

## Chapter 27

It happened on a Saturday morning. We had our usual breakfast of biscuits, eggs and sausage. When everybody was finished, Clarisse said, "Walter, before you go outside and work on that tractor, I want you and the kids to come see the pantry with me. It's totally full and packed for the winter!"

We walked to the back of the house and she opened the shutters from in front of her pantry. It was full of what must have been hundreds of jars of canned and preserved foods.

"Looks wonderful, Clarisse. Absolutely splendid!" said The Old Man.

"Oh, thank you so much Walter! It's good to be home. I missed you so much, you old bear!" She gave her husband a quick hug and then said, "And now that the harvest is over, we can just spend more time together, you and me in the porch swing."

"Sounds lovely, darling." He said to his wife holding her and embracing her. "Why don't we go sit a spell on that porch right now and spark a little with one another."

The Old Man winked at Angela and me.

She hugged him back and said, "Just one more thing, Walter". She reached into an adjacent cabinet and pulled out a polaroid instant camera. She pointed the camera at her pantry full of goods and took several shots putting each on a desk to finish the development process.

"Thought I'd take a few snapshots and send to Lillian so she could see how hard we've been working this summer."

I didn't know who Lillian was, maybe a sister or an old friend, she never did say. She then gave the camera to The Old Man, took me by arms and beckoned for me to pose with her in front of her work, "Now, take one of me and Johnny, Walter."

We stood together and she put her arm around me as we said the obligatory "Cheese"

"Now, Walter, give the camera to the girl so you can come over here and we can have a photo of all three of us." The Old Man did as he was commanded. He gave the camera to Angela and she took the photo.

There were five instantly developed photos sitting on the desk. Clarisse looked at them again and said, "Oh, I'll keep the one of me and Johnny then send the others to Lillian. She'll be green with envy."

And it was at this moment that we heard all four dogs start to make a cacophony of sound in the yard. I had learned that this meant that there was a car pulling into their long driveway.

Without warning, Angela bolted out the door and ran out of the house. The Old Man turned to his wife and said, "Clarisse, you better stay here, and I'll handle this."

"Why?" she questioned. "What's the matter?"

"Just never mind, Dear. You stay here. I'll be right back."

The Old Man stepped out of the door quickly. And hardly knowing what to do, I followed him. The car had stopped well back down the long driveway. A woman had gotten out and I could see Angela had jumped into the woman's arms. She was hugging the mystery woman. The mystery woman was stroking and caressing Angela's long strands of red hair.

The Old Man increased his pace, walking as fast as his ancient legs could take him. When we arrived at the scene, the mystery woman was saying, "Oh Dear Darling Angie, you've grown so much. We've got a lot of catching up to do. Your Momma has been back and forth this whole country seeing lots of things and making waves!" She let Angela out of her grasp and said, "Look Sugar, I brought you a necklace." She gave the gift to her daughter.

"Oh Momma, that's a trumpet charm. You know I play clarinet!"

"Oh, you never mind about that, honey." Said her mother, "Music is music."

I got my first good look at the woman who was apparently Angela's roaming and roving mother. She was a short person, probably barely over five feet tall. She had stringy peroxide-blonde hair, wore cut off blue jeans with flip flops for shoes and a t-shirt with a cartoon of this guy with really long legs and a caption which read "Keep on Truckin'"

The lady finally looked up beyond her daughter and noticed The Old Man standing in her presence. "God Damn, Walter. I've been trying to call for three weeks. Ain't nobody answered. Don't you got a phone no more?"

The Old Man grimaced. He adjusted his faded overalls. He brushed the back of his hand across his bushy moustache and said quite sarcastically, "Good to see you too, Doreen."

"Oh, don't give me that crap," she replied. "Just tell me why you haven't been answering the phone."

"Maybe I've been too busy Doreen. Maybe I unplugged it because I didn't want to hear all those party line rings. Maybe I did it because I wanted to. What does it matter to you?"

“Well, it matters to me because I’ve been wanting to talk to my baby girl here.” She gave Angela another hug.

“And now you’re here and now you’ve hugged her. You can just turn around and git like you usually do.”

“Maybe I’m gonna stay around a little bit this time,” Doreen exclaimed loudly.

“If that’s what you want to, then do it, damn it.” Spit out The Old Man. “If that’s your intention, you just go up there on that hill there and settle down in your folks house.” He pointed to a hill that was in the distance adjacent to his peach orchard.

“That old shack needs too much work, Walter. It ain’t fit to be lived in.”

“Tarnation, Doreen. You’ve always been an ornery one! If you want to be a mother to Angela, then you quit living on the road and shacking up with a different man every night. You ain’t nineteen anymore. You’re pretty near thirty-five. You need to grow up. Go up on that hill and move into your folk’s house. If it needs some fixing and patching, I’ll fix it up for you. Get a job for goodness sake and be there every evening when Angela gets home from school. The sixties are over. That god damned Vietnam is over. Life goes on.”

I had never heard The Old Man so full of words and emotion before.

Doreen’s attention was suddenly taken away from the heated discussion with The Old Man. Her attention was on the woman with long gray hair braided back behind her head, wearing an apron who was very slowly and cautiously walking up behind The Old Man.

“Clarisse!” she exclaimed almost losing her breathe, “Good God when did you wake up and make it back home?”

The Old Man turned around and realized that his wife had wandered out of the house and into the conversation, “Clarisse, “ he said, “I thought I told you to stay in the house and that I would handle this.”

“Walter, since when do you tell me what do?” she defiantly questioned.

Doreen looked at The Old Man

“God damn, Walter. When did this all happen? I thought the doctors had said there wasn’t a chance of her ever waking up again.”

At this point, Angela inserted herself into the conversation, “We went to visit five or six weeks ago, and she just woke up , Momma!”

Clarisse looked at her husband and said, “Walter, who is this woman? Do you know her from somewhere?”

Doreen’s mouth dropped from her jaws. She said, “Clarisse, did you leave part of your memory lying back there in those bed during all those years? I’m Doreen. I was married to your son for five years!”

“Married to my Johnny?!” said Clarisse nearly screaming. “No, you’re talking nonsense. Johnny is right here. He ain’t but eleven years old!”

Clarisse moved over to me, put her arm around me and smiled warmly and lovingly.

Doreen turned to The Old Man and said, “Walter, just what in the hell is she talking about?”

Before The Old Man could answer, Doreen turned back to Clarisse and said, “If that’s your boy Johnny, the who is this?” She grabbed Angela, jerked her quickly between herself and Clarisse. “Who is this? Tell me!” demanded Doreen.

Clarisse seemed flustered. She began to speak, then stopped. She stuttered and stopped. Finally, she spoke, “Well, that my...she’s my. She’s my daughter..no..no, she’d my granddaughter,..my niece..no..she’s just a little girl that lives with that family just beyond the orchard up the hill there. Oh Good Lord, I don’t know for Heaven’s Sake. She’s always there with Johnny. They are like each other’s shadows. She’s no trouble. She’s such a sweet little girl, I love having her around.”

And Clarisse was silent for several moments and then spoke in a loud whisper, “Just who are you again, Miss?” she glared blankly at her former daughter-in-law.

The Old man took his hat off, threw it down on the ground and stomped on it with his feet. He said in an increasingly louder voice, “Damn...Damn...Damn...Damn it all!”

He turned to his wife who was beginning to cry and calmed his voice down to a gentle drawl, “Clarisse, let’s go back to the house and get you in bed to relax. I’ll get this all sorted out.”

He started walking Clarisse back to the house, turned back to Doreen and said, “Let me get her settled down and I’ll be back. Don’t go anyway, you hear me?”

“Oh, I won’t,” said Doreen. “I can’t wait to hear what this is all about.”

The Old Man walked his wife to the porch, Doreen turned to Angela and said, “Sweetheart, just what in the hell is going on here? What do you know that you aren’t telling me?”

Angela was silent. Mother stared at daughter and daughter stared right back at the mother.

“Angie, you talk to me right now, do you hear me?”

“Momma... “groaned the daughter, “It’s Angela. OK? Angela. Not Angie. I’ve always hated being called Angie. It’s Angela.”

“Oh, whatever then, “exclaimed her mother. “Just what in the hell do you know about this young man standing there? Why is Clarisse walking around for the first time in ten years? And why does she think he’s your Daddy?” She stiffened her arm and pointed her index finger at me.

Angela was silent at first then turned to me and said, “Sorry...”

I shrugged my shoulders and raised my eyebrows at her. “Go ahead,” I said, “I understand.”

And then Angela turned back to her mother and spilled all the beans, so to speak, Told her mother the whole story about me running away from church camp, finding me in the peach barn, Clarisse’s awakening, how Clarisse thought I was her dead son Johnny, about canning the jams and jellies and how we figured it might just be possible that I was a reincarnation of her father.” Angela rambled on and told the story as only she could tell a story. She blew my cover right off the box

Doreen took a few moments to take it all in and finally replied to her daughter, “And how long has he been here?”

“Six weeks, “replied Angela.

And just as Angela replied, The Old Man returned to the discussion and she said, “Good God Walter, you have the nerve to stand there and lecture me about getting on with my life!”

“Doreen, “he pleaded, “It’s more complicated than you think.”

“What the hell Walter? You seriously believe all this crap about reincarnation? That’s bullshit and you know it!”

“I admit, it’s quite a yarn, but it’s possible Doreen. She hadn’t spoken in twelve years, just lied there frozen in that hospital bed until we walked in that day. Can’t you admit he’s the spitting image of Johnny when he was a boy?”

Doreen’s voice grew loud and exasperated. “Oh, come off it, you old crazy codger. You know as well as I do that John’s been buried right down that road, six feet under that red clay dirt for 10 years now. You were there when the coffin came back from Vietnam. They gave you the flag, the twenty-one-gun salute. Is any of this ringing a bell in the cobwebs up there in your brain?”

The Old Man paced around a bit, turned back to Doreen and said, “You never were good enough for him, your family was just poor white trash sharecroppers.”

“You listen here, Walter,” she spit back at him. “I loved and adored your son from the day I laid eyes on him and was true to him through and through.” She pointed her finger at him in an accusing manner, “This hasn’t been easy for me either!”

The Old Man looked off into the distant at the far away hill and said, “But he looked so much like Johnny, especially in those glasses. Said he wanted to stay. Him and Angela get along so well.”

“God damn it, Walter. You are missing the point here. People are going to start asking questions. The boy would have to enroll in school. You can’t hide him out in that peach barn forever. Walter, for goodness sakes, they’d lock you up for the rest of your life. This is kidnapping. This ain’t no Johnny Came Marching Home Again! I ought to go get the sheriff right now and have you arrested, Old Man!”

The Old Man kicked the dust. “Well, then just do it he challenged. “I’ll go in there, plug the phone back in and you can make that call.”

She shook her head, “No, Walter. I’m not going to do that. I don’t hate you. Haven’t been able to stand you half my life, but I don’t hate you. I won’t do that to you.”

“Well then, will you get back in your car and just leave us be?” asked The Old Man.

“Can’t do that either. Can’t you see, it’s only a matter of time before somebody around these woods gets wise to you and turns you in. I’m trying to figure a way to save your ass here, Walter.”

“And why would you want to do that, Doreen?”

“Because John thought the world of you Walter. Until the day he died, he thought the sun rose and revolved around you! He loved you and worshipped you. So I’m doing this for John.”

Doreen turned her attention to me and said, “Boy...what’s your real name?”

I didn’t respond. I just wanted to run over to The Old Man and hide in his shadow.

Doreen prodded me and glared at me, “Your name’s not Johnny, now is it, sweetie?”

I finally heard myself say very silently, “No, Ma’am, it isn’t.” I put my head down in shame.

“And what’s your real name, then?” asked Doreen again.

Angela interjected and said, “His name is David. David Edwards, Momma.”

Doreen turned back to me and I nodded my head at her.

“And is everything Angela tells me is true too, honey?” She asked of me.

I wanted to say “No, No, No! I’m Johnny. This is my home.” But I didn’t though. I just very weakly nodded my head. I didn’t want to admit it, I didn’t was to leave this place, but I had reached the

point where I had to make a choice between what was right and what was wrong. Make a choice between what was real and what was fantasy.

I let my mind drift away from the farm and the peach orchard just for a few moments and back to my home in Texas. I could see the image of my parents in my mind. I hadn't thought about them for weeks. I didn't want to go back to their arguing and screaming and hiding in my room. But it hit me like a boulder when Doreen had asked me about who I really was. For the first time, I imagined my parents were being ripped apart and tattered into emotional shreds wondering where I had disappeared to.

Doreen looked at me, then she looked The Old Man and then back at me again, "Now, honey," she said. "Think about this one long and hard. Do you want to go back to your own folks?"

Of course, I didn't, nor did I want to leave Angela, The Old Man and Clarisse. But I knew I had painted myself into a corner and it was time for me to get my head out of my ass and come up for air and check in with reality again.

I nodded my head again and said, "Yes, Ma'am. I do."

Doreen looked at her daughter and commanded, "Go pack your things, we're leaving."

What are you going to do, Doreen" asked The Old Man.

"I'm going to save your ass, you old fart." She sneered.

"David, "she said turning her attention to me "Do you have anything to pack, honey?"

"Not much, "I muttered back to her.

"Well, whatever it is, go get it together. We'll be leaving here as soon as possible."

I nodded my head and ran to the house. The only thing I had was my box of money I'd been hoarding. I grabbed the box. Angela was finishing her packing. She had a small red suitcase and her clarinet. She looked at me and said, "You're coming too?"

"Uh-huh, "I said.

We both ran back outside together.

When we got back to the car, Doreen said, "Get in the car Angela." Angela got in the car. She turned to me and said, "Angela says you're from Texas. Is that so, boy?"

"Yes Ma'am, "I answered.

"And do you know what city you live in and was street you lived on?"

"Yes Ma'am." I said again.

“Get in the back seat then, sweetie, “she told me.

I got in the back seat of her car.

Doreen turned to The Old Man and said, “Walter, I’m taking this boy back to his own folks and dropping him on his front doorsteps. Other than that, I don’t know anything nor will I say anything. Whether or not he chooses to implicate you is his own business. “

She got in the car and started the engine.

“Doreen, “said The Old Man, “Just wait one minute, will you? I have to go get something.”

“OK, Walter. One minute. Clock is ticking. Do whatever you need to do. Get whatever you need to get.”

The Old Man trotted in and out of the house as quickly as he could. He had several things in his hands. He walked up to the car window, bent down on one knee to talk to Doreen face to face.

“Doreen, “he began, “I’m sorry about this whole mess. I didn’t mean for it to happen. Things just got out of control quickly. I’m sorry if I said things just now that hurt your feelings. I know you loved Johnny and I know he loved you. I was mad at myself. I was mad at the government. I took it out on you.”

He took some money from his pocket. “Here’s some cash. Take it. If this old car of yours gives out, you can use it to get it fixed or to get a bus ticket for the boy.”

And then he pulled a bulky envelope out of his other pocket and gave it to her. “This here is for Angela. Put it in a bank account her here. There’s enough for her to get a good start in college, but she can have it for whatever.”

Doreen took the money from The Old Man. “Thank you Walter. Thank you.”

He moved back a few steps to the back window tapped on it for me to roll it down. I rolled down the window. “Boy…” he began and then exhaled. “David, “he said with some effort, “This wasn’t your fault son. This was all the fault of a stupid old man. I hope you can find it in your heart one day to forgive me. I’m very sorry to you.

He handed me a pint of peach preserves and added, “Thanks for making an old man and woman happy. Maybe this will allow you to remember us fondly.”

I took the jar and said, “Thank you, sir.”

Suddenly, Angela got out of the car, ran around it and embraced The Old Man, “Goodbye Paw-Paw. I love you. I’m sure I’ll see you soon.”



“Goodbye, my dear Angela,” he said. “Take care of your mother and make sure your friend there gets home.”

“OK, Paw-Paw, I’ll do that.” She ran back around the car and got back in.

Doreen leaned out her window, put out her hand and said, “Walter, thanks for taking care of her all these years. I know she’s a handful.”

“Weren’t no problem, Doreen.” He said in return.

“What are you going to do about Clarisse?” asked Doreen.

The Old Man turned to look back at the house. Then he turned back to Doreen, “Don’t know, just have to take it day by day.”

Doreen stretched her arm out of the car and motioned for The Old Man to extend his. He stuck out his arm and held her hand for just a few brief moments. They smiled at one another.

“Call me if you run into any problems. I’ll make sure the phone is plugged in. Guess I better go in and check on Clarisse.”

“Goodbye Walter,” said Doreen.

And with that, she put the old car in gear, turned it around in the yard and sped down the dusty dirt road.

I turned around and watched the farmhouse disappear behind us. I never saw The Old Man, Clarisse of the peach orchard again.