

**The barn stood on a** high, rocky rise, and was visible over the gnarled old apple trees to the north of the old farmhouse. While the basic structure was almost as run-down as the house, the hayloft in it was fairly new, with fresh-hewn flooring and a new outer door. I liked it in the loft. With little effort, I could see north as far as Sam Prichard's fish pond and south all the way to Newt Pearson's General Store.

I looked south now, and strained my eyes to see in the waning light. There were a lot of cars at Pearson's. That was not unusual. Many men, mostly those I never saw at the New Bethlehem Church on a Sunday morning, gathered regularly at the store. They arrived from various directions on the old gravel road and plunked themselves down on produce-crate chairs. Soon, a thick, blue haze of tobacco smoke floated in an endless galactic swirl, while lanky young forms waited a turn on the tattered pool table that graced the center of the room....