

ROSE HAMILTON-GOTTLIEB

FAVORITE SON

Usually Willie's sister made sure Stefan got on the school bus, but today she'd gone home with a friend who lived on a different bus route, so Willie was stuck with their little brother. At the door to the kindergarten room, he heard Stefan's voice.

"And we have seven cows," his brother was saying. "One's named Beulah. And then there's Bossy . . . she's mean . . . and Tildy and . . ." Willie peered around the edge of the door and saw Stefan sitting on Miss Reynolds' lap, looking up at her from under those long black eyelashes women always went nuts over. Willie had spent first and second grades in old lady Reynolds' classroom, and as far as he could see the only kid she ever held on her bony lap was the superintendent's measly little girl. Now here was Stefan, and telling her some long-winded story.

Now, Stefan held one hand in the air and counted on his fingers until he came to the last cow's name. Then he slapped his hands down on his knees and gave his head a jerk.

That was Stefan's latest habit, shaking his head, like a period at the end of his sentences. It drove Dad crazy. Mom said it just made Stefan worse when Dad yelled at him for it, and Dad said if she had her way he'd be a baby all his life. Then Mom would accuse him of taking his troubles out on a little boy. They had a big argument about it last week when Dad came home upset on account of Frank Morgan's dying.

Frank Morgan had not only been Dad's old friend, but he had held his note, and now Dad had to come up with a lot of money all at once. This morning he left for Des Moines to borrow from a finance company that advertised on the radio. Willie knew all about it because he'd heard his folks talk about how the banker in town wouldn't loan his dad the money to settle up with the Morgan family.

It was a mystery why Miss Reynolds liked Stefan. She made kids stay in

at recess for what she called "annoying nervous habits," like sitting at a desk all by himself would make a kid stop biting his nails. But the teacher didn't seem to notice Stefan's tics.

"And do you help milk the cows?" she said.

"No." Stefan jerked his head again. "But I will now I'm in school. Sometimes the cows kick though, and I worry some about that."

Willie supposed he shouldn't be surprised at the teacher's sweet tone of voice, after the way Sunday school teachers and the other ladies from church carried on about Stefan. He could understand them making a big deal over a baby, but Stefan's cuteness didn't show any signs of going away. Willie was eleven, and as far as he knew, nobody had ever called him cute. His three sisters teased him about his big ears and his freckles and crooked front teeth, and he supposed Miss Reynolds would fall over dead before she smiled at him.

Willie stepped into the room and caught his brother's eye and Stefan slid off the teacher's lap.

"There's my big brother. Gotta go," he said. He picked up his lunch pail and followed Willie into the hall.

"Miss Reynolds is nice," Stefan said, as they went down the stairs. "She's not a bit mean like you said. Today she let me pick up the reading books and put them on the shelf."

"Yeah, I might've known you'd be teacher's pet," Willie said. "Come on, we're late." He had to run ahead to catch the school bus before it pulled away from the curb. He waited, one foot on the bottom step, until Stefan had climbed, puffing, onto the bus. The driver, who had given Willie a dirty look for being late, smiled at his brother.

"You sit here." Willie sat him down near the front and went to the back to sit with the big boys, then wished he hadn't left him alone because he had to spend the whole ride watching to make sure nobody teased him.

The bus drove through town and out into the country past oat fields turned to stubble and corn, stunted and yellow from a summer without rain. Almost every week, clouds would roll in and there'd be thunder and lightning and a few raindrops. Then it would stop and Mom would look out the window and mutter something about there not even being enough moisture to settle the dust. Dad was in a bad mood most of the time.

The bus ride was short, a mile and a half on the highway and a quarter of a mile on the gravel road leading to the Hartin mailbox. Last year, Willie and his sisters had had to walk from the highway, but when their little brother started