

Chapter 16

We followed behind the old man fifteen or twenty feet as he walked towards his work shed. He stopped at the truck. The truck was an old beat up Ford pickup truck-at least thirty years old. He turned to us and said "You two get back here. Angela will show you how it's done" He motioned to the bed of the truck.

There were a stack of wooden baskets and two long things on a pole that looked like lacrosse sticks. They were about eight feet long each. Angela unstacked the baskets and gave me one of the long devices, "Here. "She commanded me. "Take your peach picker"."

"Peach Picker?" I questioned.

"Yes, peach picker." She echoed.

She moved three empty baskets to the back of the truck and said, "Now the big ones, they are called Lorings, they are almost as big as a grapefruit, put them in this basket on the left." She pointed to the basket on the left. And the small ones, they are called Red Havens. Put them in this basket on the right." She pointed to the basket on the right. And anything that's kind of in between the big and small ones put in this middle basket."

The truck started up. The Old Man looked out around us and said, "Hold on, you two. Here we go!" The truck backed up and we went at a gentle rumbling pace down the dirt road.

I was standing up in the back of the truck. Angela poked me with the peach picker and said, "Goodness sakes, David, sit down or you are going to fall out of the truck and get ran over."

I sat down. She was good at giving orders, a natural. I was even better at following the orders.

"Now, as I was saying, "When one of these three baskets fill up, we push it to the front and replace it with an empty. It's going to be a busy morning. We have about fifteen or twenty baskets to fill here."

The truck was pulling in the orchard. The Old Man backed it under one of the trees. He turned around and talked to us again, "OK, y'all do your thing and let me know when it's time to go to the next one."

Angela carefully hoisted her peach picker inch-by-inch up to one of the branches. She cradled a peach with the pointy metallic spoke like fingers of the picker's basket, gave a little tug and the peach fell into the container. She retracted the picker, put her hand in the basket, placed it in front of my nose and said, "See! We're looking for them to be about half red, half yellow. Just right to be perfectly ripe when they hit the grocery stores in a few days. Not green peaches, OK? We will pick those next week. And not too yellow, we'll get those in the next day or so. You understand, don't you."

I nodded.

She placed the peach closer to my face, "What kind of peach she said? Large, Medium or Small?"

I shrugged and said, "Large I guess."

"Right you are, Mister. Loring Peach."

She gave it to me.

"Now, place it in the basket gently. Don't throw or drop it. Place it. You don't want to bruise it. That's the most important part."

I placed the peach very carefully in the proper basket.

"Right on!" she said, "Give me a fiver!"

She stuck out her hand upright. I very gently slapped it with the palm of my right hand.

"Now it's your turn, fella!"

I slowly raised the picker, grabbed then gently tugged, brought it downward, retrieved it and placed it in the basket.

"Well done!" she said as she slapped me on the back. "Now, get to work and quit slouching, Mister!"

We both began picking in earnest. After five minutes or so, she went and knocked on the back glass of the truck cab and said, "Ok Paw-Paw, onto the next tree!"

The Old Man drove us twenty feet or so and backed beneath the shade of the next tree. We picked all the ripe peaches from that tree. And then it was onto the next tree, then the next and so on in that manner. We filled basket after basket until they were full and placed them in columns and rows in the bed of the truck. This must have taken three or four hours. There was hardly any place for us to sit in the back of the truck by the time we were done.

Angela went up to the cab and said, "That's it Paw. We got them all filled."

The Old Man pulled out of the orchard onto the dirt road and back to the house. He parked in the shade, got out and looked at us. "OK, you two, let's go in, get washed up, grab a Dr Pepper and head on up to the market."

And in fifteen minutes we were back in The Old Man's truck drinking our sodas, headed down the road. The Old Man drove. Angela sat in the middle and I sat in the passenger's side by the window. The Old Man flipped channels on the push button AM radio stopping on a channel occasionally to listen to the news or some old country and western music station.

Angela had brought her clarinet. She took it out once to go through her repertoire, squeaking and sometimes hitting a sour note. When The Old Man had enough, he said, "OK now, Angela, love, that's enough tooting for now."

"Oh, alright," she sighed and harrumphed.

"Don't argue now," he admonished.

We had been on a paved road now for quite a while when he pulled into a gas station. We parked and went in.

"Getting a little hungry, myself," said The Old man. He turned to me and said, "What about you, son? How about a bite to eat before we make the rest of the trip?"

"Yes sir," I replied.

There were six or seven booth tables there in the gas station. We chose one and sat down. A waitress with tall blonde hair came up to our table, smacking bubble gum and said, "Who's this young fella you got here with you, Walter? Never seen him before."

The Old Man smiled, "Just a young man who showed up out of nowhere and stole some of my peaches. So instead of shooting him with my twelve gauge, I figured I'd put him to work to pay it off." He gave me a quick wink when he said the part about shooting me with the twelve gauge.

There was a bit of a silence and finally the waitress laughed, thumped the Old Man on his head with her pencil and said, "Oh Walter, if you ain't the craziest old man I have ever met!"

She turned to me and said, "Well now, sugar. Hamburger or hot dog for you?"

"Hamburger, please," I replied.

"Cheese?"

I nodded my head.

"Mayo or Mustard, then?"

"Mustard," I said.

And then she turned to Angela and said, "Well how about you Angie, sweetie?"

Angela scrunched up her nose and placed her order.

The Old Man placed his order as well. In just minutes we had our cheeseburgers. Angela and I had French fries and The Old Man munched on onion rings. The waitress had not asked us what we had wanted to drink but had brought us all glass bottle Dr Peppers

We ate the food. It was the best hamburger I had ever had. We were back on the road in no time at all, each with a small chocolate malt to keep us company.

There was more news, more country music and Angela asked me a lot of questions like "What is your favorite food?", "What's your favorite color?", "What do you want to do when you grow up?"

I gave her short answers like "Pizza", "blue" and "I don't know".

And after I gave answers, she would tell me her "short answer" followed by a five- or ten-minute explanation of why that was her answer.

She took out her clarinet again and played a few notes. Her grandfather said, "Can't take it any more today, Angela."

She frowned and put it away

Finally, we came up a huge billboard on the side of the highway that said, "Welcome to Yazoo City - A Great Place to Call Your Home."

The Old Man drove down the main street through several intersections. At the fifth red light, he turned onto a road that ended up at a large outdoor pavilion that had a large banner pulled from side to side. The banner said, "Yazoo County Farmer's Market".

We pulled up to a trailer, got out of the truck and walked into a trailer. There was a man there recording figures into a large blue ledger book with his right hand and typing numbers into a large calculator with his other hand. He had an old brown cowboy hat on and was chewing on a cigar.

He looked up at me over his reading glasses and said, "Ah...afternoon Walter. Was beginning to think you weren't going to make it today.

"Just running a little late, Bill. Stopped a ways back for a Dr Pepper and Cheeseburger."

"Who's the boy? Asked Bill nodding at me.

"He's a friend of Angela's said the Old Man. "He's helping us out for a spell during the busiest of the picking season."

"Mmmmm..." grunted Bill from under his cowboy hat. "Well, then, what ya got for me today, Walter?"

"Eighteen bushels. Plenty of Red Havens and Lorings. They're good for pickling or making preserves. Should be good and ripe by market open tomorrow morning."

Bill, The Cigar Man, did some calculator figuring. Then did some math with a pencil and his notebook, looked up and said, "I can give you twenty-three dollars per bushel." He tapped in some more numbers on the calculator and said, "Comes to four hundred fourteen dollars, let's just round up a bit and say four hundred and twenty."

The Old Man thought about it. "Little bit under last weeks price, Bill. What's changed since then?"

"Just got to make up a little bit for the loss we took over the weekend due to the storm that passed through."

"Aw...all right, Bill. I know these prices go up and down all the time.

Bill picked up the phone and dialed a number. I could vaguely hear a voice answer on the other side. "Roger, this is Bill. Walter just came in with a whole load. You and your boys come over here and help him unload it. Be sure to give him empty baskets in exchange."

Bill counted out a stack of money and gave it to The Old Man. "There ya go, Walter. Four Hundred and Twenty. How many more weeks of harvest would you say your trees have left in them this season before they are all picked out?"

"Probably three weeks, maybe four," replied The Old Man.

"See you tomorrow, then?"

"Day after next, Bill." We got to drive over to Jackson tomorrow to see Clarisse."

"How's Clarisse, these days, Walter?"

"No change, Bill. Physically as healthy as can be expected but her mind ain't there. Either totally gone or so far away she might never make it back. But thanks for asking, Bill. I still talk to her every week. I'll let her know you said hello."

"Much appreciated, Bill."

We got back in the truck and headed out of the city. Angela sang some songs and made me join in with her on "American Pie" and "Afternoon Delight" Once she broke into "Ninety Nine Bottle of Beer on the Wall" but the Old Man said, "Angela, please you know that song drives me crazy."

So, then she started telling about everything she wanted to do the rest of the day, everything she wanted to do the rest of the year and everything she wanted to do the rest of her life.

When we finally got back to their house, the sun had almost set. Angela and I were tired and yawning. The Old Man pulled into the garage, turned off the engine and opened our door. We nearly fell out and we walked right into the kitchen. Angela pours a glass of water. The Old Man walked in and said, "C'mon over here you two. I've got something for you."

We walked over to him as he pulls out his wallet and gave us each a fresh new and crisp twenty-dollar bill. "Here you go y'all. That was a good day work you gave me and that's a good day's wage for a couple your age. Proud of you." He patted us each on the head.

I cradled the bill gently and opened my eyes wide as they could go. It's the most money I had ever earned. "Wow. You mean it Mister Frazier? Can I really have this...really?"

"Yes indeedy. Really." The Old Man said in return to me. And you don't have to call me Mister, you can just call me Pops, OK?"

Angela folded up her bill and put it in her overalls pocket. "Paw-Paw, "she prodded, "Shouldn't we call David's parents no?"

The Old Man nodded his head and motioned for me to come over to the phone. I dialed my parents' number, first a "one" then the area

code and finally the number. It rang, rang and rang. I let it ring for over a minute. I stopped counting the rings.

"Not home, I guess. Maybe they are out looking for me."

"Well then, we'll have to try again tomorrow. You don't mind staying another night, do you?"

"I shook my head. No Sir. It's been nice. I'm really having a good time.

"You an Angela just scoot off to bed and get some sleep then. Been a long day."

We shuffled into the bedroom and laid down in the beds. Angela started reading to me from "A Wrinkle in Time" again. It had something to do about an evil alien taking over the mind of some kids are age. I began to drift to sleep and suddenly I was aware that Angela had quit reading. After I few seconds I heard her whisper, "David..."

"Yes?" I said.

"Sleep tight and don't let the bed bugs bite." She whispered in reply. "Glad you're here, it's nice to have someone to talk to around here besides The Old Man.

I yawned and turned over on my side. "Good night, Angela, see you in the morning."