

Cottonwood Summer (Pages 1-2)

The Adventures Begin

From the way that Danny and Jase first met, you would never guess that they would become best of friends.

Spring of 1944 brought a succession of upbeat reports from the war. After winning decisively in North Africa, the Allies were pushing the Nazis up the boot of Italy, back to Germany where they belonged. In the Pacific, we were boldly island hopping our way toward Tokyo. And, as General Eisenhower gathered his forces in England, the long-awaited invasion of Europe was at hand.

So, when I opened the afternoon's *Riverton Daily Press*, I expected good news. But, to my bitter disappointment, the "Michigan at War" column reported two more Riverton boys killed in action. Since New Year's Day, our town's killed-in-action tally stood at a record-setting sixteen "with the heaviest fighting yet to come."

Needing a change of mood, I threw the paper aside and set off for the backyard.

The giant oak tree hugging the Reilly property line accommodated the neighborhood's best swing. Its sturdy seat, fashioned skillfully by my father from a plank of seasoned walnut, hung from heavy rope secured to a thick branch a dozen feet above the ground.

Looking forward to a good dose of therapeutic solo flying, I slammed the kitchen screen door and raced down the back steps toward my aircraft.

But I stopped, dead in my tracks!

There, sitting in my swing, was a strange-looking boy that I had never seen before.

He was about my size and, as I would learn later, almost exactly my age. His thick hair, matching the color of his black eyes, was butched short and his skin was heavily tanned. Immense ears framed his owl-like face.

The over-sized, olive drab army cap perched rakishly above his left eyebrow signaled a cocky demeanor. A tee shirt of alternating maroon and dirty yellow stripes was tucked carelessly into crumpled tan cotton shorts. Several passes of an adult-length, brown leather belt embossed with bucking broncos and branding irons circled his waist.

But the most dramatic element of his fashion statement was the floppy pair of canvas infantry leggings, surplus from the Great War, I guessed, which if

fully laced would have extended upward, well past his knees. Two scuffed brown work shoes, in need of new soles and strings, poked out from under his doughboy specials.

The well-contrived uniform was clearly designed to intimidate. But, for good reason, I wasn't a bit threatened. Well before my matriculation to kindergarten, years earlier, I had mastered our neighborhood's rules of engagement. These were the sacred protocols used to repel unwanted interlopers like this one.

I launched my attack.

Drawing on my vast knowledge of movie tough guys, I *became* Edward G. Robinson, snarling, "Listen here, buddy! You can't use that swing, see! This is private property, see!"

Boy, was I good!

But the intruder immediately demonstrated that he was no stranger to the nuances of territorial warfare. He hopped off my swing and stepped across the border into the Reilly backyard. He now stood in a neutral country, defined as the property of any neighbor without children.

Safely out of harm's way, he countered, "This isn't your property! So I can stay here all night if I want to -- and you can't stop me!"

He trumped me. I didn't have a comeback.

**Excerpted from *Cottonwood Summer* by Gary Slaughter.
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