I sat on the back porch step and looked toward the barn, which was being rapidly swallowed up and was disappearing from view by the thick fog rolling in from the bay. From somewhere across the bay, fog horns blared loud, raucous warnings to passing ships, their noise slicing into the otherwise utter stillness and silence of the early morning.
A tingle of excitement raced through my body as I listened and soon I, too, was totally enveloped and swallowed up in the billows of swirling fog.

I sat there, head up, my eyes looking straight ahead into the impenetrable clouds of gray, feeling for all the world like I was floating . . . floating . . . floating . . . into the mysterious, vast unknown.

I liked the fog. It gave me a feeling of detachment from everything -- the world and everything in it. I often wondered if perhaps God didn't allow it to enshroud the few farms in our area and the nearby village to slow everyone down a bit. Whether this was His reason or not, I cannot say; I only know that our little world came to an abrupt halt when the fog rolled in like it was doing this morning: cars couldn't move; they'd pile up on top of each other in serious accidents if their drivers dared venture out on the narrow, winding, twisting road when visibility was nil, like now. Farmers too! They had to curb all activity and outside work until the sun burned the fog away so that they could see where they were going and what they were doing as they worked the long, narrow arm of land that jutted far out into the bay.

Inside the house, I heard Mama slide a heavy iron skillet across the big wood cookstove. At the same instant, a tantalizing odor stole through the screen door straight to where I sat, its fragrance whetting my appetite to its apex -- its zenith. Mama was having fried potatoes and onions for breakfast! I knew there would be ham and eggs, too, but the thing that sent me scurrying to the kitchen from my land of fantasy and dreaming on the porch step was the knowledge that a big bowl of bubbly-hot, thick milk gravy made from the ham drippings would be ready and waiting for me to spoon over thick slices of Mama's homemade bread.

"Peter's my breakfast clock!" Mama exclaimed laughingly to Papa as I came through the kitchen doorway just as she was pouring the steaming gravy into a bowl.

"A perfect timekeeper!" Papa declared, patting my shoulder and ruffling my hair.

"He must have hollow legs!" Sally declared, slicing the bread and setting it on the table. "It seems he's always hungry," she added, giving me a look of deep concern; an "I-wonder-if-you're-normal" look.
"He's a growing boy, Sally." Mama's voice was sweet and pleasant sounding. It made me feel all good and warm and wonderful inside. "Someday -- when you have a family of your own -- you will understand. About boys' appetites, especially," Mama added, laughing pleasantly and filling my cup with delicious hot chocolate from a pot on the back of the stove.

"Sally and I'll have to marry rich men if we have a family of boys who eat as much as Peter eats," Suzanne said lightly, seating herself on the chair next to mine and winking at me.

"All healthy Dutch people eat 'hearty,' girls. Even the women --" Mama said with a twinkle in her bluegreen eyes.

"And that's why they're so plump, too," Sally declared. "And I don't want to get 'pleasingly' plump, even though Aunt Louise thinks I'd look 'so much better' -- her words -- if I had 'a little more flesh on these bones,' end of quote."

"You are awfully skinny," I piped up without thinking.

"It's not 'skinny,' Peter; say 'thin,'" Suzanne teased. "Sally thinks 'skinny' has a . . . a vulgar sound."

"What's the difference?" I asked quickly, wanting to know for my own satisfaction.

"The one just sounds better than the other. See, little Peter?" Suzanne explained.

"Girls sure are funny, and . . . and strange," I said, shaking my head in consternation and not understanding at all.

"It's simple, Peter," Sally said, her cornflower blue eyes resting on my face and her hand covering mine. "I just don't want to become 'pleasingly plump.' Fat! Rotund!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms out in a great round circle to accentuate the 'rotund' part. "I want to be like Polly --"

"Li . . . like . . . Polly!" I gasped. "Oh, Sally, not you too! Not you!" I all but wailed. "Thin, Peter. Thin like Polly."
At mention of Polly, a sort of pall settled over our otherwise pleasant breakfast conversation.

"If you are through with your little teasing now," Papa said kindly, "we shall ask the blessing on the food and be thankful to our Heavenly Father for the same. Shall we all join hands?"

Sally reached over and, giving my hand a tight little squeeze, she bowed her head. To my right, Suzanne did the same. It was a good feeling, my hands resting lightly, one in Sally's hand, the other in Suzanne's. With her other hand, Sally took Papa's hand; he took Mama's, and Mama took Suzanne's. The circle was complete.

"Eat all you want," Mama said as she passed the potatoes and ham and eggs, "but this morning, there'll be no lingering; there's work to be done. . . . Her sentence trailed meaningfully.

I knew what she meant; it was "that" time of year again. I could always tell when the "housecleaning spurt" attacked Mama. The feeling pervaded the house and hung heavy in the air. It "hit" Mama especially hard twice a year -- spring and fall -- and I do declare, it seemed to me that she all but tore the house apart to locate that last speck of dust or dirt. Pictures were taken off the walls, their glasses washed and wiped till Sally and Suzanne could see their own image reflected in them while the frames were polished until the wood shone and felt as smooth as satin. Curtains had to come down: rugs were lifted and taken to the clothes line for their twice-a-year-beating and mattresses were carried to the lawn for airing and sunning.

"More gravy, Peter?" Mama asked, setting the bowl in front of my plate. "Eat all you want," she repeated.

"But no 'lingering' this morning," Papa parroted mischievously, patting Mama's hand and winking at me.

As soon as family worship was over, I ran to the porch. The fog was lifting and, slowly but surely, it was vanishing. Mama would have a sunny day in which to do her fall housecleaning, I noted happily.
Mama was a "go-getter" (Sam's words) and I knew, had Sam been home and not in college, he'd have done everything in his power to lighten Mama's work.

Quite suddenly, I wished I were bigger and stronger so I could pick the mattresses off the beds and carry them outside all by myself -- like Sam used to do. But since I wasn't that much a man yet, being barely 10, I decided I could do Mama and my sisters a big favor by just staying out of their way. I would remain near enough, however, I decided, so that I could hear Mama call if she needed me for anything besides beating the carpets when finally they were hung across the clothes line.

While Suzanne hurried upstairs to join Mama, Sally removed a pot of bubbly baked beans from the oven and a big, fat, plump hen, stuffed with delicious stuffing. This would be our fare for the rest of the day, along with a big bowl of potato salad, plenty of home-baked pastries and rolls and creamy milk, chilled in the big crock in the spring house where icy-cold water ran perpetually through the concrete trough in which the crock sat.

Since today was another special housecleaning day, it meant a day of "rest" for the stove, for it, too, would be cleaned -- from the grates and oven to the last joint of the stovepipe where it crooked its elbow and went into the brick chimney outside the house.

I chuckled as I recalled how black and funny Suzanne looked the last time she cleaned the inside of the stovepipe. Her hands and face were grimy-black from the soot that she scraped and brushed out of its insides, making her eyeballs look unusually white and peculiar. When I said something to her about it, she quipped lightly, "I'm so dirty, Peter, and so black that if I'd stuff my head into the chimney hole, I could almost pass for a piece of the stovepipe itself."

"Poor Suzanne," I whispered softly, hoping she wouldn't get quite so black this time. She didn't enjoy getting all sooty, I knew, but she and Sally were obedient and diligent in everything they did. I was proud that I was their brother.

Getting quickly to my feet, I hurried inside and down the cellar steps. Mama and my sisters had cleaned the cellar and the attic on a rainy day, and now each smelled fragrant and clean. I enjoyed sitting on the bottom
cellar step -- step number 8, it was -- and looking at Mama's jar cupboard which wasn't a cupboard at all, but was long rows of shelves from floor to ceiling and went the entire length of our house.

Sitting on the shelves, two rows deep on each shelf, were shiny-bright jars of canned peaches, cherries, pears and plums; green beans, wax beans, lima beans and corn, tomatoes, pickles, relishes, juices and jams and jellies of every sort and kind.

The thing that fascinated me most of all and filled my heart with a sense of special awe, pride and amazement for Mama was her clever ingenuity with scissors and cast-off newspapers. Mrs. Ward, a neighbor, passed the weekly Sentinel on to the Worleys -- another neighbor-who passed it on to us. Mama saved these weekly "contributions" and when spring and fall housecleaning came around, she folded the papers this way, then that way -- and ways I could never remember -- then went to cutting. The result was the fancy, beautiful, lacy-edged shelving paper on each and every single shelf that made the canned fruits and vegetables look like pictures from a magazine.

I leaned my head against the cool, freshly whitewashed wall and took long deep breaths of the cellar odors -- a grand mixture and combination of cooling pies in the screened-in pie cupboard along the east wall, fleshly-dug potatoes resting in their big, deep bins and smelling ever so earthy and good, and a partially sliced hickory smoked bacon hanging by a meat hook from one of the stout beams in the ceiling.

I felt I was the richest boy in all the world and that Mama and Papa were the grandest, dearest, best and most wonderful parents God could ever give a boy.

From upstairs, I heard the dull thud and scraping of moving furniture and I knew that the woven carpet was being lifted from the floor. Soon I would be busy too, doing what little I could, beating the dust out of the long carpet strips as Suzanne and Sally scrubbed the rough wooden floor with homemade soap and hot water. Later the floor would be inspected by Mama, who made sure that all the cracks and grooves were spotlessly clean and dirt-flee before the three-foot wide woven strips were laid, overlapping each other slightly, and tacked securely to the clean-smelling boards once more.
A good feeling came over me and I felt a warm drowsiness envelop me. I closed my eyes, thinking how wonderful it was to have a clean heart—a pure heart. In many ways, Mama and the girls were doing to the house what the Lord did to my heart when He saved me then sanctified me—I was clean, from the inside out, all clean. Our house, too, though inanimate, and not at all like people, would be clean. From the attic, where the teas were hanging upside down to dry—for use in treating colds and various and sundry bodily ailments through the winter—to the cellar, the big farmhouse would be clean. We were a clean family—clean, pure hearts and soon, a freshly cleaned house!

I sighed contentedly, keeping my eyes shut, just thinking and being thankful.

I must have fallen asleep; how long I don't know, but I was suddenly awakened by agonized praying and sobbing.

I jumped to my feet and stood motionless, listening. Then a tear slid from my eye, and another and another. Mama was praying. No, she was interceding—in great agony of soul—and her voice was coming from Polly's room! The girls, too, were having a prayer meeting in Polly's room.

I wanted to race up the stairs to Mama and my sisters but decided it would never do. I could pray in the cellar, couldn't I?

I fell to my knees. Step number 8 became my altar of prayer, only I didn't pray much; rather, I knelt in awe over Mama. I knew that tone of voice as she wrestled with God and I knew, too, that Mama wouldn't let go of God until she got an answer. This time something was going to happen! I could feel it all through my entire being. Mama was praying and wrestling with God with the same determined spirit that she had when she began her fall housecleaning!

Suddenly I knew what happened—why the three were praying and weeping so: ever since Polly left home—two months, it was now—the door to her bedroom was kept shut. Today, with fall housecleaning, they had gone in to clean. . . .

I wept too now. Hard. My ears were attuned to Mama. She prayed with exactly the same fervor that she manifested when anything important and big
needed done. I felt the power of her hold on God, there in the cellar where I
kneel, clear to the tips of my toes. It was like great electric shocks were
charging through my body and I knew, as surely as I was kneeling there, that
something was happening in Polly's heart.

    It was Mama's glorious shout of victory that sent me racing up the cellar
steps, two at a time, through the kitchen to the upstairs.

    Mama was laughing and crying and shouting all at the same time, and
walking back and forth in Polly's room waving a scrub cloth and shouting
"Hallelujah! Hallelujah[ Hallelujah!"

    I rushed to her side, crying so hard I could scarcely see. Mama looked
like an angel, I thought. Her face shone like a bright light was turned on
somewhere inside.

    "Polly's coming home, Peter! She's coming home -this week! Praise the
Lord!" she exclaimed, gathering me up in her arms and pacing across the
room in ecstasy.

    Quite suddenly, Mama put me down and with eyes alight with joy and
her dear face aglow, she addressed my sisters. "We must hurry," she told
Sally and Suzanne, whose faces much resembled Mama's, with a heavenly
glow. "Polly will soon be home; we must have the room in order. . . ."

    The girls set to work with a will -- a purpose. I tiptoed out of the room,
down the steps to the back porch, thinking of Polly and her rebellious heart.

    Polly was a beautiful young woman, oldest of the girls. But her beauty
was her "downfall," as I heard Papa say to Mama on a certain occasion. She
had wanted to compete in some sort of beauty contest and Papa and Mama
forbade her doing such a thing. In a fit of anger, she had stolen out of the
house one night, leaving a note saying she would never be back. I smiled,
knowing differently since Mama and the girls had the prayer meeting in her
room.

    It was during the supper hour that I looked up from my plate and saw a
movement on the front porch. "Polly! Polly!" I cried excitedly, rushing forward
to greet my dark-haired sister.
"Come in, dear," Mama said as casually as though she were talking to Papa or me or one of the girls at the table. "We've been expecting you. You're just in time for supper. . . ."

Polly stood inside the door now, her dark eyes spilling tears. "I'm sorry," she said brokenly. "Will you please forgive me, Papa and Mama? I'm so sorry. The Lord forgave me and took me back. . ."

Can you . . . all forgive me? Please?"

As one, we all moved toward Polly. Soon everybody was talking at once and when Polly sat down at the table and Papa said softly, hoarsely -- his voice sounding like there was a catch in it -- "Shall we join hands around the table and thank God for His special blessing to us in sending you home, dear Polly?" -- only then did I realize just how much we all had missed Polly and loved her.

Suzanne gave up her usual place at the table -- next to me -- so Polly could hold one of my hands, and as her fingers wound tightly 'round mine and we bowed our heads while Papa prayed, Mama shouted loudly, "Hallelujah! Thank you, dear Lord. Thank you."

I breathed a fervent "Amen" and then aloud I thanked God for Mama's housecleaning prayer meeting. Everything was going to be all right now. Everything! The family circle was complete again -- in Christ.