

Chapter 26

The next morning, we moved all the jars of preserves and jelly to her cupboard in the back room. There were over forty jars. She placed them carefully and slowly, one-by-one like they were pictures of her grandchildren to be displayed for all to see. When she had them properly placed, she took several steps back to take it all in. She turned to me and said, "That's a good start, isn't it Johnny?"

I didn't even mind being called this name and I'd only been around her for a day. "Yes, mam, it's a good start." I replied.

And then she turned to Angela and said, "There's so much work left to do, isn't there sweetie!"

Her granddaughter nodded her head at Clarisse.

And so, began our routine for the rest of that summer.

Every morning after breakfast, she would ask her husband to go "fetch" something from the garden before he got to work on the daily rounds through his orchard. Or is it was not something they had in the garden, she would say, "Walter can you take a half a bushel of peaches down to 'so-and-so' and take them some squash or figs or whatever may have been the case. And occasionally, she would ask him to bring something back from the market when he returned that evening.

And whatever may have been the fruit or vegetable of the day, we would spend the morning with her, cooking and canning. Always taking it to her cupboard to store it next to that initial harvest of peach preserves we had made that first day she had returned home.

The pantry quickly filled up with a variety of jams, jellies, beans, squash, pickles, tomatoes, relish and juices. I had never even heard of some of the things she canned and kept in her pantry.

One day, she handed me an old dented can that had once held ribbon cane syrup and told me to go pick some black berries on the fence line. Angela and I followed the fence line through the orchard,

picking berries wherever we found them, getting deeper and deeper into the wood's way past the old caboose until we had filled the can.

We had just turned around to go back to the house and a sudden thunderstorm came out of nowhere. I had never seen so much rain and such dark clouds in my entire life. The thunder was so loud, it hurt my ears and we seemed to be surrounded by a wall of lightning strikes in every direction.

"Come on," Angela said to me. "Drop those berries and let's run"

I put the berries down and ran as fast as I could after her. When we made it to the house, our clothes were wet, shoes soaked, and my glasses were completely muddled and foggy.

She met us on the porch. She pulled me into her arms, "Oh, Johnny," she said, "I was afraid I was going to lose you again. Good Heaven's child, I was worried sick. Oh, how I hate these sudden thunderstorms!"

"I'm sorry," I replied, "I dropped the berries running home."

"Oh, don't worry about those old berries. That blackberry jam can wait. You know my little brother was killed by a lightning strike from a storm just like this one when he was only nine years old. One minute he was picking cotton and the next he was lying there in the field limp and dead. I remember him saying "Clarisse, I'm just going to finish filling my sack and then I'll be up to the house before the storm gets bad."

She put me back out at arm's length. "And when this storm came up on us like that, all I could think about was my little brother Charlie laying there dead with that horrible old burlap cotton picking sack right there next to his lifeless body." She hugged me tightly again.

"Well, I'm OK" I said. "No harm done to me..." and I paused. And I almost spoke but I paused again. Then I said. "I'm OK...Mom. You needn't worry."

Yes. I called her "Mom". It came out of nowhere and I meant it.

She released her grip on me and went towards the kitchen stove. I saw Angela walk silently to her room. I followed her. She collapsed on her bed and was crying, "What's wrong?" I asked.

She gave me no reply.

I let a few seconds pass and asked her again, "What's wrong? Aw come on, Angela. Talk to me."

She turned to look at me and said, "Oh hush. You just wouldn't understand. Just shoo away from me right now." She made motions at me inviting me to leave the room.

I left the room and went back out to the porch. The storm was already passing. The rain had slowed to a sprinkle and the thunder was way off in the distance now. I sat in the swing and petted the little dog called "Bozo"/

It had been just about ten minutes when Angela came out on the porch. She didn't even seem upset anymore. "Come on, you. "She commanded at me. "Let's go out to the stand.

I complied with her order and followed her to the stand.

The stand was a little bench, desk and roof that Clarisse had told the old Man to make for us at the end of their driveway where Angela and I could sell peaches by the single or the dozen to cars that passed by. This is what we would usually do in the afternoons after lunch and "canning and preserving" time every day.

Now, not an awful lot of traffic came up and down that old dirt road, but it seemed that everybody who did was either interested in or felt obligated to stop by and purchase something from the two kids manning the peach stand.

We had our normal customers-the neighbors from several miles around, the mailman would buy something from us everyday and there was an odd man who would come walking down the road with a backpack on a few times a week to buy something from us. He was usually calm, silent and polite, just asked for what he needed, paid for the peaches and walked back down the road just as mysteriously as he came.

One morning, I decided to strike up a conversation with him, "What's your name, mister?" I asked him.

He looked up at me. His face was tan. He had a thick brown beard and long wavy hair. He seemed so old and ancient to me then, but looking back, I realized he must have been only in his late twenties or early thirties.

It took him a while to answer but he finally cracked a slight smile and said, "My name..my name is Douglas. Thanks for asking, thanks for asking fella. What's your name, pal?" he asked me in return.

I started to answer, but Angela jumped right into the conversation, "Well, now!" she exclaimed, "That is a good question, isn't it? My friend here just doesn't rightly know who he is. We've been trying to figure that out for weeks. You see, he's different things to different people.

Douglas smiled and chuckled. "Well young man. Keep 'em guessing and they'll never chase you down. That's a good philosophy." He bit into a peach and winked at us.

"Where do you live, Douglas" asked Angela.

He sighed and spoke. "Out there..." he pointed. "and out there..." he said pointing in the opposite direction. "Wherever I lay my head is where I live. I haven't given up on the dream yet."

"The dream?" I asked.

"Yes, the dream that there's something out there else to this life. Something more than punching in at seven in the morning, working on the assembly line for nine hours and repeating that day in and day out for fifty years."

"And have you found what you're looking for yet?" asked Angela.

"No Mam, "he said, "Sure haven't. But I keep looking. Always one step in front of The Man."

"The Man?" we both asked looking at one another.

"The Government. The Management. Anybody who might want to hassle me." He then looked up into the upper branches of a tall pine tree and said "No sire, I say. I was Government Issue for five years and I could never do that again."

"Government Issue?" questioned Angela.

"Government Issue." He stated. "You know, G.I. Military, soldier, Vietnam...little girl"

Angela nodded her head. Douglas took his small bag of peaches, withdrew another from the bag and bit into his second one of the afternoons. The juice ran down the whiskers of his beard. "Good talking to y'all. Keep your ears to the ground and don't lose your faith"

He turned around and marched back down the road. When he was about fifty steps away, he turned back to us and waved the old peace sign with his right hand at us. He had stopped by our stand.

He had stopped by our peach stand several times that summer, but that was the last we ever saw of him

After Douglas was down the road and out of sight, we walked back to the house counting our money. Usually we would have between ten and twenty dollars of nickels, dimes quarters and crumpled up dollar bills that we kept in an old rust Folgers coffee can.

Every night we would go into the house and divide the money up between us. With the money we had made at the stand and the money that the Old Man had given me, I must have saved about a hundred dollars which I kept hidden in a brown paper bag folded up into small box under the bed that I slept in.

If we still had time before sunset, we'd run out to the caboose and talk for a while or go play dominoes. Every night we'd turn on the TV and see if we would tune anything in one on one of the three channels that sometimes got partial reception.

One evening, I was trying to tune into Channel Seven for Angela, and I looked outside the window. The Old Man was working on an old

tractor that was sitting out beneath a huge pine tree, "Angela?" I said, "I didn't know that old tractor runs. I ain't seen it do anything but sit there."

"It doesn't," she replied. "IT's been broke ever since I can remember, but he swears up and down that he's going to get it running one day.

I finally got the TV tuned to her approval and sat down next to her on the sofa. The Old Man opened the door, took off his shoes and put his hat on the wall hook.

"How was the load today, Walter?" asked Clarisse.

"Only five bushels today, dear." I think the harvest is about over for the summer. Been a good crop this year, got two more weeks out of the old orchard this year than I did last yar. With that few peaches we still make, we'll just let the kids sell them in the stand or give away to the neighbors. No need to drive down to market anymore this season."

His wife smiled and nodded her head. He continued talking.

"I'll have more time to get some other things done around the house. I think I've almost got the old tractor running out there."

"Walter..." she admonished. "Why do you spend so much time on that old rust heap when your other tractor runs just fine?"

"Oh, I don't know," he replied. "Seems just a waste of time to let it sit there. Afterall, it was the first tractor I bought right after I cam back from Germany and married you."

"Goodness!" she replied, "I can't believe you are being sentimental over a fifty-year-old rust bucket."

He shrugged his shoulders in guilt.

"Well, if you got so much extra time, why don't you start taking me back to Church? I'm sure everybody would love to see Johnny again." She added.

The Old Man just kind of grunted at his wife's suggestion.

It occurred to me at that exact time just why The Old Man had deflected every request she had made of him to go to Church or anywhere else in public. And that he had been perfectly content to let her stay busy from sunup to sundown filling the pantry with preserved goods.

I realized that if they had, I would have been the proverbial elephant in the room and a line of questioning would have ensued that would have easily broken down the thin façade of who I really was. Oh...it was easy enough to explain me to the mailman or the random passerby who bought peaches from the stand.

"Oh, this is just a friend of my grand-daughter's" or "This is the neighbor from down the road."

But the minute we would have all gone out into public, his wife would have introduced me as her long presumed-dead son. Her long presumed dead son who was somehow magically 12 years old again. She would have done that and the last brick in the wall of lies would have tumbled down even though I wanted to keep up the act for her. I desperately wanted to be her son.

At that exact moment she tried to get her husband to take us all to church for what must have been the fifteenth time in two weeks, I realized that all good things will eventually come to and end. I just didn't know who to untangle this knot that I had helped tie without getting people hurt or letting people get in trouble.

There seemed to be no easy way out of the situation I had slipped into. But as it happened, I wouldn't have to wait much longer for the knot to start to untangle itself.