

Chapter 14

We walked up to the driveway to her house. It was a large one-story brick home with a porch that seemed to go around the entire perimeter of the house. There were white columns of brick and wood lining the porch. About halfway up the driveway, four dogs ran up to greet us, jumping all over and licking us to death.

"Down boys!" commanded Angela, "Shoo now! Get away and get back to sleep. I ain't got no food for you yet." The dogs calmed down a little and ran circles around us as we kept walking. It was good to see the dogs. I chuckled. I loved dogs and thought about my dog Charlie back at home in Texas.

"What are their names?" I asked as the big brown and white one reared up on its legs, leaned on my shoulders and licked me.

"Well," she began. "This black one here that is following me is 'Buster' and the collie over there by fence is 'Buddy' and the little one that's just now going back into the house, we call him 'Bozo' She pointed at each one as she named them.

"What about this one that's all over me?"

"Oh, that's just the old hound dog. My Paw-Paw just calls him 'Dog'.

She opened the screen door to the house. We walked in. She sat on an old sofa. I sat on a chair by the sofa. "Y'all have lots of dogs, don't you?"

"We sure do," she replied. "They hunt down and tree all the racoons and possums in the orchard, so Paw-Paw and shoot them with the twelve gauge." She pointed to the shotgun hanging on the wall over the fireplace.

"David," she said, "You're a mess. Paw-Paw would probably say you're a ragamuffin. That's a word he likes to use. You must have been through an ordeal, no fooling?"

"No fooling, scouts honor, remember?" I replied.

"Well, you go into the bathroom down that hall, wash your hands and face. There's some of my combs and brushes in there. You can use them if you want. I don't mind. You won't get no cooties or anything like that."

I walked to the bathroom, squinted at my image in the mirror. I must have had five or six layers of dirt all over me and my hair had knots and burrs stuck in it. I thoroughly scrubbed with the gritty green soap that was near the sink. I washed my hands, face and stuck my hair under the faucet and washed it out. I grabbed a brush and gave it a few passes through my hair. I walked back to their living room and asked, "Better?"

"Much better," she said nodding her head in approval. She had a huge drawer in her hands that she must have pulled out of a desk somewhere in their house. "Look," she said, "this is drawer where Paw-Paw keeps all the glasses in. He doesn't throw away anything. Any pair of glasses he or anybody else has ever worn, he keeps in here. He keeps telling me 'Angela, if you would have lived through the Great Depression and The War, you wouldn't throw away anything either.'"

She handed me the drawer and continued talking, "Anyways, there must be about thirty or forty pair in there. Maybe you can find a pair that fits you and helps you see better. Because you're starting to freak me out a little walking around everywhere squinting your eyes. I'm afraid you are going to run into a wall and break your leg or something like that"

She handed me the drawer. It smelled ancient. I sat down on the chair with it in my lap, sorting through the, trying on many. Some I put back into the drawer, while others I made a small pile of "possibilities". After I had tried on every pair in the drawer, I re-tested the "possible" pile. Meanwhile, Angela had got her clarinet out of the case and started to squeak out a song that sounded like "Hot Cross Buns" or "Mary Had a Little Lamb"

Finally, in the "possibility" stack, I did settle on a pair of glasses that I could see better out of. I didn't think they were quite as effective as my pair in that lay in shards somewhere back in the East Texas Woods, but nevertheless, they worked better than nothing.

I looked up at Angela and could see the finer details of her face more clearly now. She had infinitely thick strands of fire red hair, a freckled complexion and dark green eyes. I could even make out the individual keys on the clarinet as she played. There was a break in the playing, I moved over toward her and said, "How about these?" I asked.

She giggled, "Well, they do look a little corny, like you're from the fifties or something like that. But if it keeps you from squinting at me and walking around like a blind bat, they will have to do.

I blinked from behind this ancient pair of spectacles on my face and lost myself gazing at her.

"Lordy, David. Now don't be a weirdo and just stare at me like that, Mister! I might change my mind about being so nice to you."

I rattled my head a bit and apologized. "I was just re-adjusting to having vision for the first time in days. It's like looking at a lawn your whole life and not realizing that there are individual blades of grass down there below your feet until you have sight restored.

"That's fine, Mister. Just don't get all weird on me again like that."

I looked around the house. There were a lot of old photos hanging on the brown paneled walls. Pictures of soldiers, old nineteenth century photos, photos of people riding horses and photos of peach trees full of fruit. The gun was hanging over the fireplace and an old cuckoo type clock was on the wall. There was a horseshoe hanging over the front door, toolboxes in the corner, pots and pans in the sink.

Angela walked toward me carrying a telephone, a long-coiled cord connecting to the wall trailing behind it. She placed it in my lap. It was a big black heavy rotary phone like I remember my own grandparents having. "Well, "she commanded, "I promised you. I'm always good on my promise. Go ahead and call your folks. Prove to me this ain't no wild whopper you are telling me."

I looked up at her, put the phone receiver slowly to my me face. There were already people having a conversation on the phone. I put the receiver back on the hook, looked up at her and said "There's already people talking on this phone. Are there people in this house besides you and your grandfather?"

Angela laughed. "Oh, no silly. That's called a party line."

"A party line?" It sounded like some kind of social get together.

"You never heard of those? You ain't got any party lines in Texas?" She asked.

"Don't think so, "I answered shaking my head.

"Well, here's how they work. We share the telephone line with ten other families around here. We all have different numbers though. If somebody is using the line, you are just supposed to hang up and try later."

"How do you know who the call is for when it rings?"

"Well, each family has their own unique ring. Our ring is two short pulses followed by one long ring...bing...bing...ring."

"Man, that is complicated."

"Sometimes it is. But I have fun with it sometimes. When Paw-Paw isn't around, I'll quietly pick the phone p and listen to the other people's conversations. I know everybody's business for ten miles around here. If he caught me doing that, he'd probably take a switch off the pecan tree and whip my butt. You'll just have to try a little later.

"So where is he anyway?"

"He's off at The Farmer's Market in Yazoo City. Every morning we get up at the crack of dawn, go pick the peaches. We usually pick ten bushels or so. Then I stay here at the house while he drives up to The Market. Usually he gets fifteen or twenty dollars per bushel. Six days a week most of the summer. He usually gets back around seven or eight in the evening.

"So...all that talk about fetching him to shoot me today..." I asked.

"Yeah, I was just having you on and pulling your leg there, David. But if he had been here, he might have come after you. He can be one downright ornery old coot sometimes. Just keep checking the phone every ten minutes, pick it up gently, check the line, call your folks if it's clear. Put it back on the hook if somebody is still using it. Put it on there carefully. Don't let anybody know you are there.

"O.K." I said as I grasped the phone tightly. I looked around the room again. Something was missing among all the photos, antiques and furniture. "Where's your T.V.," I asked.

"Don't have one." She shrugged her shoulders and said matter-of-factly.

"No T.V." I echoed.

"None. We used to have an old black and white, but we could only get one station from Jackson and in only came in clearly early in the morning and sometimes late at time. He used to let me stay up late and watch Johnny Carson with him. I'd fall asleep in his lap every night. But it broke a couple of years ago and he never bought another one."

"Well, darn it then. What do you do all day by yourself around here?" I asked in a horrified tone.

"Play the old clarinet a lot. Read books. Run around the yard with the dogs. Listen to the radio. Swing on the tire swing. Go fishing. And yes, listen to people's conversations on the party line.

I don't have any problems passing time. I'm never bored. What do you do when you're not watching T.V.?" she asked chuckling at me.

"Play football a lot. Well, most of the time. There's fifteen or twenty of us on the block. Seems like we're playing football year-round until dark every night. There's a huge abandoned yard that we meet at every day. We'd probably be playing football right now if I hadn't gotten myself in this mess, I'm in."

"I picked up the phone receiver again, there were still people on it. I put it back down, let out a heavy sigh and looked at the clock. It was just after three in the afternoon.

Angela was getting something out of the kitchen cabinet. She was retrieving a small rectangular box. "Ever play dominoes, David?"

"Nope, never have."

"Never played dominoes," she said. "Well, sit yourself down here and we'll get that fixed, Mister."

She showed me how to play a game called Muggins where you score in multiples of fives. She beat me three games in a row. I checked the telephone there were still people talking on it.

We went out on the porch. It was getting late and the sun was going down. She played the clarinet. The small dog started to howl. "Hush, you old mangy dog" she said. "You wouldn't know good music if it hit you over the head."

We went back in. I sat down and checked the phone. There was finally a dial tone. I looked up at Angela and gave an affirmative nod, "OK then, remember to dial a one then your area code and then the number," she said.

I nodded my head at her. Very nervously, I began to dial the numbers on the old rotary phone. The line on the other end began to ring. One ring, Two rings, five rings, ten rings. So many times, that I just quit counting. The seconds ticked away on the wall cuckoo clock. Finally, an automated voice came on the line and said, "The party you are calling does not seem to be answering. Please try your

call again later." I hung up the phone, looked at Angela and said "Well, guess they aren't home. Maybe they are out looking for me."

I expected her to say something smart aleck about me having made up the whole story and told her a whopper but she must have seen the fear and disappointment on my face, "You're right David, they're out looking for you. They are probably just as upset as you are right now. You keep trying to call them. They are bound to answer soon."

My heart was fluttering. I was feeling a weakness in my neck and spine. I was about to lose it and start crying again. I fought back the tears, picked up the phone and tried again. I only let it ring ten times before hanging up. I could see headlights coming up the road towards the house. Angela ran to the door, turned to me and said, "That's him, he's home from the market." I could hear the excitement in her voice.

She darted out the front door and met him as he got out of his truck. I could hear her recounting the whole story of the day to him as they walked to the house. She kept on rambling about everything. They almost stepped in the house side-by-side. Her story was just about finished up as they walked in.

"...and the phone was finally free, and he tried to call his folks, but nobody answered, what should we do with him Paw-Paw?"

The old man took off his hat. He had thick long grey hair, a bushy moustache, was well over six feet tall and wore dirty overalls. He looked up at me, gasped as if he had the air knocked out of him, stared me down for quite a long time and finally said, "Well, son, sounds like you've had quite an adventure?"

"Yes, sir, "I replied.

"Well, it's pretty late. Near ten o' clock. We can't get anything done about this tonight. You best just stay here for the night if you want to..." His voice trailed off a few seconds later and then he resumed, "Unless you want to go a' stowing away in another truck and take your chances that it gets you back home."

"No sir, I can stay here the night."

"OK, then. There's an extra bed in Angela's room. You can sleep there if that's all right with her." He looked at her and she nodded. "Go on, then," he said. "We'll get this all sorted out in the morning."

I found my way to the bed and laid down. Angela sat on her bed on the other side of the room. She picked up a book and said, "Can I read you some of this book?"

"Sure," I said. "What's the book called?"

"It's called 'A Wrinkle In Time'. It's about some kids right around our age who lose their parents and must travel through time and space to find them.

She began to read. I hardly remember her getting a whole sentence out before I was asleep like a rock.