared notes. She'd been there years and years *after* my adventure, even though she'd gone years *before* I did."

"Our time and Marus time don't line up," Whit suggested.

"They sure don't. Which makes things a little confusing

when you're trying to write it all down."

"Why *did* you write it down?" Jack asked.

"To keep a record, of course. And because she thought I was a good writer, Mrs. McCutcheon made me the official chronicler. I was honored. She even let me rewrite her story from her diary so I could fill in a few of the missing pieces about her family and where she'd come from. She wanted them to be consistent, told with my writing style. But for a long time, it was just our stories."

"How did you find out about the others?" Whit asked.

"Through Mrs. McCutcheon. You see, after I grew up here, I went on to college in Boston, then to seminary because I felt God wanted me to be a pastor. One thing led to another, and I eventually became a missionary to English- and French-speaking countries in Europe and Africa. I served as a chaplain in World War II and even spent time in a German prisoner-of-war camp. Over the years, whenever I returned to Odyssey to visit my Aunt Edna, I also spent time with Mrs. McCutcheon. Again, to my surprise, she had found someone else who'd been to Marus."

"Wade Mullens?" Jack asked.

"Yeah. Wade was one of her students."

"What about Kyle and Anna?" Jack wondered. "They weren't students. According to your story, they didn't live in Odyssey at all."

James accepted the comment with a nod. "They visited their grandparents that summer. Which is how Mrs.

McCutcheon learned about their adventure. Their grandparents went to her church.”

Just then a woman dressed in a pale-blue dress arrived with a tray of hot drinks. She gave Whit and Jack cups of coffee. James had some hot cocoa. After making sure they were comfortable and James wasn't too cold, she went off.

Whit started their conversation again by asking, “Are there more stories?”

James nodded. “I have a few more manuscripts here with me. Other manuscripts were sent around to other believers for safekeeping.”

“Like Wade's mother?” Jack suggested.

“That's right.”

“You have all the stories about Marus?” Whit asked.

“No. I've chronicled some, but there are others I haven't had time to do. And I suspect there are some we don't even know about.”

A pause followed as Whit and Jack sipped their coffee. It was hard to take it all in. James sounded sane and spoke of Marus as casually as other people might talk about any town or country they'd visited. And yet ...

Whit wasn't sure what to ask next, so he returned to James's story. “How did you wind up at Hillingdale Haven?”

“I had to retire from my missions work. A couple of know-it-all doctors said I was getting too old. They said I was showing

the early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease." He snorted as he said the last phrase.

Whit looked concerned. "I'm sorry," he said sympathetically.

"Don't be," James said quickly. "They're wrong. They only said that because I'd been a little loose-tongued about Marus and they thought I was crazy." He harrumphed. "I made the mistake of saying that I hoped the Unseen One would somehow allow me to return to Marus before I died. It was always home to me after I'd been there, and I'd still like to go back. It was a heartfelt wish that I was foolish enough to say out loud to the wrong person."

"Do you still think you'll go back?" Whit asked.

"I hope so."

There was another pause as they enjoyed their drinks.

Jack spoke next, an uncharacteristic edge to his voice. "So, Mr. Curtis, let me get this straight," he began. "You're telling us that these stories about Marus are real? They actually happened?"

James looked surprised by the question. "That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"And you expect us to believe that?" Jack asked.

"Why wouldn't you?"

"First, because you've written stories about another *world*."

"So? Can either of you assure me beyond a shadow of a doubt that other worlds don't exist? Where does it say that God hasn't created other worlds?"

Whit considered all the arguments he'd heard on the subject of parallel worlds, other universes, and wormholes through space. Some people believed in them; some didn't. But Whit had to concede that no one could say beyond a shadow of a doubt that other worlds didn't exist. "That's a fair point," Whit finally agreed.

Jack wasn't finished yet. "Second, the world you write about very coincidentally mirrors our own—and contains events that are almost identical to the Bible events that have happened in *this* world."

"What about them?" James replied nonchalantly as he took a drink of his cocoa. The steam touched his sunglasses with silver spray.

Jack looked puzzled. "Doesn't that seem odd to you? I admit it's a clever idea. It's the kind of thing Whit would do at Whit's End to help the kids understand the Bible better. But why would God do that for real?"

"How can I answer a question like that?" James replied in exasperation. "Why did God create *this* world? Why does God do anything at all? I can't answer such a question." James looked at them carefully, his brow furrowed. "You don't believe in Marus, do you?"

Whit and Jack were speechless. The question had been posed to them before, and they didn't know how to answer. The possibility of it was certainly worth exploring—it was an

intriguing idea—but did either of them truly believe in it?

Finally Whit said, “We don’t know what we believe, Mr. Curtis. We’re still trying to figure it out. That’s why we wanted to meet you and ask you about it.”

“I’m not afraid of your questions,” James said defiantly. “But I won’t make up answers just to convince you about Marus.”

“But you have to admit that it’s all pretty far-fetched,” said Jack.

“As a Christian, I believe in a lot of things that some people consider far-fetched.” James’s jaw was set, and Whit knew there would be little sense in arguing with him.

Jack wasn’t ready to give up, however. “But consider it from an objective point of view,” he continued. “You wrote all the manuscripts. It would’ve been easy for you to take the Bible stories, adapt them to Marus, and then throw in some real kids from *Odyssey* just to give them some zing. Right? Come to think of it, you didn’t even write your own adventure in the first person.”

“I’m a chronicler, not an autobiographer,” James stated. “The writers of the Gospels didn’t always write ‘we’ or ‘I.’ Besides, I didn’t say I wrote all the stories.”

“What do you mean?” Whit asked.

“There are a few stories I know about but never got the full accounts from the people involved. And there’s one written by someone else.”

"Someone else?" Jack inquired. "Who?"

"Have you ever heard of Scott Graham?" he asked.

Jack had to confess that he hadn't.

Whit frowned in concentration and tugged at his white mustache. "I remember something about Scott Graham. Is he the one who disappeared from Odyssey back in the '70s?"

"In the summer of 1979."

"I wasn't here then," Jack admitted.

"It was a big case," Whit explained. "Scott Graham had gone down to the railroad tracks with some friends. They were train buffs and wanted to see a new type of train that was supposed to come past Odyssey. Then Scott simply disappeared."

"What do you mean, *disappeared*?" Jack asked skeptically.

"If I remember right, he'd gone into a train tunnel in full view of his friends and never came out again."

"He must've gone out the other side."

"Not according to the railway worker who was testing a signal over there."

"Then he fell into a hole. An underground mine shaft. A sinkhole."

"It was checked thoroughly again and again by the police, then by experts," Whit said. "They couldn't find any reason for his disappearance. He was never found."

Jack turned to James. "And you're going to tell us he disappeared to Marus," he challenged.

James smiled and shrugged.

Jack thought about it a moment, then said, “How could you know if he never came back to *this* world?”

“Because I have the manuscript telling about his adventure.”

“Ah,” Jack replied quickly, “but how could he tell you about his adventure if he never came back?”

“He didn’t tell it to me. He wrote it himself.”

“What?” Jack exclaimed.

Whit nearly dropped his coffee mug. “He wrote it himself?” he repeated.

With great effort, James got out of his chair. “Come to my room,” he said.



James Curtis lived in one of the original bedrooms of Hillingdale Haven. That meant his room had far more character than the more-institutional rooms built later. He got to enjoy a small fireplace along one of the walls; two large, wood-framed windows; a sink in one corner; and ornate woodworking along the ceiling and around the door itself. He slept in a four-poster bed, worked at an antique writing table, and occasionally sat in a wing chair and watched a small television attached to the wall. Whit noticed a collection of local, national, and international newspapers scattered on a round coffee table. Other books were scattered around the room as well, a few best-sellers but mostly

classic titles of prayer and meditation. Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* caught Whit's eye.

From a dresser drawer, James produced a handwritten manuscript. Unlike the other Marus manuscripts Whit and Jack had seen, this one wasn't written in an old-fashioned school notebook. It was a photocopy of a manuscript that had been scrawled on plain, lined paper. The pages were held together by a rubber band.

"The handwriting is not mine," James pointed out as he handed the bundle to Whit.

It certainly wasn't James's handwriting—Whit could tell that right away. And, unlike the others, it didn't have a title or a date written near the top. "By the way," Whit had to ask, "what did the dates in your manuscripts mean?"

"Those dates were when the story first happened or was first chronicled," James replied. "They don't mean much to anyone except me." He gestured to the wing chair and then pulled out his desk chair. "Please make yourselves at home while you read."

Jack tilted his head a little, glancing down at the papers. "So this is the story of a boy who disappeared into a railway tunnel," he observed.

"That's right," James answered. "I'm sure you'll have questions when you've finished."

Whit knew they would.

CHAPTER ONE



Ouch was the first thing I thought when I opened my eyes and looked around the dark railway tunnel. I lifted my hand to my forehead. I felt a bump but no blood. I struggled to sit up.

Ouch. My hands scraped against the gravel under me. Whoever designed these railway tunnels didn't build them for pedestrians, that's for sure. I looked up and saw the thing that had knocked me flat. It was a short beam with an iron ring attached. I knew it was a leftover from the old days, when the railway workers hung lanterns in the tunnels.

I felt embarrassed. I should have remembered it was there. But when I had started to run through the tunnel, my eyes were dazzled from the afternoon sunlight and didn't adjust to the dark in time. I hadn't thought to look for anything hanging down like that. So *kaboom*, I banged my head on it.

The smell of oil and soot made my nose twitch, and I held back a sneeze. The railway tunnel stretched out in both directions from where I sat. With a little catch in my breath, I realized something was wrong. It was darker outside than it had been a minute ago—darker than when I first went into the tunnel. It had been a clear summer's day, not a cloud in sight, so the sun couldn't have faded that way.

And where were Donny and Mike? They were my two friends who had come with me to the railroad tracks to see the new Chicago-to-Dallas *Turbo-Fire* train engine. I remembered, too, that I was going through the tunnel to talk to some man on the other side who was working near the tracks. We

thought he might know exactly when the train was coming.

Scrambling to my feet, I decided to go back to where Donny and Mike were waiting when I went into the tunnel. They'd been sitting on the bank next to the tracks. It was our favorite spot because it overlooked an older section of the tracks where the trains had to slow down for the bend into the tunnel. "Hey!" I shouted as I jogged to the end of the tunnel. "Mike! Donny!"

I came out into the sunlight and right away started to worry. Mike and Donny weren't there. And the sun was definitely lower in the sky, as if it were just about to go down. I put my hands on my hips and looked around. How long was I knocked out? I figured it was only a minute, maybe not even that long. But it must've been longer. Did Mike and Donny run for help because they thought I was hurt? But why would both of them go? Why didn't one of them stay with me? Or they could have gotten that railway man to help. I mean, they wouldn't just leave me lying there.

Or would they?

Boy, did I have a few choice words for them.

"Mike! Donny! Quit fooling around!" I shouted just in case they were playing a trick. Yelling made my head hurt, though. I lightly touched my bump.

Ouch.

I made my way up the bank and knew right away that something else was different. When Mike, Donny, and I had sat on the bank before, the grass had been green. I had thought about how damp it was because of the rain we'd had the day before. But this grass was dry and brittle. I shrugged and carried on. At the top of the bank, I could see the bridge that formed the top of the tunnel. Beyond that we'd seen the railway worker messing around with a signal by the tracks. That's

why I'd run into the tunnel in the first place. Now, though the tracks shot out as far as I could see, there was no railway man.

I sat down, still feeling a little woozy, and tried to think things through. Everything looked awfully strange. Even though it was dusk, all the colors seemed brighter than usual. The brown grass looked golden. The gray gravel along the railroad tracks seemed like a bright gray. The red brick of the tunnel leaped out at my eyes. Even the black lines of the tracks themselves looked sharp, as if somebody with a fine-pointed pencil had drawn them into the landscape. But the *sun*—that's the thing I couldn't take my eyes off of. It sat there in the sky, big and orange, just inches above the horizon. And that's what bothered me. It wasn't getting any closer to the ground. It hung where it was. No matter how long I watched, neither it nor the shadows ever moved.

My heart suddenly lurched. If it was nearly dusk, I'd been at the railroad tracks most of the day. I looked around. Where were Mike and Donny? If they'd gone for help, where was the ambulance? Why hadn't my parents come to get me? Surely they'd be worried by now. It didn't make any sense.

I'd better get home fast, I decided, and I went back to the bottom of the bank to follow the tracks toward Odyssey.

I hadn't gone far when I heard a *chugging* noise. It sounded like a steam engine approaching on the track behind me. But steam trains hadn't ridden on these tracks for years. Still, the sound was clear. And then came the whistle. I turned back to look. Just as I did, a black steam engine emerged from the blackness of the tunnel, white steam puffing up from its chimney.

"Far out," I said and stopped to watch it go past. I'd only seen a real steam engine in a museum. This one was shiny black all over except for the chrome connecting rods that

pushed forward and backward on the wheels like arms and elbows. The engine was followed by the tender, which carried the fuel and water, followed by a couple of passenger carriages filled with—

I did a double take. The passenger cars were lit from inside, and I could make out clearly that they were filled with men in black-and-red uniforms. My first impression was that they looked like Nazis from an old war movie. But I knew that wasn't possible, either.

The passenger cars were followed by cattle cars. I began to count them, wondering who would be transporting cattle by an old steam engine, when I saw hands reaching out from between the wooden slats. My mouth fell open in shock. There were *people* in those cars, and not just a few. The carriages were jam-packed with them—hundreds, I figured. Many were crying out, shouting for help. I stumbled on a rock and fell to my knees, but my eyes never moved from those cattle cars.

More soldiers filled the caboose, and one who carried a rifle and stood outside, at the back railing, saluted me with a slight smile.

Are they prisoners? I wondered. Is the train transferring inmates from one prison to another?

I shook my head. Donny, Mike, and I had watched a lot of different kinds of trains go past Odyssey, but we'd never seen one carrying prisoners. At least, they'd never carried prisoners in a cattle car. I was sure that kind of thing was against the law. It was so cruel.

The train disappeared around the next bend, and for the first time I started to think I was in a dream. That made more sense than anything I'd seen so far. It certainly explained why the sun was still exactly where it had been 15 minutes ago. And why I'd seen that strange train. And why no one had come

to look for me. Maybe I was at home asleep in my bed ... or maybe I was still knocked out in the tunnel, and even now Mike and Donny were trying to bring me around. Or maybe I was in the hospital.

I'd read stories about things like that—kids in comas having really vivid dreams. Maybe that's what was happening to me now.

I was getting more and more convinced of it the longer I walked. Nothing looked familiar. All the landmarks I'd expected to see were gone. There was no sign of Eddy's Convenience Store over near the highway, where Mike, Donny, and I had stopped to get sodas on our way to our spot by the tunnel. The highway wasn't there, either. And I couldn't find the field with the big oak tree that had a tire hanging from it on a rope. Or the intersection of Route 24 and Dixon's Road—probably because there was no Route 24 and no Dixon's Road to form an intersection.

I walked on and on, the sun hanging motionless in the sky, my mouth getting dry and my heart pumping harder and harder. I was growing scared now. Had I gone in the wrong direction? Even though I'd often gone down to the tracks to watch the trains, I had lived in *Odyssey* only a few months and might've lost my way.

Finally I found a dirt road that looked familiar and branched off from the tracks to follow it. I figured it would eventually take me to someone who might have a telephone. My feet kicked up the dirt in clouds of dust, which was weird. It had rained a lot the day before, yet this ground was bone-dry. And the grass on both sides of the road was as dead as if we'd been in a drought for years. In the distance, I could see forests of skeletal trees. I knew for a fact that the trees I'd seen earlier in the day were thick with green leaves. The road came to a

small bridge that crossed what I assumed was a riverbed. It looked as if it hadn't seen water in ages.

At school I once saw a movie about the dust bowls of Oklahoma in the 1930s, where everything had turned brown, the water had dried up, and the people had been forced to move away or die. That's what this reminded me of. I half expected an old pickup truck to round the corner, driven by a man looking like Henry Fonda, except he wouldn't be a famous movie star but a poor, down-and-out guy with patches on his clothes and dirt smudged on his cheeks. And he'd have a thin wife with pinched eyes and a turned-down mouth, and she'd be carrying a hungry baby in her lap on the passenger side. There'd be five other kids with them, in rags, sitting in the back of the truck with a few pots and pans and a trunk of old clothes.

The road went on, seemingly forever. I was feeling panicked by now. I didn't see anything I recognized. No signs pointed me this way or that way. Everything was perfectly still in the setting sun that wouldn't set. I started to feel the sun was teasing me with a night that wouldn't come. I was getting hungry and thirsty, too.

Then I glanced at the barren field on my right and saw a bright-red, two-story farmhouse in the distance. My heart leaped with joy. Maybe someone there could help me. Maybe they would let me use the phone to call my parents to come and get me. I started to run toward the house, jogging at first and then picking up speed into a full run. As I got closer and closer, I noticed things that made my heart beat even faster. For example, the grass surrounding the house was thick and alive, spreading out like a green carpet. Clothes hung on a clothesline and gently moved in a breeze I couldn't feel. Fresh flowers grew in the flowerbeds around the porch and in boxes

along some of the windows. Off to the side of the house stood a plot of vegetables. Everything had been so strangely empty and dead until now that the sight of normal life made me want to cry.

A woman came around the corner of the house carrying an empty basket. She was heavysset, her pale blouse and brown skirt billowing out from her like waterfalls. Her hair was tucked up under a scarf. She dropped the basket on the ground next to the vegetable garden and put her hands on her hips as if trying to decide what to pick for dinner.

“Hello!” I shouted.

The woman was startled and turned around quickly to face me. “What do you want?” she snapped as I came within a few feet. Her eyes were pinched and her mouth tugged down at the corners, and she looked as if she’d been through something terrible. She reminded me of one of the mothers I saw in that film about the Oklahoma dust bowls.

“I’m lost,” I explained. “I’m trying to get back to Odyssey.”

The woman shook her head. “I’ve never heard of it,” she declared.

“It’s a town somewhere around here.”

The woman shook her head again. Then she did a curious thing. She took a step to one side as if she hoped to block my view of the garden behind her. I thought she looked nervous about it, as if I wasn’t supposed to see it.

“Connellsville?” I asked. I was sure she must have heard of Connellsville. It was the biggest city in the area.

The woman shook her head again. “If this is some kind of prank, I won’t put up with it,” she warned.

“It’s not,” I said, my voice quivering without my meaning for it to. “I’m lost, and I need to call my parents. Can I use your phone?”

"Phone?"

"Yeah, your telephone. Please."

The woman looked at me as if I were speaking Swahili. Then her eyes widened as if she suddenly realized what I was saying. "Oh, one of those boxes that rings!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah!"

"I don't have one of those. Nobody around here does. Those are for the city people."

I felt like crying again. How was it possible that there was somebody left in the United States who didn't have a phone? Had I walked through some kind of time warp? I clenched and unclenched my fists, which is something I do to help me think. "If you've never heard of Odyssey or Connellsville, what city is around here?" I asked.

"Krawley is the closest city," she said, still keeping a watchful eye on me. "But that's miles away." Then she suddenly added: "There might be a ring box in Raundale."

"Raundale?" I'd never heard of it.

She nodded. "That's only a couple of miles from here."

A screen door slammed, and a young girl stepped out onto the porch. I figured she was about six years old. She had long, blonde hair and wore a flowered dress with a little apron. She had pale, white legs, white socks, and black shoes. I thought of Alice in Wonderland.

"Mama," she said.

The woman cut her off. "Go back inside, Cylindra," she ordered.

"But who is he?" the girl asked, pointing at me.

"I'm Scott," I answered, wanting to be friendly.

"Go back inside *right this minute*," the woman commanded.

The girl hesitated only a second, smiled at me, then turned and went back inside the house.