

vasion. But I was naturally impressed by these precautions. I found it more difficult to fall asleep and I woke up more easily.

Sometimes, in the dark, my mother would suddenly ask: "Are you awake?" Often it turned out that we were. Then she would say: "Listen!" We would listen tensely, more alarmed by my mother than by anything we heard, though the old house was full of noises. Soon my mother took to keeping an axe in the closet. "A woman with an axe," she said, "is a match for any man." In that somewhat uneasy atmosphere, I began to take a knife to bed with me. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I would feel to make sure that it was still under my pillow. I always put it away carefully in the morning. My mother never knew that I had it.

There were no streetlights in those days. One night, we heard a woman's terrified screams quivering in the dark, almost under our windows. My mother sat up in bed and screamed in sympathy. "Scream!" she shouted to us and screamed again herself. It was a hold-up, the only one I recall in that community.

After that, my mother moved the axe under her bed.

## X V

Every week, my father sent us eight dollars for living expenses. At the time and place, it was possible to manage on eight dollars, and my mother was a good manager. But, as a child, I knew that we were poor. I knew it by direct experience. Perhaps my mother felt that she was stared at in the village, for I did most of the family shopping.

One of my mother's ways of managing was to charge things at the stores. "Charge it," I would say as casually as possible, with increasing embarrassment when I knew that the unpaid bill was big. Sometimes, the baker's wife would whisper with him before letting me have a loaf of bread. Sometimes, a storekeeper would say: "Tell your mother, no more credit till the bill is paid." Once an angry woman leaned over the counter and sneered at me: "Your mother is a broken-down stagecoach." In times the bills were always paid, but I knew a good deal about the relations of the poor man and the shopkeeper before I read about them in Karl Marx. Of course, the shopkeepers had bills to pay too.

We were never hungry. Rutabagas were very cheap then and a big one would last us several meals. We also ate a good deal of pea

soup and a great deal of spaghetti and rice. I grew husky on a diet that would scandalize a dietitian.

Fuel was sometimes a problem. We used to keep a sharp eye out for new houses building. After the carpenters had gone home at night, we would fill burlap bags with beam and board ends. My brother and I could each manage one bag. I have seen my beautiful and slender mother, plodding through the dark, with a heavy bag of kindling slung over each shoulder. Sometimes we picked up coal along the railroad tracks.

To eke out our living, my mother began to bake cakes for sale. I would go out and hustle orders. The next day I would deliver the cakes. In summer I peddled vegetables. I also developed a regular route for eggs. My mother had an incubator in the attic. Through the glass door, at hatching time, we could watch the wonder of chicks breaking the shell. Sometimes my mother had to take a hair-pin and help the chick chip the egg.

When the first of these chicks grew big enough, I went out and got orders for dressed broilers. Then my mother told me to go and kill the first chickens. The thought of hurting anything so helpless and foolish was too much for me. I said: "I can't." My mother did not even answer me. She took a sharp knife and pressed the handle into my hand. "I will not have any man in this house," she said fiercely, "who is afraid of blood." I knew that she was thinking of my father.

I caught a chicken. I sat down with it in the coop, stroked its feathers and tried to quiet its alarm. It was a sunny day. It was the thought that from the bird's bright eye that world of light must now fade that unnerved me. Why must I darken it? So that the live, free creature could pass through the bowels of a gross person? It made no sense.

I tied the chicken's legs and hung it, head down, from a nail, and as quickly and as mercifully as I could, severed its head. The knife fell as if gravity had jerked it from my hand. Then I hid.

In hiding I had these thoughts, in other words or phrases, but substantially these thoughts. Something in me, the deepest thing that makes me what I am, knows that it is wrong to kill anything. But there is something else—a necessity—that forces me to kill. I have the strength to overcome the feeling in myself against killing, and I am proud that I have it for it is part of what makes me a man. All right. As a man, I will kill. But I will kill always under duress,