

Chapter 21

And thus, my new life began, that summer so long ago. They were oddly enough the happiest days of my life I had up to that point in my life.

Days were long, busy and carefree. We got up early in the morning at the crack of dawn, had breakfast, picked the peaches and took them to the Farmer's Market every day. Always stopping for cheeseburgers and chocolate malts for lunch. We'd get back to the farmhouse always around five or six in the evening and The Old Man would give us each five or ten dollars.

Sometimes he'd say "Good for you young ones to learn the value of a dollar early in life or "Did I ever tell you about the time in The Great Depression that me and the boys set out for California in a model A, nothing but ten dollars in my pocket. Got back three months later with just seven cents left. Just enough to buy a loaf of bread and some cheese for a sandwich"

And then he'd say "OK, you two. Run along and play. Be in bed by ten, don't stay up too late, got to get an early start tomorrow on those peaches"

We'd run out of the house through the orchard and down to the old caboose to play. When night would begin to fall, we'd run back through the orchard and Angela would stop at her favorite tree to pick two peaches for us to eat. We'd briefly stand beneath the tree until she saw the first star in the sky. She would say "Last one to the house is a rotten egg, bet you can't beat me."

And then I would say "Oh yes I can." We'd run at breakneck speed down the rows and columns of the orchard to the pathway of their house, up the porch stairs and through the screen door.

"Beat you again! Can't believe you let a girl beat you. You're a soft city boy."

I would nod my head and smile, bent over trying to catch my breath.

For the rest of the night, we'd play dominoes or sit next to one another in front of the piano banging out random notes with no melody or time signature laughing at one another until her grandfather would poke his head around the corner and say something like "It's getting late you two" or "That's about all the noise my old ears can take."

The Old Man called me "Boy" or sometimes "Son". I started to call him "Pops". Sometimes Angela would call me by my real name or sometimes she would call me Charles or Calvin, which were two of the characters in the book she was reading to me.

And she kept reading that book to me every night. I remember parts of it being very scary. There was some evil "IT" trying to invade the minds of the little kids in the book. The kids were so upset that they would never get to see their parents again.

As Angela would read, she would begin to doze off and finally she would say "OK, fella, that's all for the night. I can hardly keep my eyes open."

And I would say to her, "That fine Angela, see you in the morning."

"Sleep tight, now."

"You too, "I'd reply as she winked off. But I would always stay in bed awake jus a bit longer looking at the dark contours of the walls. I thought about my previous life. It was the only time these thoughts would enter my mind. And with each passing night, my previous life, just weeks in my past, seemed less and' less real. I'd quantify my desire to stay with this new family with a dozen of self-questions of justification. "If they loved me so much, why did they send me to that church camp.", "Why didn't they ever have any more children, was I just a mistake?". "All they do is argue and fight and pretend like I'm not even there." Or "They probably don't even love me, why should I love them back?"

Each night I went over this script in my head and with each night, the script got shorter and shorter. I fell to sleep quicker and quicker sleeping deeper and heavier every night.

One Saturday night after a long day of fishing, swimming and following Angela about everywhere she dashed, The Old Man woke me in the middle of a deep dark sleep and said, "C'mon boy, get up, get your boots and britches on. The dogs got a critter up one of the trees. We better go see about it."

I slowly got up, stretched and rubbed my eyes.

"C'mon Son. We better go." He shined the flashlight at me.

I got out of bed, put on my glasses and got dressed. He handed the flashlight and said, "Here, hold this and walk right beside me. Let's Go!"

We walked through the living room, through the door and down the path that led to the orchard. I could hear the dogs barking and baying and howling in the distance. The Old Man walked quickly and briskly through the rows of trees saying things like "Dad blamed critters, those peaches aren't theirs." Or "We're almost there, dogs are getting louder."

We finally came to a tree in the heart of the orchard where the dogs were madly frothing at the mouth and trying to climb the tree. "There Boy." He pointed at the tree, "Shine your light in those branches there."

I pointed the flashlight. There were two little devilish eyes reflecting the light back at me like a laser.

"Now, Boy, "I heard him say, "Give the flashlight to me."

I handed him the flashlight at which the same time he exchanged the 12-gauge and placed it in my hands. Up until that point, I was not aware that he had been carrying the gun with him.

"OK, son." He commanded. "Point the gun at those eyes and pull the trigger. There's already a shell in the chamber.

I lifted the gun to my shoulder. It seemed like it was the heaviest thing I had ever lifted. I pointed in the general direction of those eyes and pulled the trigger. At that point there were two instantaneous thuds. The first was me falling backwards onto my back due to the recoil of the shotgun and the second was that of the sound of this mysterious critter falling from the tree and hitting the ground dead as a doornail.

I heard the dogs attack it and carry it off deeper into the night past the orchard and train caboose into the heart of the woods.

I struggled to get up and I felt the huge hands of The Old Man helping me to my feet, "By God Boy, you got him. That one less damned coon that's gonna eat our peaches. You're a man now, Son!" He laughed deeply. His voice was raspy and happy with joy.

I got up, dusted myself off and took the flashlight back from him. He picked up the gun and said, "Let's go. We got a big day ahead of us in the morning. We both need to get some more sleep.

I made my way back to bed upon our return and went back to sleep. I slept like a log, past breakfast into the late hours of the morning.

This time around, I was awakened by the happy sounds of Angela's voice. She was saying, "She's here, she's here. She came to my bed and started shaking me. "Get and get dressed. Get your glasses on!"

I quickly got up and followed her commands. She ran out of the room and I heard the porch door close in its frame. I looked out of the bedroom window and saw Angela running to meet a large white van. There were two people getting out of the van and helping a third person into a wheelchair. They turned the wheelchair around and I saw who was sitting in it.

It was Angela's grandmother. The Old Man's wife. She'd finally come home.