

HARRIS *and* ME

GARY PAULSEN

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*In which I meet Harris and am
exposed for the first time
to the vagaries of inflation*

Meeting Harris would never have happened were it not for liberal quantities of Schlitz and Four Roses. For nearly all of my remembered childhood there was an open bottle of Schlitz on a table. My parents drank Four Roses professionally from jelly jars—neat, without diluting ice, water, or mix.

They were, consequently, vegetables most of the time—although the term vegetable connotes a feeling of calm that did not exist. They went through three phases of drunkenness: buzzed (happy), drunk (mean as snakes), and finally, obliterated (Four Roses coma).

Unfortunately the buzzed, or happy, stage only

lasted a short time, and it grew shorter as time progressed until they were pretty much mean whenever they were conscious.

Home became, finally, something of an impossibility for me and I would go to stay with relatives for extended periods of time.

By the time I was eleven I had stayed with several uncles, my grandmother, and an old Norwegian bachelor farmer who thought God lived in the haymow of his barn, where he was afraid to go without wearing a feed sack over his head. He told me God couldn't see through feed sacks and if God couldn't see you, you never died.

I had many uncles and shirttail relatives and when I was eleven a kind of rotation dumped me with Harris and his family.

The sheriff sent a deputy to pick me up and we left for the Larsons' place in late afternoon. They lived on a farm forty miles north of the town I lived in, yet it might as well have been on a different planet. The ride took about an hour and a half but it went through such varied terrain that before we had gone five miles I was in despair. For two or three of those miles the car moved past farm country that still seemed rather settled. Frequently there were tractors working in the fields and people who waved cheerfully, walking down the sides of the road. But soon

the trees closed in, closer and thicker until they were a wall on either side and the road and car were enveloped in a curtain of green darkness. And there were no more open fields or driveways, just dirt tracks that disappeared into the forest and brush. It was like going off the edge of the earth on those old maps used by early explorers, into places where it said: There Be Monsters Here.

The deputy I was with spit constantly out the side window while extolling the virtues of the car—a 1949 Ford.

"It's got the V-eight," he told me. "Gets you a lot of power, the V-eight." *Spit*. "You need power for catching criminals while in hot pursuit." *Spit*.

"You want to be able to *move* this thing when you go into a hot pursuit situation." *Spit*.

There was absolutely no break in the forest. Black-green, densely vegetated, the summer northern woods fought right to the shoulder of the asphalt. Indeed, in places the trees came out over the road and made a green tunnel. I kept looking for an indication of life.

"People live here?" I asked finally.

"Sure." *Spit*. "Must be two, three hundred of 'em scattered around. You know, back in a ways."

The road grew more narrow, closed in until it nearly disappeared ahead of the car, and just when it

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This summer will be different. That's for sure. When an eleven-year-old city boy is dropped off to stay on a farm with relatives, he doesn't know what to expect. His cousin Harris soon takes care of that. Harris is rude and crude and finds trouble at every turn. He leads his city cousin into everything from wrestling slippery pigs to catching mice to a daredevil jump out of a barn loft. And that's not all. There are swimming and cowboy movies and enough good food to fill the boys up for days.

Farm life is hard but never lonely. Before long, Harris's cousin has found a place where he belongs. If only summer could last forever.



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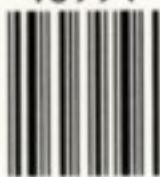
Cover illustration by Wendell Minor

US \$5.99 / \$7.99 CAN

ISBN 0-440-40994-2



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A Yearling Book
New York
RL:4.5
008-012

COVER PRINTED IN USA