

# **Johnny Came Marching Home Again**

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**Prologue**

I will affirm to you that what I am about to tell you is the hundred percent truth. I write them down here just exactly as they unfolded in my life nearly forty years ago. These are memories, so long recessed in the back of mind that are now coming forth to me on the page like a volcano that has been centuries dormant. No longer can I “not think about it” or “not talk about it”. I can no longer pretend that this didn’t happen because it did. I haven’t even bothered to change the names of those people involved. Time has washed all the players away in this tale, one-by-one. There is no need for anonymity. There is only the need to get this out on the page-a burning rage to tell the truth.

## Chapter 1

Fifth grade was the worst. It was an absolute horrible nine months. I hardly know where to begin so I'll just start the enumerating. To start with I had to get glasses the summer before. They were horrible, wretched black goggles. They were the kind of glasses that would have fit right on Buddy Holly's nose just fine but looked like an abomination on me. And ten to make matters worse, the week before school began, I broke my arm flying off Marvin Alvarez's trampoline onto the pavement. I spent the first two months of the school year in a cast that went from my wrist all the way up to the shoulder blade on my right arm. I had to write everything with my left hand. And that was just me.

Our family life, once so solid and certain, started to crumble. My remaining grandparents died the year before. My father's job down at the steel mill had been cut in both hours and pay. Mom and Dad started to argue. They argued all the time. It just wasn't your ordinary "I keep telling you to take out the garbage" type of arguing either. No sir. This was the type that was accompanied by slamming doors, throwing pots and mutual threats of murder and suicide.

When it got extremely bad, I'd go to my room, lock the door, crawl into my closet, turn on the light and read my comic books. The yelling and screaming became a faraway muffled sound outside my fortress. It's not like they paid me any attention and cared where I was during their storms on insanity. It's the only place I felt safe. I was safe among my comic books, stamp collection and hot wheels cars. Sometimes I would pull my little twelve inch black and white TV into the closet and watch TV all night while they argued. If the antenna was turned "just right", there were a whopping three channels I could tune in.

As the year progressed, insane things started happening. My father would sleep outside on the hammock between the two pecan trees. Sometimes my mother would disappear for two or three days. She would always come back though. A few times it got so bad, I was shipped out to my aunt and uncle's house while my parents could try to "get their heads together" or "dry up" or "try one last time"

All this never seemed to work though. I'd be back for less than a week and something simple like a "towel on the floor" or an "unpaid bill" would kick off the fireworks again and I'd run off to the safety of my room.

And right in the middle of this storm, one or both of my parents had the brilliant idea that it would all get better if we joined a church and tried to fix things that way. So, they bought me this silly little uncomfortable suit and we went to church every Sunday. We joined the local Baptist church, went every Sunday morning, smiled a lot, shook a lot of hands. We said stuff like "So good to see you", "Isn't it a glorious morning?" and "Wasn't the sermon truly inspirational today?" For weeks we went to potluck dinners after each Sunday service. To this day, I still have trouble even looking at a casserole in a 9 x 13 Pyrex dish. None of this brotherhood and community participation did anything to help my parent's issues at home though. They'd be at each other throats again by Sunday night.

So, just as fifth grade was winding down, it was decided without consulting me that I should leave for a couple of weeks and go to Church Camp. They said something like, "It would be good for me to make new friends" while they "work it out between each other". The thought horrified me but as their arguing got even worse, I began to warm up to the idea and started looking forward to the whole Church Camp thing.

And this is where my tale really begins. At that instant of being shipped off to Church Camp, sitting in the middle seat of a blue and white Dodge Van, somewhere, sometime in the hot summer of 1981 as the tires hummed on the Texas pavement.

## Chapter 2

Church Camp. I had high hopes, but my hopes were soon dashed down a Black Hole. At first glance upon disembarking the Dodge Van from hell, it seemed more like Army Boot camp. The trip had certainly been no fun at all. The air conditioner was on the blink, and the temperature was a blistering 99 Fahrenheit outdoors. Our parental chaperones, Mr. and Mrs. Clark, had silly arguments about the directions to the camp. Mr. Clark knew of some back road shortcut he had taken as a kid that was going to shave thirty minutes off the drive while his wife kept rotating an Exxon Texas roadmap saying “No, Don, you should go this way, your way is not on the map.” and her husband would say “Damn it Linda, I remember this road, it used to take us to the Lake.” In the end, the road came to a dead end in some farmer’s front yard and Mr. Clark had to turn the van around and go the way his wife had been telling him the whole time.

Meanwhile in the back of the van the two eighth graders, Michael Hughes and Cheryl Stephenson were French kissing and feeling each other up. Probably as near as I would get to seeing what a rated R movie was like for another 5 years or so. Every now and again, I would peek over the back of my middle seat at them and Michael would hiss at me and say something like “What are you looking at fuck head?” or “Turn your god damned head around you peeping tom ass hole”. And then he’d shoot the middle finger at me and promptly go back to fondling Cheryl’s breasts.

We arrived at camp, hours late no doubt. The sun was blistering, and pavement below was unforgiving. I was hungry and there were masses of people hurrying from place to place. A man with curly hair, glasses and whistle around his neck screamed “Ladies and gentlemen, please listen for your names and cabin assignments as I call them. When you receive your assignments, ladies will get on the bus and will be driven to the west side of the Lake. Men, as your cabin number is called, please take your belongings and march promptly to your cabin behind me”. He motioned to the columns of cabins behind him.

He began calling names alphabetically. It was a bit of a wait until he got to me but eventually, he yelled my name, “David Oliver-cabin twenty-three”. I picked up my suitcase and joined the diaspora of teens and pre-teen boys marching through the woods to the cabins.

I found cabin twenty-three, opened the door and found five of the roughest looking hooligans I had even seen-every one of them a head taller than me. I had no idea that eleven-year-olds came in “Godzilla” variety but apparently, they did. They stared me down, I looked away and tried to avoid eye contact.

The biggest and brawniest of the hooligans with shoulder length hair walked up to me and thrust his finger into my sternum, “Listen you little pussy! We don’t like you and don’t want you here. Now you fucking do what I say, and we might just let you get the hell out of here alive in five days.”

The other four snickered and sneered.

The leader continued, “And if you don’t...”. He took his index finger and made a slashing motion and sound across his neck, “And if you don’t, your fucking toast.”

My heart jumped into my throat and begin to race. What had I gotten myself into? Was this church camp or the chain gang my parents sent me to?

I hovered in a corner with my suitcase while they looked at me with hatred in their eyes.

### Chapter 3

And just at that moment, in walked what was supposed to be the “adult”, perhaps all of 21 or 22 years old and introduced himself, “Hey guys, I’m Quentin Kimbrough and I’m your counselor! We’ll be spending the next week together having all kinds of fun. Now, y’all gather around, “he noted looking at his clipboard, “and introduce yourself to me.” We began blurting out our names to him in rapid succession.

“Jeff, “said the leader of the hooligans.

“Robert, “said another.

“John, “said a voice too deep to be that of an incumbent sixth grader.

“Daryl, “said the boy with the crew cut.

“Rick, “said the last of the gashouse gang.

The counselor marked each one off his clipboard list and then finally looked at me. “I guess that would make you David, wouldn’t it pal?” He smiled at me beneath his curly hair and thick glasses.

“Yes sir, it does, Mr. Kimbrough.” I said.

“Good, “he said. “Now that we are here and we know one another’s names there’s no need for formality, y’all just call me Quentin. No Mr. Kimbrough. The only Mr. Kimbrough I know is my grandfather.”

I nodded my head and looked down. The roughest of the bunch rolled his eyes.

“C’mon over boys,” said Quentin. “Everyone gather round in a circle, hold hands and let’s say a prayer to get this week kicked off. Then we’ll walk on over to the cafeteria and see what they have cooking for supper.”

We all begrudgingly circled, together. Very uncomfortably loosely held each other’s hands. He began to pray, “Dear Father in Heaven. We’d like to thank you for this glorious day...” He kept praying but it faded into mumbling in my mind.

I had peeked up from the prayer circle to notice that Jeff had unlatched his hands and was staring me down. He was twisting his right fist into his left palm. Then he pointed at me and whispered “YOU!!!”

“...Amen.” Said Quentin. “That’s all men, y’all follow me over to the cafeteria!”

We marched to the other side of the campus and stood in line for supper when we got there. The counselors sat together at their table while all my “cabin-mates” found some of the other ruffian friends to congregate with.

I sat at the end of the least populated table all to myself eating a plate full of spaghetti. It was quite tasty and enjoyable. It occurred to me at that instant that I knew what it was like for a condemned man to eating his last meal before they marched him to The Chamber.



## Chapter 4

After supper, it was back to the cabin for more praying and getting to know one another. The “gang of five”, I surmised, must have known one another prior to coming to camp. Perhaps they all came from the same church. Though, what kind of god they worshipped at that church was beyond my eleven-year old mind’s grasp.

Oh, of course, they were perfect angels when Counselor Quentin was in our midst. It was all “Yes, Quentin.”, “I’ll get right to it, Quentin.”, or “No problem, can do, Quentin.” But the second Counselor Quentin turned his head, the hooligans were making it clear to me that my demise was their life’s work.

Night came. I picked the cot in the far end of the room by the window. Lights out order came at 10:00 pm. I huddled underneath my blankets and tried to go to sleep. I thought I’d be safe as long as Quentin was in the room asleep with us as well.

## Chapter 5

I couldn't have been more wrong though! Sometimes in the middle of the night, I was suddenly awakened. The Hooligans had me by all four limbs and head. They proceeded to lift me out of the bed. I turned my eyes as far as I could towards Counselor Quentin's bed to scream for help, but he wasn't there. His bed was made as neatly as it had been hours before.

The Hooligans pushed me into the bathroom and forced me to my knees, each one holding a limb. Their esteemed leader, Jeff, had me by the neck and hair. They opened the toilet (full of fresh waste, of course) and then Jeff thrust my face down into the concoction of water, urine and excrement. He pulled it back up and shouted at me "Where do you keep your god damned money you little motherfucker!?"

I couldn't speak. I was dizzy and nauseous. I vomited all over the toilet and floor. Jeff thrust my face back down in the poison again. "Don't fuck with me you fucker!" He pulled my head back up and I struggled to gulp in precious air.

I heard the one named Daryl say "Let's ram the broomstick up his asshole. I bet he'd love that!" He got right up close to my face and said "You know you like it don't you, you little fucker. You know you want it!"

I struggled to breathe again. Oh God, I thought to myself, just tell them where the wallet is and maybe they'll leave me alone. I was shivering and fighting back the reflex to vomit again. I gulped as much as I could in and whispered, "Middle pocket of my backpack. Brown wallet."

The immediately relinquished their grip and dropped me on the floor. They slammed the door and I lay there for a longest time crying. Finally, I summoned enough strength to stand up. I grabbed a few clean towels, wiped up the floor, flushed the toilet and took a shower to clean myself up. The tears were gone now. I carefully opened the door and ran back to my bed. I got under the covers. I could only hope the Hooligans were all asleep. I closed my eyes but couldn't sleep.

"What a fucking poor trailer trash loser," said Hooligan Jeff. "Only fucking twenty dollars to his name."

“Hey, you little pussy, “harshly whispered Jeff. “I bet you want your god damned mommy now, don’t you?!”

“After we get through with you, they are going to have to send you back home in a body bag!” said Robert.

They all laughed.

I hovered deep beneath the covers and began crying again.

## Chapter 6

Light was coming through the lone window in the cabin-I could sense it on the other side of my closed eyes. I was awake but didn't want to open my eyes to the world. I didn't want to move. I stay there motionless under the covers frozen with fear.

Then I heard a slight creaking of the rusty hinges on the door, a few steps and then a deep breath. "Rise and shine men! Let's get up and meet this wonderful day face to face." Said Counselor Quentin and then he continued, "Y'all got half an hour to hit the showers and get ready. Hustle. Hustle. Hustle!" I opened my eyes. He had a cowbell and a drumstick. He began to beat out a steady rhythm on the bell until we all sat up from our beds. "Clang, clang, clang!"

I looked around. The Hooligans were wiping sleep from their eyes, stretching and yawning. For just a brief instant, they looked like a bunch of normal kids and not the mutants of humanity I knew them to be. They made small talk with the counselor, kissing his ass like they were kissing the hand of The Pope.

The counselor spoke, "OK Men, now that you're up and moving, I'm going outside to catch a little of this beautiful sunrise we have happening out there between the pine trees. Y'all meet me out there beneath the big one when you're ready and we'll all go over to the mess hall for breakfast.

Mess hall...I thought to myself.

I stayed as far behind the pack as I could. After breakfast, we spent the day doing what all kids do at summer at church camp. We prayed. We sang songs like "Oh What a Beautiful Morning" We did arts and crafts. We went swimming, we had lunch, and then swam more. Late in the afternoon we went hiking through the woods. Then it was time for supper. And then as the sun was going down in the East Texas Piney woods, it was time to go to chapel for sunset service. None of the day's nonsense did I particularly enjoy due to the menacing and murderous whispers The Hooligans were making to me behinds the adult's backs.

At all times, I kept within a screaming distance from an adult in case things went south. At least a dozen times I almost approached Counselor Quentin to tell him about the events of the previous night, but talked myself out of it every time as I had convinced myself that perhaps he

was part of the conspiracy to cause my demise due to his odd absence in the middle of the night when he was obviously supposed to have been watching over us.

As long as there was light in the woods , I felt I could maintain my personal safety but panic started to set in after chapel service as the sun glowed it's last daily embers behind the trees and nightly breeze started to flutter through it's endless of branches.

The counselors marched us back to the barracks and gathered us beneath the Prayer Pine (as they were calling it). "Men," said Quentin, "What a great first day! Now let's join hands in a circle and have one last prayer this evening."

Again, we all uncomfortably held hands. The Hooligans were cracking jokes with one another beneath their breath, laughing and giggling, throwing evil stares at me.

Quentin looked at each one of us and finally said to the leader of The Hooligans, "Jeff, why don't you lead us in prayer tonight?"

The Hooligans giggled. Jeff begin very slowly and awkwardly, "Lord Jesus in heaven. Thank you for this...this...beautiful day and all the friends we've made so far. Amen."

"OK Men!" said Quentin. "Let's get ready for lights out. Back to the cabin we go!"

The Hooligans were still calling each other names and exchanging punches on their arms. Jeff turned around, walked back to me and whispered in my ear, "This is your last fucking night on this earth you little mamma's boy pussy. When Quentin leaves tonight, you ass is grass!"

## Chapter 7

It was lights out on another horrible day. Everybody accounted for in their beds-there was me, the five Hooligans and Counselor Quentin. I wasn't sure how I was going to make it through another night. I had no idea of where the counselor was disappearing to at night. I didn't know why these five strange boys hated me so much. I missed my own bed, I missed my dog, missed my comic books and my little black and white T.V. I would rather much have my parents yelling and screaming at one another than what was awaiting me this night in the cabin with The Hooligans. I sat there under the covers and almost convinced myself that if I think hard enough that I could magically transport out of church camp and to some other place far away. I tried and tried but no amount of wishing and hoping could get me out of that cabin.

I opened my eyes as wide as I could and vowed to not go to sleep-to stay on high guard throughout the night and not get taken by surprise. If I had to die, I was going to die fighting them. I turned to my side and noticed that everyone else seemed to be fast and deeply asleep. And it could have been an hour, it could have been two (time moves so terribly slow in the darkness of night), but I watched Counselor Quentin slowly sit up in his cot then very quietly get up. He put on his shoes and crept around the room, stopping to look at each of us for a few moments as if checking to see if WE were asleep. He walked around the room in a counterclockwise circle, he came to my corner of the cabin. I closed my eyes, but not too tightly, relaxed my body and pretended to be asleep.

Then he walked a few more steps away from me and stopped. Then I heard the doorknob turn. I heard the rusty hinges squeak. I opened my eyes and peered at him. He took one more look over his shoulder at the Hooligans and then me. He walked through the door and was gone into the night.

Quickly, I thought, what to do...what to do. I heard his steps disappearing down the sidewalk. A couple of The Hooligans were starting to stir. I jumped up, got my jeans and tennis shoes on, put my glasses on the nose and blitzed out the door with as much stealth as I could muster and followed the counselor.

The night was clear. There was a full moon out. I followed him down the sidewalk onto the dirt path. I followed him through the woods to The Lake, always staying at a distance whereby I could see him, but he could not see me.

I could hear laughing and other voices down at The Lake. I took a safe position behind some Palmettos and watched. Our counselor had met up with The Others. I counted. There were seventeen of them in all. They were all gathered beneath The Gazebo which was built at the end of the pier overlooking The Lake. They were passing around a bottle. There were beer cans all over the floor of The Gazebo. They began to smoke cigars and cigarettes and play cards. Soon, some of them were throwing off their clothes and skinny dipping in The Lake. I had never seen such goofiness and heard such laughing in my whole life.

Again, I don't know how long this all went on, but I watched them throughout the night as my eyes stayed glued on all these scenes before my eyes. I constantly fought back the urge to sleep. Finally, I don't know what time it was, their party began to disperse and each of them started to stagger back to their respective parts of The Camp.

Counselor Quentin started hobbling toward me. "Oh man, on man, "I thought to myself. "I better get out of here and back to the cabin before he does, or I will be in major trouble."

I bolted through the woods parallel to the dirt path, well ahead of him. I ran across the playground onto the sidewalk and to the door of our cabin. Carefully, I peeked into the room and looked at The Hooligans. Thank goodness they were still fast asleep. I tippy toed into the room, took off my jeans, shoes and glasses then slipped into bed under the covers. I intensely watched the door. Minutes later, I saw Quentin peek in just I had and slipped into bed himself.

The sun wasn't up yet. It probably wasn't long until sunrise. Sleep and darkness washed over my mind after my long adventured through the woods that night.

## Chapter 8

Another sunrise. The counselor's cheery voice rang again throughout our musty little cabin. And on cue, he began banging the cowbell. He gave us our allotted time to shower and get ready. We had to gather around in a circle holding hands, yet again, praying together like we really meant it and cared for one another.

He corralled us across the campus for a breakfast of powdered eggs, hash browns and sausage. After breakfast, we joined a huge crowd of other kids marching down the pathway through the woods towards The Lake for morning chapel. Somewhere along the way, I lost sight of Quentin and fell into the back of the pack. I suddenly ran right into The Hooligans standing there waiting for me at attention with their arms crossed.

"C'mon you little shit head," said Hooligan Robert. He grabbed me by my right arm while Hooligan Jeff grabbed my other arm. The remaining three took turns shoving me in the back. They dragged me off the path and deeper into the woods.

"And just where the fuck did you go last night you little pussy?" Said Jeff.

I remained silent. I was too terrified to speak. My mental systems had shut down as if my sleeping body were locked in a nightmare.

"You didn't think you could get away that easy," said Hooligan Rick.

"We're gonna make you wish you were never born, dickhead." Said Jeff.

I started to whimper and cry They kept rambling me through the leaves and underbrush of the woods.

"That's right go ahead and cry for your mommy. She can't hear you. Nobody can hear you. Cry you little fucker," said Daryl.

We kept at a quick pace for fifteen or twenty minutes. They marched me down a deep and steep gully. There was a small creek at the bottom and several willow trees stretching out over the water. They pushed me to the ground. Two of them ripped off my shoes, socks and jeans. Two others ripped of my t-shirt.

Jeff looked at Rick and said, "You got the rope?"



Rick nodded and pulled out some kind thick twine from his jeans. Two of them lifted me by my arms and dragged me to the base of one of the willow trees. All that I still had on was my underwear. They pulled my arms behind the tree and tied them together. Jeff pulled out a roll of duct tape from seemingly nowhere and wrapped my legs together with the tape. By this time, I was hopelessly and uncontrollably crying.

“C’mon guys,” said Jeff, “Let’s get back to camp before fucking Quentin realizes we are gone.”

His four followers ran back towards the hiking path. Jeff stepped up to me and leaned into my face, “Listen, don’t fuck with me, man!” He spit in my face and as an afterthought he yanked off my glasses, twisted them to shreds and threw the remains deep into the woods.

“Cry all you want for your mommy, asshole.” he said. “She can’t hear you. She’s probably sucking the mailman’s cock while your dad is working his ass off to pay the bills. She’s a fucking whore.”

He ran away. And as if he needed to assert one more insult to make him feel better, he turned around at me, shot the finger and yelled, “Take that, you fucker!”

I struggled and struggled to free myself, but I was too weak and in too much of a panic. They left. I was all alone. All I could do was cry and even after a time, I couldn’t even do that. I was all cried out. The only thing my spirit could do was to go limp and let the insects have their way with me.

## Chapter 9

Eventually, the powers that be found me. I don't know how long I had been asleep or how long I had been there, but they found me. "They" ... being the Counselor Quentin, Hooligan Jeff and a man they called "The Pastor". The one they called The Pastor seemed to be the guy who was in control of the entire Church Camp Cult Operations.

I can only imagine how it went down. I suppose somebody back at camp under the Prayer Pine eventually asked just where the hell poor little David Oliver had disappeared to. Perhaps after some intense grilling one of The Hooligans might gave into the scrutiny. And perhaps, they then led them to me. That has been my working theory for all these years.

The Counselor and The Pastor were mumbling stuff like "Oh dear God", "Oh Good heavens" and "David, David are you alright buddy?". Obviously, I was not alright.

The Pastor took a knife out of his pocket, cut the rope and duct tape. He turned to Jeff and said, "Jeffrey, "can you to get his clothes, please?" The clothes he was referring to were the clothes The Hooligans had stripped off me that were still laying nearby in the dirt of the sides of the gully.

"Yes, sir" said Jeff who snapped to attention, ran a few steps, picked up my clothes, ran them back to me and said, "Here ya go, pal.". Yes, he actually called me "pal". Imagine that.

We made the long walk back to camp, nobody, including myself, mentioned the absence of my glasses. They didn't even know me well enough to realize that they were missing. Nothing was said.

We arrived at camp, walked around the recreation area to a building which I had not previously noticed. It smelled musty like an old bank lobby or a dentist's lobby. We walked through a series of doors into a large office with a semi-circle desk. There were photos of The Pastor and his family, little golf knick-knacks, a large framed photo of Jesus on one wall while on the other wall was a photo of Albert Einstein sticking his tongue out at the camera.

The Pastor motioned for Jeff and me to sit down in front of his desk. The Counselor moved a chair to the side of his desk and sat down looking at us. "Boys..." began the Pastor.

Then he stopped, shook his head slightly and continued, “No...you’re not boys anymore, you are young men, aren’t you?”

Jeff and I slightly nodded in agreement.

“So...” said The Pastor, “We’re going to deal with this like men then right here and now.” I don’t know what he was thinking but I was starting to feel like I had done something wrong and I was about to get my ass paddled or something like that.

“Look guys. I don’t know what you’ve heard about summer camp-the hazing, the initiations and things of that sort. But I’m here to tell you that this sort of thing must stop right now. This isn’t a Marine boot camp; this is a church camp...right?” He paused as if trying to let that sink into our skulls.

Jeff nodded. The Pastor raised his eyebrows at me, so I gave an empty nod as well.

“Now Jeff...” he began. “We’re not going to have this kind of horseplay again, are we?”

“No, sir.” Said Hooligan Jeff grinning ear-to-ear.

“And we’re not going to have to call your parents, are we? We can take care of this right now like reasonable adults here in my office, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” echoed Jeff. Oh brother, he had them fooled.

The Pastor turned to the Counselor and said, “Quentin, do you have anything to add?”

The Counselor thought about that, clasped his hands and said, “I know we all love one another here. And God loves us too. He’s going to see us through this crisis just like he led Moses through The Wasteland.” He turned back to The Pastor and said, “Will you lead us in prayer to send us back into the rest of our glorious evening?”

We bowed our heads. The Pastor gave us a short saccharine benediction. Finally, he said, “We’re all in this together, men. Jeff, David, Quentin and myself. We are all going to shake hands and walk away from here as friends and brothers in Christ.”

I put my hand out to shake Jeff’s hand thinking that the worst of this ordeal could have been behind me now. He slowly and painfully grabbed my hand, squeezed it until it felt like my bones were going to crush and gave me a weasel-like smirk. I knew if I didn’t get the hell out of this camp, The Hooligans were going to kill me for sure.

“OK, then.” said The Pastor, “Go in Peace and not in Pieces”

“David, “said Counselor Quentin, “supper time has passed but go on over to the cafeteria anyway. I think there is still some staff there. They’ll fix you up with something to eat, partner. Take your time. When you’re finished, come meet us down by The Lake for evening vespers.”

I walked out of the building across campus to the cafeteria. It must have been about seven in the evening. I couldn’t see perfectly without my glasses, but I could see well enough to get around where I needed to go. I had no idea of what I was going to do about having to survive another night in the cabin with the Hooligans. I just knew I had to get some food; I hadn’t eaten anything all day.

## Chapter 10

I gorged myself with spaghetti and bread in the cafeteria. They let me go back for seconds and thirds. They then put a huge bowl of banana pudding under my nose which I couldn't say no to so I ate that too. I then left the cafeteria and walked along the sidewalk to the path that would take me through the woods back to The Lake. I started formulating a plan in my mind for survival. If I could just make a point to stay in the shadow or shout of an adult for the rest of the week and somehow manage to sneak out of the cabin every night after Quentin left us to go to his little counselor parties down by The Lake, I might make it out of the hell hole and get back home alive. And I would never return to this place again.

The path from the cafeteria across the campus to the Lake trail passed by the camp entrance. I stopped for a minute and looked down the road. It was a narrow farm to market two lane blacktop road as empty as Space as far as I could see to the horizon. I turned around again and looked down the trail towards the Lake. A hundred yards or so down the trail, I saw The Hooligans hanging out, very causally walking to the Lake. Their backs were away from me and they had not yet seen me.

A chill went down my neck, across my spine, through my legs and down to my toes. My body locked.

I breathed in and out a few times. I tried to continue my walk back to the Lake, to The Hooligans, to the Counselor. To that damned counselor who seemed to have better things to do than to see to the safety of those who were his charge. I tried to move in the direction I was supposed to, but a I couldn't.

Some force overtook my mind and body. I bolted through the entrance gate and down the road as fast as I could-like I had never run before and like I haven't ran since. I ran and ran. And when my lungs were screaming and burning with pain and it seemed like I couldn't get any more oxygen down the old tubes, I ran even more.

I kept running and eventually looked behind me. I could no longer see the camp's entrance gates, but still I kept running.

I ran until my legs gave out and I fell over. I fell over and I started crawling on all fours. I pulled myself up and walked. I'd catch my breath and then I'd run a little. I'd run out of energy and I'd walk. Walk, then run. Run, then walk. Finally, it was all I could do just to drag my feet along the asphalt shuffling along. The sun was down, and darkness had set in.

Finally, I came upon a lone gas station in the woods at a flashing red light crossroads. There were a couple of cars and trucks. I walked into the parking lot. There was a payphone by the door. I should have picked up the phone, dialed '0' and asked the operator to call my parents. I should have walked through the convenience store's front door and asked for help. But I didn't. Every scenario that I analyzed in my mind of asking for help from any adult seemed to end up with me back at Church Camp. I wasn't thinking clearly. Or maybe I was thinking clearly, or maybe I wasn't thinking at all. I was running on instinct and adrenaline. The only thing I could think about was putting more distance between myself and The Hooligans, the dumb-ass Counselor and The Pastor.

I spotted a large flatbed pickup truck in the parking lot. It had a blue canvass tarpaulin covering it. There was a flap opening in the back. I peeked underneath. There was a lot lumber boards and fence posts. I climbed up on the bumper and crawled into the truck's bed, beneath the tarpaulin and huddled next to the stack of boards.

I lay there motionless with my eyes closed tightly and curled up in a fetal position. Only a few minutes had passed when I heard the engine of the truck start. I felt the slight inertia of the truck pulling out of the parking lot and onto the road away from the direction of Church Camp.

I didn't know where the truck was going. I really didn't know where I was at. I only knew that I was going sixty miles an hour in the opposite direction of Hell. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

## Chapter 11

The truck stopped, I woke up and peeked out through the cover on the truck bed. I was at a highway rest stop. I could see the blurred figure of the driver making his way to the public restroom. It was still dark outside. The night was and I could make out images through my squinted eyes by the light of full moon. I had no idea if I had been asleep for 30 minutes or 13 hours. I did the calculations in my head. I could still be in Texas or I could be somewhere like Alabama for all I knew.

I carefully climbed out of the pickup truck and looked at the license plate. The truck was from California. That was no help. There was a picnic area in a small ravine. Beyond that lie what seemed to be thick wooded area. I scampered through the parking lot, across the picnic area, up, down and then over the ravine. I scraped across a series of barbed wire fences and into the wooded area. There were no paths and the undergrowth was thick as could be, It was a slow pace tramping through it, avoiding thorny bushes and sharp rocks. I continued moving without any thought or reasons as to why I was doing this, where I was running to or what I was running away from. I could only think about my next step, putting one foot in front of the other to keep moving.

I lost count of how many barbed wire fences I crossed and how many streams I tried to follow. For all I know I could have been walking in circles. I could tell day was beginning to break. I didn't even know what day it was. Was it Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday?

The wooded forest came to an abrupt stop at the edge of a pasture. The pasture was full of tall grass. It was as tall as my eyes. A gentle morning wind was blowing. For just a moment I stood silently in awe watching the wind creating rippling waves across the pasture.

And then instantly, I broke into a run across the field. At the other end of the pasture was another wooded area. This area was not like the forest I had just emerged out of. It was an orchard of sorts. There were hundreds of trees planted in exact rows and columns no more than 15 feet high. I walked through the orchard noticing bushel baskets, ladders and buckets everywhere. At the back of the Orchard was a barn. I ran to the barn, unlatched the door and

walked in. The barn had baskets full of peaches and bales of hay stacked to the ceiling. I walked to the very back to the barn, set down a bale of hay, and tried to catch my breath.

I was hungry and thirsty. Immediately to my left was a plastic bucket of peaches. I reached in and grabbed one and cradled it in both of my hands. It was the largest peach I'd ever seen and warm to the touch of my hands. I sunk my face into it and withdrew a large chunk of it in my mouth. Ice cold nectar burst into my throat and immediately cooled my body. I ravenously devoured the rest - peach nectar leaking over my face, all over my clothes and onto the ground. I gobbled it down to the pit and discarded the seed. I grabbed another and ate it, then grabbed for 3rd and ate that too. It was the most wonderful meal I'd ever had period

Sometimes during this forbidden feast, I became aware of an eerie squeaking noise happening outside of this barn. I moved ever so carefully to the crack in the door and peered through. There was a young girl just about my age sitting on a wooden box beneath one of the peach trees. She was playing what seemed to be a clarinet. She was playing it rather badly as a matter of fact. She had red hair-red like the rust colored earth packed dirt beneath my feet in the barn. I squinted in efforts to make out more details. I struggled to obtain more details through my eyes- my myopic eyes than needed glasses so badly.

I shrugged my shoulders to myself. I was thinking clearly and calmly for the first time this week. I was just going over to sit in the hay a little bit longer to another peach or two. Have another peach or two and wait for the clarinet girl to go away. When she went away, I'd find the first phone I could and call somebody. I'd be back in my room in my own bed petting my dog and watching Beverly Hillbilly re-runs before the day was done. Just one more peach to eat...



**Chapter 12**

I slept deeply in that cool and dark barn. I began to dream. I dreamt that I was sitting by a lake on a warm summer evening. There was a rainbow stretching from one side of the lake to the other. There was a flock of swans swimming in gentle figure eights on the surface of the lake. Suddenly one swan separated from the rest of flock, swam ashore and walked up onto the bank and looked at me in my dream. It started honking swan talk at me like I should know what it is saying. I don't know what to answer. The honking got louder. It became more unbearable with each sounding of its voice. And when it finally got so loud that I couldn't take it anymore, I shook myself out of the dream and forced myself to wake up.

I jumped to my feet and my heart began to race. There she was right in front of me no more than 5 feet away, the mysterious red headed clarinet girl, looking at me, playing and squeaking her clarinet. She's would blow a note, look at me, laugh, and then blow another note.

She put the clarinet down to her side and said, "Sit yourself back down, mister!"

I slowly sat down on a bale of hay. I wondered how long she had been sitting there watching me sleep.

"Do you know what my Paw-Paw does to critters who steal his peaches?" she asked me?

I didn't give her a reply.

She honked her clarinet at me. She put it back down and said, "Well, do ya?"

I shook my head and whispered "No."

"He shoots them with his twelve gauge, pins their hide out on the barn and feeds the carcass to the dogs. Do you think that's what we should do with you?"

"But I'm not a critter." I said in my defense.

"Critters eat peaches that don't belong to them. You ate peaches that don't belong to you. You're a critter." She giggled, put the clarinet up to her mouth and tried to play a scale and then said, "What do you have to say in your defense?"

I gulped in a lung full of air and said, "I'm sorry. I'm lost. I was hungry. Those peaches were so good. I hadn't had anything to eat all day. I won't eat anymore, don't tell him, please."

"Hmmm..." she pondered, "I guess your secret is safe with me. At least for the time being." She put the clarinet back to her mouth and tried to squeak out a tune. This time, slightly more melodious than before.

"Well then," she said. "What's your story? What's your name? Where are you from-mysterious peach eating critter!" She moved closer and poked at my chest with the clarinet.

"I really don't know where to start," I said. "I ran away from Church Camp. I hopped in a truck. I ran through the woods. I ended up here. I ate the peaches and then fell asleep."

She played a few notes and said, "What's your name, mister?" She asked.

"David," I replied.

"And where is this supposed Church Camp you ran away from?" she asked.

"East Texas," I said.

"And is that where you live?" she asked.

"I live close to San Antonio, maybe 30 or 40 minutes from the city". I said.

"Lordy Mercy, boy!" she said. "You are a long way from home, Mister!"

"Well, where am I then?" I asked

She put the clarinet in her mouth and honked one loud note at me, "I'm asking the questions here, Mister!"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"So, you want me to believe that you ran away from church camp, stowed away in a pickup truck and somehow ended up here in my Paw-Paw's barn?"

I nodded, rather meekly.

She squinted her eyes again and looked me over. She pointed at me with the clarinet and said, "A likely story! You could have just made all that stuff up, you...peach eating critter."

I didn't say anything.

“You stay right here,” she commanded. “I’ll be back in two shakes.”

She paused, “You hear me? You understand? You. Stay. Right here. Don’t leave.”

“I won’t,” I said.

“If you do my Paw-Paw might shoot you with his twelve gauge.”

“I’m waiting. I won’t move.” I promised.

She walked out the door and shut it. Just a few seconds later, she peeked in again and said, “My name is Angela. Not Angie. Don’t call me Angie. It’s Angela. You got that, Mister?”

“Got it,” I said.

“Ok then, David. I’ll be back in a jiff,” she said shutting the door again.

### Chapter 13

I sat on the hard-packed red dirt floor of the barn, watching the rays of morning sun cut through the cracks in the ancient temple like structure I had been hiding out in. The dust and tiny bits of hay were playing in the light-defying gravity and entertaining me. It took my mind off the current situation that I found myself in. I was no longer in a panic. I felt the worst was behind me-that I'd never have to see Church Camp again nor those Horrible Hooligans.

I was thinking clearly for the first time in days. But no sooner had the calmness set in that it started to fade. The sadness of being away from home started to hit me. I missed my parents, even though they argued violently and viciously with one another, they were the only thing in the world I had to hold onto. I imagined that they must be terribly panicked about my disappearance. But then I began to wonder if the nincompoops at the camp even noticed or cared that I was missing. Again, I tried to calm myself down. I would just wait for this girl to come back to the barn. I would then get her to take me back to her house and then I'd call my parents.

She was only gone for about half an hour. She came inching back in through the barn door. She was holding a large bright orange Tupperware bin in her hands. She walked up to me, sat down, moved around some hay bales into a table and bench arrangement and placed the Tupperware container on the middle bale of hay. She pointed to one of the other bales. "You sit there," she demanded.

I sat down. She sat down on the third bale, took the lid off the containers and said, "I bet you're still pretty hungry even though you ate all those peaches. Peaches will go right through you; they don't stay with you for long. So, I went and fixed us some lunch. I got all kinds of sandwiches here. I got peanut butter with jelly, ham and cheese, and pimento cheese. Which ones do you want?"

I paused, my need to give into hunger pains stronger than any urge to figure out how to get back home. I finally said, "I'll take the ham and cheese"

She handed me the sandwich, a bag of chips. She then took a small bottle of Coke out of the container, pried off the cap with a bottle opener and handed that to me.

"Thank you," I said. I sunk my mouth into the sandwich.

She began talking. "I live here with my Paw-Paw. It's just me and him."

I swallowed half a sandwich in a gulp and said, "Angela, you didn't say where I am, you just said I was a long way from home. But you didn't tell me where we are."

"You're in Mississippi, Mister! And what was your story again? That you ran away from church camp in Texas. Well, I still don't believe that. But if you are from Texas, you are a long way from home then. Like three or four thousand miles away from home.

Mississippi. That was a long way from home. I knew it wasn't as far as three or four thousand miles away, but I knew it was far away enough to know that I was in pickle, for sure.

"Do you have a phone I can use to call my parents?" I asked.

"Well of course we have a phone. What do you think we are? Some kind of back woods redneck trash? And of course, you can use it to call your parents in Texas, it that's where you are really from. But at least you can sit here and have a nice lunch and conversation with me first. You were stealing our peaches, you peach thief. Or should I get my Paw-Paw down here right now with his twelve gauge?"

"No," I assured her, "No need for the shotgun, we can eat first. No hurry."

She took a huge gulp of Coca-Cola and continued. "Well, like I was saying, it's just me and my Paw-Paw. My daddy is dead, and my mom is just a hippie who never lives in one place for too long or with one man for too long. She can't even take care of herself, much less me. So, she dumped me here with Paw-Paw. Oh, she stops by a few times a year with trinkets to give me from her travels. Paw-Paw says she's no good white trash and wasn't good enough for their boy, Johnny"

"Johnny was your father?" I interjected.

"Yes, I never knew him. He died when I was just a few months old. He got killed in The Vietnam just shortly after I was born." She pulled out a photo and showed it to me. It was a photo of a young man in his formal military attire. He had military issue glasses on and was wearing a beret. He was holding a little baby in his arms. I assumed that little baby was Angela.

“I’m so sorry. I said. It was all I could offer up. “It must be hard having no father ever.” My mother’s brother had been in The Vietnam. She had told me that he’d never been ‘right in the head’ after coming back from that miserable dirty little war.

“Oh, that’s OK,” she said, “Me and my Paw-Paw get by just fine.”

“What about your grandmother, “I asked, “Is she dead?”

She began to speak in a rapid-fire manner, not even pausing to take a breath between thought or sentence. “No, my Granny is in the state mental hospital. The day she learnt about my Daddy’s death a horrible silence fell over her and she ain’t talked again since then. Ain’t talked in ten years. So, they put her in the state hospital in Jackson. We drive up there every Tuesday morning, watch “The Price Is Right” with her in her room, Paw-Paw feeds her and talks to her, but she just stares into space. I’ve never even heard her say one word in my whole life. And now I’m noticing that you don’t talk much either do you, David.” She pointed at me.

I squinted trying to make out the finer details of her face in the sunray lit barn. “All the boys were really mean to me at the church camp. I don’t even know why. I didn’t even look at them or talk to them. They just started beating me up. I wasn’t even aware that I was running away, Angela. Something just overtook me and possessed my body. I felt like I was a puppet on a string and some force was pulling me along to escape that place. I never want to go back to that place again”

“Man-oh-man.” She said slapping her knee. “That sounds horrible. That sounds so horrible, sounds like you might be telling me a whopper. Are you telling me a whopper?”

“Uh...what’s a whopper?” I asked.

“You know,” she said. “A whopper is a made-up story, a lie, a tall tale.”

“No. No whopper. I promise. It’s the honest truth. I just need to get to a phone to call my parents.

“You promise it’s the honest-to-god-swear-on-your-granny’s-grave-cross-your-heart truth are telling me?” she prodded again narrowing her eyes at me suspiciously.

“Promise.” I proclaimed nodding my head.

“Shake on it, scout’s honor!” she said and extended her right arm.

I stuck out my right hand, squinted so that I wouldn't miss the handshake, grasped her hand and said, "Scout's honor!"

"OK, then" she said. "I believe you, and why are you always squinting like that?"

"Oh," I said. "The Hooligans at church camp-they took my glasses from me, smashed them and threw them away. I'm not totally blind without them. But they sure make life a lot easier to make out small details." I finished the chips, coke and said "Thanks for the food Angela. I appreciate it."

"You are very welcome." She said. She started putting away the remains of our lunch. She stuffed everything back into the large Tupperware crate neatly. "Doesn't sound at all like anything a church camp should be to me! I would think church camp would be all lovey-dovey holding hands and singing 'Kumbaya' together."

"Well, I think it was supposed to be Angela, but something went severely wrong with the one I was shipped off to."

She started talking quickly again. "I don't know nothing much about church anyway. We never go. Paw-Paw told me he quit going after my Daddy got killed in The Vietnam and my grandmother lost her mind. He says it's not that he doesn't believe in God no more, because he does. But he figures he'd just rather go out to his Peach Orchard, pick a peach and eat it on Sunday morning while watching the clouds float by in the sky. He says there's a lot of ways to commune with the All Mighty and one man's Peach Orchard works just as good as another man's Church."

"Well, I said, "He does grow a good peach out there. I'm not much on fruit, but they had to be the best I've ever had."

"He sells them at the Farmer's Market every day in Yazoo City. Also sells them to people who drive by the house and see the 'Peaches for Sale' sign we have out at the roadside. They stop by, buy his peaches. They say stuff to him like 'Haven't seen you in church lately, Walter' or 'Tell Clarisse we're praying for her.' Paw-Paw just grunts and wishes them a good day."

"That's your grandparents names then, Walter and Clarisse?"

"Yes, that's his name and my poor old sick Granny's first name. C'mon now, David. "She said taking one of my hands, "Let's get you to the house so you can try calling your parents

back in Texas. She picked up two peaches with her other hand and gave one to me. “Here...” she said, “Eat a peach, it’s on the house.”

I grabbed it and sunk my mouth into its cool succulent flesh.

She led me out of my temporary barn refuge, back through the orchard or perfectly straight rows and columns. We turned down a dirt path and I could see a house no more than two or three football fields down the road



## 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 can 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 finally 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 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 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.

## Chapter 15

I woke up gradually the next morning, only aware that I had slept well and deeply. I wasn't immediately aware of where I was or could I remember what had happened in the last few days. The sun was up, and I could hear all sorts of birds greeting the morning outside. I kept my eyes closed and took deep breathes. Oxygen began rushing to my brain in ample supply and the drama of the last few days began to play upon the backs of my eyelids like a movie upon the screen. All the players and scenes were there in full color; The Hooligans, the Spaced-Out Counselor, the truck I stowed away in, getting caught in the barn by Angela and the weary kind eyes of her grandfather the night before.

I opened my eyes and looked across the room. Angela was still asleep with her book cradled in her hand at her side. I immediately became aware of the smell of bacon, eggs and bread. I rose to my feet, stretched and put my newly found glasses on. I shuffled quietly out of the bedroom towards the kitchen.

Her grandfather was sitting at the dining table already in his work clothes. The table was set with plates full of biscuits and eggs. There were pitchers of milk and orange juice between the plates. I looked at the old man. He looked at me. Neither of us spoke. He stared at me intensely like he was analyzing every square inch of my body.

At last, he smiled and said "Been on a long trip, son. Bet you're hungry. Sit down and have some breakfast."

My stomach grumbled as the wonderful savory aroma filled my nasal passages and warmed my lungs. "Thank you, sir" I said. I sat down next to him and took a plate. He piled it high with scrambled eggs, bacon slices and two puffy steaming biscuits. I devoured the bacon and eggs, cut open the biscuits, slathered them with butter and poured can syrup on them from a small ceramic pitcher that was on the table.

He filled a large glass with milk and a small cup with orange juice. I grabbed each of them and gulped them down promptly. The old man smiled and nibbled the food from his plate. "Nothing like a good breakfast, is there, boy?"

I nodded my head at him.



Angela wandered into the kitchen, took a place at the table and started to serve herself, “Morning, Paw-Paw, how ya doing this morning?”

“Just fine and dandy, dear. Your young friend here has had quite an appetite this morning. Guess he’s had a long journey.”

She started laughing. “Oh, you should have seen him in the barn. He was eating all your peaches from the peach crib.”

My heart began to race. I took a glance at the shotgun hanging on the wall. The old man chuckled and said, “Yes, indeed. I do like me a good peach now and again. And once you eat one, you just can’t stop there.” His eyes grew larger. He leaned over to me and whispered, “Did she tell you that I’d get the shotgun after you?”

I nodded my head.

“Oh, don’t pay that granddaughter of mine no never mind. She tells that to all her classmates at school. She tries to make me out to be some kind of crazy old fart. I haven’t shot that thing since way back in ’64 or ’65. Right before Johnny got drafted and ended up in that mess in The Vietnam. Right before they shipped him out, he and I went duck hunting one morning his senior year in high school. Bought back the limit, filled the freezer. Roasted duck. Fried duck. Duck gumbo that summer, all summer long.”

His voice trailed off, he seemed to lose his train of thought. He quickly picked up the empty plate, took it to the kitchen sink. He stared out of the kitchen window lost in thought. There was a gentle morning breeze that pushed the tire swing back and forth like a pendulum.

Angela looked at me, picked up her plate, took mine and carried them to sink. She placed them next to the old man, “Paw-Paw?” she interjected.

The old man took deep long sighs of air, turned away from the window and said, “Better go wash up, son. You’ve got a lot of miles on you and probably haven’t had a bath for days. There’s an old green chest of drawers at the end of the hallway there. You might find some clean clothes in there that will fit you.”

I found the chest. I picked pair of jeans and a shirt that nearly fit me. I made my way to the bathroom and washed the dirt and grime off me from my journey. I then walked back into

their living room, took a brief look the telephone and looked away. The old man walked toward me, patted my head and said, “There, now, feel better to be clean, son?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.” I said.

He smiled and said “good to have you here, boy. If there’s anything you need, let me know.” And with that he put his straw hat on and walked out the door.

Angela began to follow him. I turned to her and said, “Where’s he off to?”

“We gotta pick the daily peaches and get them to market before they get too ripe and rot. And we gotta do it before it gets too hot out there!” She smiled at me, gave me a friendly little punch on my shoulder, “C’mon you silly boy. It’ll be fun.” She smiled again and I got a funny feeling inside that I had never had before.

Part of me wanted to beg and plead to ask her to use the phone again but there was another part of me deep down somewhere in my soul that was already becoming comfortable in the moment I found myself in. And at this moment, for some strange reason I felt I needed to follow this girl wherever she wanted me to go. I shrugged my shoulders and walked through the door with her, almost as if it was the perfectly normal thing to do.

## 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, you silly boy.”

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 do 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 use 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 week’s 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, Walter”

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 pulled 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’s 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 was the most money I had ever earned. “Wow. You mean it Mister Parker? Can I really have this...really?”

“Yes indeed. 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 now?”

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 Paw-Paw.”

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

## Chapter 17

Again, I was awakened the next morning by the smell of breakfast coming from the kitchen. It wasn't bacon this time though, I knew the smell of sausage when I smelled it. I looked around. Angela was still asleep, her book cradled in her arms around her chest. I reached out to the nightstand and put my strange new glasses on. The world came into sharp focus.

I got up, shuffled to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I don't think I had been away from my old life for more than a week and I was hardly recognizing my own reflection anymore. My skin was tanned, my hair seemed lighter. I was dressed in a pair of faded overalls and was looking back at myself in a pair of glasses that had once belonged to somebody else.

I heard Angela walking down the hallway. I gingerly fell in step behind her down to the kitchen dining table

"Mornin' you two. Though you'd never get up today. Plenty of breakfast left there. Help yourself to all you want," Said the old man. He was smiling ear to ear behind the bushy grey moustache.

There were waffles, sausage, cantaloupe and peaches sliced in quarters with sugar sprinkled on them. I piled the food high on my plate and ate quickly.

The Old Man chuckled, "Well there son, better slow down, come up for air now and then."

"Yes, sir," I said nodding my head and trying to chew at the same time.

He got up from his chair, walked up to a pot and said, "Want a cup of coffee to chase the breakfast down."

"No sir," I replied, "Don't drink coffee."

"What? Don't drink coffee? What's the matter with ya, boy?" He winked his eye at Angela.

Angela chimed in, "I'll have some Paw!" She put out a ceramic blue mug.

He poured just a little spoon full or two into it. She then reached out to the milk pitcher and filled her cup the rest of the way. She gulped the contents down and wiped her mouth.

"You know what my Pop told me about coffee?" said the Old Man looking my way.

I shook my head.

"Told me it would stunt my growth and make my head shrivel up!"

Angela laughed so I joined in the fun.

"Well then," began The Old Man, "We got a long trip ahead of us today, so let's clean the table, put the dishes away and get in the truck."

And we were in the truck in less than thirty minutes, headed through the orchard to the black topped road. The Old Man was dressed particularly well with his hair combed and slicked back. Angela was dressed in a purple and blue flower print dress. Her hair was tied back in two pig tails with yellow ribbons

She had her book with her and read out loud to her grandfather and me as the truck sped down the highway that we had just turned on.

After we had driven for three or four hours, we came upon a city which looked as large as any city that I had ever seen. The city was Jackson according to all the signs I was reading on the side of the road. We made two stops once we were in the city. First we stopped at McDonald's for lunch which seemed to be of special excitement for Angela because she spent fifteen minutes talking all about it as soon as we had hit the city-"We always go to McDonalds when we come to Jackson. Do you like quarter pounders or big macs the best? Don't you think they have the best French fries? Do you believe I was actually afraid of Ronald McDonald when I was a little girl?"

She nudged her grandfather in the arm and said, "Ain't that right, Paw-Paw?"

"That's right," he replied. "I couldn't take little Angela anywhere close to a McDonald's. She thought the clown was gonna take her away from me forever."

She nodded. She added, "That's right." And Ain't nothing or nobody going to take us away from one another. All we got is each other. Ain't that right, Paw?"

Her grandfather smiled. “Truer words were never spoken.” He patted her on the head.

So, we ate at McDonalds. Then we got back in the truck and drove a few more miles. He exited the highway and stopped at a grocery store. We went in and he purchased a bouquet of roses.

We came upon a huge long brown brick building five stories tall. The sign above the door said, “Mississippi State Hospital”. Angela opened the door and held it for us. We walked up to the tall front desk. O could barely make eye contact with the countertop.

The Old Man picked up a pen and signed his name in the guestbook. “Afternoon, Florence, how are you today?”

“Fine, Walter, just fine.” Said the young woman behind the desk with dark hair. “How was the drive up this morning?” She made eye contact with me and looked me up then down but otherwise, did not comment.

“Oh, just fine, hit a little thunderstorm back there a’ways on the highway, but nothing too serious.” He finished writing in the guestbook and said, “How’s Clarisse been the last week, Flo?”

“No change, Walter, no change.” She mildly shook her head. “Body is as healthy as a horse, still. Just sits there watching TV all day. No change.”

“Mmmm,” acknowledged The Old Man. “I have a good feeling though, Flo. I feel she’s gonna turn the corner any day now.”

Florence smiled, “I’ll keep praying, Walter.”

“You do that. I truly appreciate it,” he said to her and then began walking down the hallway. Angela and I followed him down the long cavernous corridor, our footsteps echoing back and forth on the walls. There were flickering fluorescent lights and ceiling fans going round and round high above our heads.

The Old Man finally stopped and turned to face a door on his right. The room number was “58”. His face looked drained and sad. He took a few deep breathes and opened the door. Suddenly a huge smile went over his face. “Good Morning, Dear Clarisse. How are you doing this day. You’re looking lovely, as usual.”

We had followed him in as he was already removing wilted roses from a vase and replacing them with the new flowers, we had just gotten from the grocery store. When he was finished, he placed the refreshed vase on the lamp table next to his wife's hospital bed and sat down in the visitor's chair. Angela and I sat down next to each other in two small wooden chairs by the wall. Angela leaned over and whispered in my ear, "That's my Granny. She's been in here all my life. We come here once a week so that Paw-Paw can just talk to her. She doesn't say anything back to him though. She doesn't even know me. I was just a little old baby when she was put in this place."

I looked at the woman in the bed as The Old Man propped her up on several pillows. She had thick grey hair pulled tightly back and bunched behind her head. Her cheeks and eyes were sunken and staring in the general direction of the TV hanging where the walls met the ceiling. The Old Man pushed a few buttons on the wall and the channels flipped. A nurse delivered a platter of food. The Old Man fed his wife in small bites of food with a spoon. To my surprise, she responded by chewing and swallowing. But her eyes never moved. She stared blindly into the distance as "The Price Is Right" played on the TV. The Old Man was very meticulous and gentle, cutting up tiny bits of meat and vegetables to feed her. As he fed her, he softly and constantly talked to her about the peach orchard, and the farmer's market and the pecan trees growing in their back yard and how the dogs were doing.

He finished feeding her just as Bob Barker was awarding some contestant a new car and wrapping up game show hour. Angela whispered to me, "We're almost done here. He always asks me to come say a few words to her before we leave"

The Old Man's voice grew louder as he turned to us, "And Angela, here she wants to come say hello to you. You know Angela, she is your granddaughter." He motioned to her. She got up and walked over to her grandmother.

"Hey, Granny," she said. She took her grandmother's hand and caressed it in her small hands. "It's Angela, your granddaughter again. You haven't talked to me since I was a baby and I sure hope you wake up one day. We'd have lots of fun together. We could go fishing; shell the purple hull peas and you could tell me stories about what it was like growing up before The War and all. Hang in there, Granny. We'll be back next week to visit again."

She gently placed the old woman's hand back on her chest, crossing the arms. But at the last second, she turned and motioned for me to come stand by her.

"Oh, one more thing, Granny," she said to the old woman as both of us stood there looking at her grandmother in her awakened comatose state. "This here is a friend of mine. I caught him nabbing peaches from our barn and we're making him work it off!!"

She laughed and chuckled. She looked at me and said, "His name is..."

"Johnny!!!" screamed a voice that was neither mine, nor Angela's or The Old Man's voice

"Johnny, Johnny, Johnny oh my precious Johnny!!!" said the voice again. The voice firmer and more powerful with each iteration of the name.

I immediately became aware of something restraining and squeezing my hands. I looked down and followed the source of the pressure back to the woman in bed whom we had come to visit. She was sitting upright, holding my hands in her's looking right at me smiling.

"Johnny!!" She cried. "You've come back to me. I knew that you would!"

She looked around the room at The Old Man and said, "Walter, it's Our Johnny. He's come back to us!"

The Old Man walked back to the bed that his wife had been laying in for ten years silent and in a vegetable like state. He looked at her. He looked at Angela. He looked at me. There was fear in his eyes. He took his wife's hand. There was a long cavernous silence. Finally, he spoke. "Yes, Clarisse. Johnny's back home with us now, safe and sound."

The Old man fell to his knees, he planted his face in his wife's bosom. He began to weep. "Oh Clarisse, "he said between tears, "I've missed you so much. You look so lovely and beautiful." He looked up at her and smiled.

"Walter!" she exclaimed. "You look so old, what's happened to you!?!?"

**Chapter 18**

The Old Man looked up at Angela, “Quickly child, go get the nurse!” Angela ran out the door and I followed. We ran back down the hallway to the front desk.

“Nurse, Nurse, “exclaimed Angela trying to catch her breathe. “My grandmother. She’s sitting upright in her bed and talking to us. My grandfather told me to run down here and get you.”

“Simmer down, honey,” said the floor nurse, “Now what room?”

“Room fifty-eight,” answered Angela

“Fifty-Eight, “echoed the nurse. She checked her folder and files for a few seconds and said, “Well...that’s...not...possible.”

“Come quick, “motioned Angela to the nurse.

The nurse talked out from behind her desk and began a slow gallop down the hallway. When we got back to the room, The Old Man’s wife was still talking to him. She saw me come back in the room. Her face lit up again, “Johnny. My Johnny, come hug your Mama, son!” She beacons to me with her arms.

Not knowing exactly what to do, I went to her. She embraced me. “Oh, Johnny. I’ve missed you so much!” She looked up that nurse and said, “Nurse! It’s my Johnny!” She hugged me even more tightly.

The nurse called even more nurses. One of the nurses called some of the doctors. One of the doctors came with his bag. They were flashing lights in Angela’s grandmother’s eyes, taking her blood pressure, putting stethoscopes all over her, taking her pulse and even sticking tongue depressors in her mouth.

They closed the privacy curtain, shuttering out our view. Angela and I on one side, The Old Man, his wife and medical staff on the other side.

I could hear her getting more and more excited saying things like “Oh, I’m just fine!”, “Quit poking me with that!”, “Just let me see my Johnny boy!”, “Let me out of this bed.” And “Walter, who are all these people and why am I here?”

Finally, I heard the doctor say, “Mr. Parker, we need to sedate her. Her vital signs are off the chart right now.”

There was a pause. I heard The Old Man say, “Better go ahead and do it then Doc, you know your trade better than I do.” And it was only a few moments before the excited woman’s voice fell silent again.

The Old Man peeked through the curtain barricade and spoke to us “You two better step out in the hallway a bit...”

We stepped out of the room. They stayed in for quite some time. Angela had a desk of cards that she had pillaged from somewhere. She taught me how to play twenty-one and gin while we waited.

Eventually, The Old Man and the medical people emerged from the room. They quickly walked down the hallway again paying no mind to us. We then followed them in their fluorescent shadows on the linoleum floor. They went into an office and talked even more and longer this time. I watched through the office window. They seemed to be overly excited, using many hand gestures and at times getting up and stomping around the office. And after they had done this crazy ballet for what seemed like an eternity, they went up to the front desk and had The Old Man sign a bunch of forms and papers. Another man in a brown suit came in to join this conference. He seemed to be explaining everything to The Old Man. Every time brown suit man said something, The Old Man nodded and signed his name again to a piece of paper brown suit man pointed to.

When at last this all seemed to be finished, they all stood up and shook hands. The Old Man walked over to us and said, “Come on. We’re done here for the day. Sun is already setting, and we’ve still got a long ride back home.”

We followed him outside and he opened the truck door for us. We all got in. He started the truck and we pulled out on to the highway. After we had been driving for a few minutes Angela asked, “Paw-Paw, who was that man in the brown suit?”

“Lawyer for the State,” replied the Old Man.

“What was he doing there?”



“Oh, he was making sure that I wasn’t going to cause any legal problems for them, accuse them of doing something wrong or sue them for money.”

“Well, are you?”

He took a deep breath, “No, child...no.”

We drove another ten minutes or so. It was dark outside now. Angela spoke up again, “Paw-Paw, is Granny O.K. now? Is she well? What happened there today?”

The radio was on. There was country and western music playing on a distant station through static. I could hardly hear it over the hum of the tires on the highway. The Old Man turned off the radio and spoke. “The doctors call it a Sudden Awakening. Apparently, it’s rare but not impossible. Clarisse has to stay there for a few more weeks while they do more tests on her. But if she continues to improve, she might get to come home in time enough to still eat a fresh peach off a tree or two. I’m going to have to make more trips to Jackson and work double hard in the orchard.”

“We’ll do whatever you need us to do, Paw-Paw,” was Angela’s reply.

“Doctor says there’s a good farmer’s market there in downtown Jackson. We may just come into Jackson every day or so with the peaches.

“Paw-Paw,” begin Angela, “Did my Granny really think that David was my Daddy?”

The Old Man let out a heavy burdened sigh and said “Oh Goodness, child. Always a list of never-ending questions with you isn’t it?”

She smiled and nodded.

“I’m tired baby girl. And I’m just as confused as you are. Let’s get home, get some sleep and talk about it over breakfast in the morning.”

“OK, Paw,” she said yawning. She stretched her arms out and laid down on his lap.

She promptly fell asleep and slept the rest of the way back to the farm. Not a word was spoken between me and The Old Man. When we got to the farm, he pulled in and turned off

the truck. He looked at her and said “I’m going to carry her in and put her to bed. You go in the kitchen and wait.”

I got out of the truck, went into the house and waited in the kitchen. I looked at the clock over the stove. It was almost eleven p.m. The Old Man came into the kitchen and stared at me for what seemed like an eternity. “Well, son. It’s late. Plum near midnight. No sense in trying to get this all figured out tonight. You better go in there and get plenty of sleep tonight. You and I will talk in the morning.”

“Yes sir, “I replied.

“And what a talk it will be, “he added.

I shuffled off to bed and was asleep in less than a minute.

**Chapter 19**

Another morning. Again, the smell of breakfast in the house. My mind started up like an old rusty machine needing lubrication. I started picking up the pieces in various corners and drawers of my mind trying to assemble a coherent explanation of where I was and who I was. I scanned through everything; my parents fighting, joining the church, two days at church camp, two days of hell at church camp, running away, peaches in a barn, a clarinet, Angela. I could seem to connect all the dots.

I opened my eyes and Angela wasn't there. I was alone in the room. I slid out of bed, stretched, put my shoes on and followed that delicious aroma. The Old Man was at the kitchen table sipping on his coffee. Angela was nowhere to be found. "Sit down. Get yourself something to eat," said The Old Man.

I sat down and helped myself to biscuits, butter and honey.

"Sleep well?" He asked.

"Yes, sir" I said.

"Pretty much near nine o'clock in the morning already. You must have been tired from that drive last night. You remember everything from yesterday, don't you, son?"

"Yes, sir." I replied. I looked around and asked, "Where's Angela this morning. Is She O.K.?"

"She's fine. Had a talk with her when she woke up. I sent her down to the old rail yard behind the orchard to play for a while. I suspect she's down there playing that old clarinet. Told her to give you and me some time to talk before she came back."

"Are we picking the peaches today, sir?" I asked.

"Not today, son. Once you and I have a little talk, I have some business to tend to in town. The peaches will still be there for us tomorrow."

I was scarfing down biscuits and gulping down cold milk. The Old Man quietly watched me.

“My, my, “he started. “From the minute I laid my eyes on you, I couldn’t deny the similarity between you and Johnny” He walked to a wall and carefully took a frame down, walked over to me, placed it down, “And now, here you are...whoever you are, wearing his glasses and clothes. Eating from the same table he used to eat from.”

I looked at the photo, got up, walked to a small mirror in the hallway, saw myself in the reflection. I looked back and forth between myself in the mirror and the photo on the wall. There was a similarity. I walked back to the table, sat back down and gave the photo back to The Old Man.

He grunted and let out a long-labored sigh. “What do you know about that blasted Vietnam War, son?”

“Well, my mom told me that her brother was there.”

“Did her brother come back home?”

“Yes sir. But mom said he’s never been the same since he came home. Said he can’t hold down a job, still wakes up screaming in the middle of the night. Has to go to the doctor often.”

“That’s exactly what that war did, boy. It took poor kids from poor families like my Johnny and your uncle and put them into Their little dirty war machine. They threw them in there and spit them out. Some boys never came back and others like your uncle wound up with injuries that can’t be seen. Injuries that can never be fixed. And for what? Nothing!”

He turned his side and spat on the floor.

He continued talking. “It was different when we went over to Europe. We were the good guys. They were the bad guys. When Johnny got his draft notice, I begged him to go on up to Canada and wait it out. But no, he’d grown up with that picture of me over there on the wall in my uniform in front of my tank and my crew. He wanted to be just like his Old Man.”

He walked over to the wall, hung the picture of his young son back on the wall and took down his war photo. He handed it to me. He was tall, skinny, cleanshaven with an old helmet on his head that looked like a football helmet without a face guard. He was standing in front of a tank leaning on it and three other soldiers were sitting in front of him. I took a long look at it and gave it back to him.

“Did you see a lot of action, “I asked. It was the only thing I could think to say. I had heard it asked before of other war vets in movies.

The Old Man let out another sigh. “North Africa, Italy, Normandy” He was about to put the photo back on the wall but instead he walked over to the garbage can and threw the framed photo away.

“Wish I would have done that forty years ago, “he said. “If I would have, we probably wouldn’t be sitting here having this conversation.”

“Did you meet your wife in the war?”

He chuckled. “Yes, met her in Belgium. Married her and brought her back home. Not once did she ever complain about it other than mentioned from time to time how much better the bread and butter had been back in the old country.”

He continued talking.

“We only had the one child. When Johnny was born, it ripped up part of Clarisse’s body and she was never able to have more children after that.”

He turned and looked at me, “You know how long it’s been since I heard her say anything, son?”

“Angela told me about ten years.”

“Closer to twelve years now, I suspect. She and I were sitting there in those two chairs.” He pointed at the two chairs in the living room. “We were shelling butterbeans. A man in a black suit, tie and hat came up to our door and handed the telegram to me. The telegram read, ‘We regret to inform you...’ And I looked up at Clarisse. She saw the news in my eyes. I didn’t need to tell her. She dropped her bowl of butterbeans and fell silent.”

“When was that, sir?” I asked.

“June 5, 1970. And I still remember the last thing she ever said to me. Right before the man pulled up in his car she had said ‘These beans are sure going to smell good cooking in the pot tonight...’

His thoughts drifted.

He talked as he looked through the window. “How’s that for the last words your wife ever spoke to you before she went off into the nothingness? That was it until yesterday. Which brings us to our crossroads doesn’t it, boy. Do you know what I mean by a crossroads?”

I gently shook my head.

“Crossroads. A time and a place where things must be decided. Where you got to decide to go either left or right, go that way and then stick to your decision without looking back.”

“What is it that we have to decide, sir?”

“Son, we have to decide exactly who you are boy.”

I repeated his question. “Who am I?”

“Yes, that’s a hard question. Most adults can’t even answer that for themselves.”

“How do you mean, sir?”

“Son...” he began, “I mean, you show up here three days ago with this runaway story...”

“But it’s true, sir. I promise.” I faintly argued.

“Perhaps it is, boy. But that’s almost beside the point now. The first time I put my eyes on you a chill went through my bones because of your similarity to my son when he was your age. And then at the hospital yesterday, you resurrected my wife from her long sleep she’d been in. I think maybe fate or destiny brought you here. It just can’t be random. Which is just about as hard as anything for me to admit.”

“Why’s that, sir?”

“Because to admit something as fate or destiny would require faith and I lost my faith the day we got that telegram. Losing my faith was the only way that I could keep going. Clarisse withdrew into her world of silence and I just lost faith. Boy, losing a child is like having an invisible knife thrust into your chest that you can never yank out. You just got to walk around with it there. Took me ten years to learn how to live with that knife stuck there. And then along you came out of nowhere.”

“Do you believe in God, sir?” I blurted out suddenly.”

“Oh, I believe there’s something out there, boy- a kind of creator or universal architect. But I’ve long ceased to believe that we are all chess pieces on a checkered board in this world. That’s the only way I can account for wars and famine and fifty-eight thousand young men and women getting killed in that god damned Vietnam jungle. What do you think, boy?”

“I understand. It’s like that church camp I just ran away from. When those boys tied me in the woods to that tree, I kept thinking to myself if this was a church camp, wasn’t God supposed to be here and if he controls everything why is he letting this happen to me.”

“And so, you took things into your own hands and left that place, “said the Old Man.

I hadn’t thought about it that much. Something just came over me and I ran and ran. I didn’t even stop to think about anything until Angela woke me up in your barn a few days ago.”

“And what about your parents, son? I’m sure they are hurting just like I’ve been hurting all these years.”

I shrugged my shoulders and looked down at the ground and said a very faint “Maybe.”

“I’ll admit to you, son. I haven’t been forthcoming with helping you get back to them. And if there is such a thing as Judgement Day, that I’ll have to answer for that. But I swear there’s something terribly odd about this whole situation. I just feel that you are supposed to be here if only to bring my Clarisse back into this world and ease her pain. God knows, its been rotting me from the inside out all these years. I almost feel that we deserve this...that we deserve you here, even if your own parents inherit the Hell, I’ve been in all these years.

The Old Man walked over again to the wall and cradled the photo of his son. He let out a deep sigh, stared at me and spoke in a firm soft voice, “You know son, it’s not as if it seems like you’re eager to contact your parents much save for a couple of token telephone calls.” He paused and added “Isn’t that so?”

I looked down and sunk my head into my shoulders. “Yes, sir. It’s not too good at my house. They’re always yelling and arguing with each other. Throwing things. My mother will lock herself in the room and threaten to kill herself. My dad lost his old job and his old one doesn’t pay as much. I just go into my room and into the closet to hid in the dark until the quit fighting. It’s lonely. I wish I had a brother or sister to be there with me, but I don’t.”

“My, my, “pondered the old Man, “No young boy should have to go through that.”

He looked back out the window, “You’ve been here three days, son. I take it you like it around here?”

“Yes sir. I like talking with Angela. I liked picking the peaches and playing with the dogs. You make a rally good breakfast”

“Well now, “he began. “Here’s where we stand. You’re a young man. When I was your age, my Pop had already passed. I started working down at the sawmill to support my sisters. No man has the right to tell another man what to do. So, this decision is yours and yours alone, understand?”

“Not quite, sir.”

“Here’s your decision, son. “he said drawing in closely to me, “You’re free to go at any time. I ain’t keeping you here and I ain’t tying you down. The door is unlocked, the phone is over there by the chair. You can walk through the orchard, get on the road and be to town on foot in twenty minutes.”

“But by the same token, son, I ain’t a ‘pushing you away. If I see you at the breakfast table every morning, I’m assuming you are where you want to be. You’ll be loved and wanted here. Ain’t nobody going to scream, shout or throw things. Ain’t nobody going to threaten to take their own life around here. You follow me, son?”

“I follow, sir” I nodded my head.

“You think long and hard about it, son. You understand?”

“Yes, sir” I said

“One more thing, son. The doctors at the hospital say if she stays among us for another week or two, they will let her come home. And when she comes home, I suspect that you will be Johnny to her. I’m even losing my grip on what’s real and not real myself with this situation. Losing track of what’s past and what’s present, what is and what is not. It’s likely that I might wake up one morning soon and you will have become Johnny to me too. You need to think long and hard about that son. I know that’s a lot to handle, but life isn’t always a walk in the park.”

“I’ll think about it, sir, “I said.

“Son, you don’t have to call me sir no more, just call me Pops.”



“I will...Pops.”

“Now I got to go into town, do some banking, pay some bills and buy some groceries. You and Angela will be fine until I get back.”

“Where can I find her?”

“Take the path down the middle of the orchard there. When you get back to the fence line, follow it all the way to the gate. Go through the gate and you will see the remains of an old rail switch yard there. It was already abandoned even when I was a boy. There’s an old caboose on a section of cross ties and rails. Angela will be down there with one or more of the dogs probably squawking on that clarinet. Tell her I’ll be back later this afternoon. You two look after one another.

“We Will.”

“And if I see you, I see you. If I don’t I don’t. that is, whenever I get back.”

“Yes...Pops” I said again.

And with that, he put on his hat and was out the door to his truck and headed down the road.

I walked out the screen door toward the orchard path. The dog he called “Bozo” followed

**Chapter 20**

I didn't have any problems finding the old caboose. When I got to the back of the orchard, I followed the sound of Angela's clarinet. I walked up to the caboose and climbed the steps up to the door. She was sitting on an old wooden bench and had begun reading her book. The clarinet case was on the floor of the old train car.

"Hey there," I said.

"Hey you. Are you alright?"

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "I suppose. I don't really know to tell you the truth. It's all too strange for me to think about." I looked around the train car and said, "Speaking of strange, I don't think I've ever seen anybody with their own life size train car to themselves."

"Been here for a hundred years," she said. "There was like a battle here during The Civil War. Paw-Paw told me the Yankees came down and blew up the train station and it was never rebuilt. All that was left was this caboose and the station. Vandals tore down the depot station way before Paw-Paw's time and the trees just grew up around it. Everybody forgot about it. I just come here when I want to hide away from everything. Sometimes in the winter, hunters use it to camp out in. Paw-Paw doesn't mind."

She paused and smiled, flipped a few pages in her book and asked, "Did your great-great-greats fight for the Yankees or the Rebels?"

"I don't think either," I replied, "I don't think my grandparents or great grandparents were here then yet. I think they were still in Ireland or Scotland or someplace like that."

She put away the book, took the clarinet from the case, put it together and played a quick tune, "I've been in band for a year now. Paw-Paw told me that my daddy played drums in the marching band."

She put the clarinet in her lap, "You know, David, my grandmother thinks you are my father. What do you think?"

"Don't think I am. But I can't be absolutely certain of anything these days."

"Seems strange to me," she said. "Why don't you want to go home to your own family?"

I shuffled my feet on the old wooden floor of the caboose, “Wasn’t too happy of a place. They fight, they scream, make up then they get back together again to try to work it out. They send me to stay with family and friends for days when it gets too bad. I feel like a ping pong ball rolling on thin ice”

“What do you think of it around here, then?”

“Feel like I’m supposed to be here. Your grandfather’s is sure nice to me. There’s no yelling and screaming around here. I don’t feel like I’m just ignored like I do with my parents. I like playing with the dogs, picking the peaches and talking with you. Your grandfather sure does make a good breakfast.

“But what do you think your parents are thinking and feeling now?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they are in a panic. Maybe they’re good to finally be rid of me.”

“But what do you want?”

I shrugged my shoulders, “Well, your grandfather says that I can stay here as long as I want to. I don’t see how that’s much different than all the time my mom and dad has shuffled me to other people’s house while they try to work it out time after time.”

“Yeah, but I’m wondering is he supposed to let you stay here. Shouldn’t he take you to the sheriff or something like that so they can get you back to your folks?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. He’s the adult. Shouldn’t he know what’s right? Maybe I was meant to go to that Church Camp and run away. Maybe I was meant to wind up in your grandfather’s barn. Maybe I way meant to be here to wake your grandmother up from her long-sleep. Should I just do what he tells me to do?

“Maybe that’s the way it was supposed to be. Paw-Paw is pretty much right about most things. But some adults don’t have any sense at all. Take my mother for instance. I don’t think she’s ever been right about anything in her life.

There was silence between us.

Then I asked, “Do you want me to stay, then?”

“Of course, I do, you silly boy! Nobody listens to me talk the way you do. Everybody else just says for me to hush or go away. I get awfully lonely around here sometimes. I sure want you to stay.”

“Well then, I’ll stay. I’ll stay for at least today and I’ll worry about tomorrow when tomorrow gets here. And then I’ll worry about the day after that when it gets here.”

She gently shook her head. “David, I just don’t know what’s right. Don’t know if you really are somebody else. Are we in a dream and still sleeping? Most of all though, I just hope my Paw-Paw knows what he’s doing. I don’t want him to get in trouble and be taken away from him. He’s all I’ve ever had in this life. I’d be just an orphan without him. She put her face in her hands and started to cry.

I moved closer to her and closely reached out my hand to her shoulder and touched it just briefly, but I jerked back my arm as if the touch was like a burning hot stove. I reached out again and made direct contact, “Angela, If I do stay, I leave as when it causes problems for him. I won’t let that happen.”

She sobbed just a bit more then looked up to me. “Come with me. I want to show you something.” She took my hand and led me out of the old caboose.

We walked back through the gate, followed the fence and walked through the woods to a ravine. She led me down the slope and we walked at the bottom until we came upon a large rock formation. She then walked up the ravine and on to a bridge. The bridge led down to a red dirt road. It was dry. Every now and again, a car would drive by and kick up a wall of dust down the road.

We finally arrived at a cemetery and stood outside the gate silently for a minute or two. She looked at me and said, “Here’s where he’s buried.” Her eyes grew larger.

“Your Father?” I asked.

“Uh huh” she said nodding her head.

She walked in and I followed. It was a small cemetery-not even the size of a football field. She found her father’s tombstone. It was a simple metallic marker issue by the government. It said “SGT. Jonathan Parker. August 12, 1943-June 5,1969, Vietnam War.” There was an army insignia and cross embossed on it.

She took my hand and said, “David, do you believe in reincarnation?”

“What’s that? “I asked in return.

“That’s when somebody dies, and their soul is transferred into somebody else who’s just about to be born.”

“I’ve never thought about what happens after somebody dies. Don’t they just go up to heaven or something like that?”

“Yeah, David. But what is heaven? Where is it? What goes on there?”

“I guess there’s no way to really know for sure.”

“Maybe my Daddy wasn’t supposed to die because of me just being born and when he did, his soul was put into you when you were born, so that one day he could see me through you and know that I was alright and OK....” Her voice trailed off.

“Is that what you believe?” I asked her.

She squeezed my hand ever more tightly. “Don’t believe it. But...don’t disbelieve it either. What about you?”

“Angela, I’m hardly sure of anything now. The only thing I am completely certain of is that I like it here with you right here and right now. With you and The Old Man.”

“The Old Man, “she asked quizzically.

“Your Grandfather.”

She nodded her head affirmatively. “I like it. It suits him, but please don’t say that in front of him.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

She looked down on her father’s grave and asked me, “David, when were you born?”

“June 5,1970.”

She opened he eyes widely, “Exactly a year after my Daddy died. Now that is interesting.”

“An interesting coincidence.” I suggested.

We walked around looking at the other gravestones. Some were ancient and unmarked. “Does it weird you out that all of these bodies are right here in the ground beneath our feet?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Paw-Paw comes down here pretty often. He talks to Daddy’s grave, puts flowers or a new little American flag on it and cleans off the marker.”

“Do you know who any of these other people were?”

“I guess I know about a lot of them. I must be distantly related to about half of everybody buried here in one way or the other. There used to be a little sawmill town here fifty or sixty years ago. All that’s left is that old caboose and the steps to the old schoolhouse my Paw-Paw went to when he was a little boy way way long ago.”

We walked out of the cemetery and back onto the road. “C’mon you. Let’s get back to the house and play some dominoes. I’ll make us some lunch. Peanut butter and jelly sound good?”

“Sounds good to me.” I said

“And maybe we’ll rustle up a peach or two.”

We continued walking down the road. She stopped and said “One thing is for sure, though. I’m not going to call you Dad or Daddy or Father. No way, no how.”

I nodded. “No, don’t think I’d want that. That would give me the creeps.”

“The Creeps?” She echoed and asked.

“Yes, The Creeps. You know when you feel weird, uncomfortable and out of place.”

“You’re funny,” she said, “but you’ll do.” She added.

He started running down the dirt road, so I followed.

## Chapter 21

And thus, my new life began, that summer of 1981 so long ago. They were, oddly enough, the happiest days of my life I had up to that point.

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 just 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 possum 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 up 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.

## Chapter 22

I moved carefully through the house to the porch door. I watched the two men in white shirts wheeling her to the house. When they got to the steps, they seemed uncertain whether to try to lift the wheelchair up on to the porch or try to lift her out of the chair to her feet.

After the initial hesitation, I saw her get up unassisted by herself and gently push the men to each side. The Old Man rushed to her and steadied her right arm, “There, there Clarisse. It’s been a long time. Best take it slowly.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Walter. I’m fine. Let go of me. I can manage myself perfectly.

The Old Man let go of his wife, but stood only inches away from her side as she walked up on the porch and was suddenly rushed by the dogs by love and affection who until then had been lazily lying about the yard doing nothing.

“Get down you old hounds! Shoo now...shoo! I’ll have time for you later, all I want to see now is My Johnny.

The dogs dispersed. She turned to The Old Man and said “Walter, where’s Our Johnny?”

The Old Man seemed uncertain what to say but at that moment she looked through the screen door and saw me on the side. She drew in a long breathe of air, her eyes grew larger, she held out both of her arms, motioned for me and said, “Oh Johnny...there you are, come here to me, my darling boy!”

I knew I had a quick important decision to make. It was my now or never moment. I could turn around, run out the back door to the nearest phone, call my parents and resume my old life, or I could walk that screen door into that woman’s arms and assume my new life and identity. In the span of ten seconds my mind changed directions a hundred times.

At long last, though, I took three steps forward, opened the door, a few more steps more towards her and felt her arms wrap around me lovingly.

“Oh Johnny Boy, so good to see you Son. I would have waited and waited forever. I knew you would come back to me!”

I wrapped my arms around her and said, “Hello. Happy to have you back here.” I didn’t address her by any title for I was unsure what I should call her.

Suddenly I was aware that Angela was there at our side, “Granny!” she said, “Oh Granny, you are awake and well.”

Her grandmother relinquished on arm or her grip around me and pulled her granddaughter into our triple clutch. “Oh darling, darling, “she said to Angela. “You are so beautiful and wonderful. I was there the whole time. I heard every word you said to me and felt every touch of your little hands while I was lying there paralyzed in that old smelly hospital.”

She held us for what seemed like an eternity but finally, she stood up straight and let us go. “Merciful Heaven’s!” she declared, “I got to go in and see my house. It’s been so long. Come on you two, let get in there and have a look-see.” She walked in, leaving Angela and myself momentarily on the porch looking at each other in awe.

Angela looked at me. I looked at her. She shrugged her shoulders at me. I shrugged my shoulders back at her. Hardly anything was making sense to me at this point. She thought I was her son come back to life. Who did she think Angela was? Did she know that Angela was her granddaughter, did she not see that both of us were eleven years old? It made absolutely to sense to me. I guess it only made sense to her in that mind and body that had laid dormant for a dozen years and in that soul, who had lost her only son in The Vietnam.

The only thing that made sense to me was that there seemed to be no yelling, screaming and arguing here. There just seemed to be love and peace.

Angela ribbed me in the side with her elbow and said, “Come On...” she paused and then said in a funny little voice, “Johnny...Boy” She winked at me and giggled.

She walked into the house. I followed. She didn’t even seem to mind now about the sudden assumption of my identity and her grandmother’s lapse in time perception. We entered the house. I left David Oliver out there on the porch and became Johnny Parker as I walked into the house.

**Chapter 23**

I walked in and sat down in the living room. She was standing in her house that she had been so long absent from, turning completely around surveying the place in silence.

The Old Man stood next to her. “Sit down and take a load off Clarisse. You don’t want to overdo it your first day back.”

Clarisse guffawed him. “Walter, I’ve been laying on my back frozen in time for the past twelve years. I don’t want to sit down. I want to get to work. There’s so much that I’ve missed.”

The Old Man said, “Fine, fine have it your way. You don’t mind if I sit down do you?”

“Go ahead your old fool, “she said. She was shuffling her feet around the floor, “Oh, Walter, you’ve let so much dirt and dust into the house. These floors are in wretched shape. Where’s my broom for heaven’s sake?”

The Old Man motioned toward a closet in the kitchen. “Probably over there where you left it, woman.” He laughed with a high-pitched giggle.

She walked over to the closet, withdrew an old straw broom and started sweeping the floor grit and grime towards the door. “Johnny, “she said to me, “Come on over here and open the door for me while I sweep this dust out.”

I walked across the room and opened the door while she madly swept the dirt outside.

She walked back over to her husband and whisked him on the boots with the broom bristles, “Don’t you need to go pick those old peaches today or is the season over already?”

“No, “replied her husband, “I suspect we’d better get them off the trees or we’ll see a day’s wages ripen and rot before our eyes. He got up, took his hat off the wall peg and said, “You’ll be all right Clarisse here, for a while I’m out in the orchard?”

“I’ll be fine your old fool!” she replied.

“If you need me, there’s that old cowbell in the kitchen. Just beat on it with a wooden spoon and I’ll come running.”

“I’ll be fine.” She reassured him.

The Old Man put his hat on and turned to Angela and me. “Ok you two, there’s peaches to pick, let’s get a move on.”

“Walter...” interjected his wife. “You quit making those two work so hard, they’re too young and fragile to be loading and hauling them bushel baskets all day long.”

“Well, they’ve managed pretty well lately,” retorted The Old Man.

“You just never mind that,” she said. “You leave them here with me at the house and go tend to your peaches.”

“Clarisse, when I was their age, I picked cotton from sunup to sundown. Didn’t bother me. I didn’t complain.”

“Oh hush, Walter. That was a million years ago when we had to go out to the woods to use the bathroom and go down to the creek to fetch water to boil. Times change. You know that.”

The Old Man let out a sigh, “Oh, alrighty then. I know I can’t win this discussion. Not that I ever could.” He smiled and tipped his hat to Clarisse. “Absolutely wonderful to have you back, dear,” he added.

She walked over to him, gently embraced him and said, “You know I adore you Walter. I tried over and over again to reach out to you all those times, all those years I was in that hospital bed, but nothing I could do would make my body move until that morning Johnny returned to us.

She turned to me and winked then turned back to her husband and said, “Now don’t work too hard and too long. Be back here by supertime.”

“Very well.” Said the Old Man.

“And Walter, why don’t you just go to town this weekend and hire a couple of the local high school football boys to help you out with the remainder of this year’s crop.”

“If it will make you happy dear,” he said. And with that statement, he opened the door to walk out.

“Yes, it will,” nodding her head, “And Walter, one more thing before you go...”

He turned around again in the doorway and said, “Yes, what’s that?”

“Are my supplies still in the canning cupboard?”

“Haven’t touched them. Everything should still be there. See you this evening, dear.” The Old Man walked out the door, down the porch, got in his truck and drove out to the orchard.

## Chapter 24

She turned to Angela and me then said, “Come on you two, let’s go look in the cupboard.” We followed her back to a part of the house that I hadn’t seen yet. There were two deep freezers, some various kitchen appliances and garden tools. In the back corner there was a tall shuttered closet. She pulled the shutters apart. The shelves were for the most part, empty, except for quite a few empty jars and lids.

“Oh, Good Lord, “she exclaimed. “It’s dreadful!!”

She paused and then spoke to us, “Listen you two, we’ve got lots to do here, so let’s get busy!”

And then she rummaged a bit around the room. She found two mopping buckets. She then handed one each to both Angela and me, “Take these. Run out to the barn, fill them with those Loring Peaches. Bring them back to me in the kitchen.

She looked at Angela and said, “You know which ones are Lorings don’t you, child?”

“Yes, Mam, the yellowish large ones.”

“Good girl, “said her grandmother as she patted her on the head. “Now, hurry!”

We walked out the door and she was still muttering things to herself like “So much work to do”, “It’s just been too long.”, “I don’t know how Walter managed all by himself.”

We raced down the red dirt road to the barn, stopped at the door to catch our breath and Angela unlatched the door. We walked in. The natural sun light was cutting through the roof rafters. Angela stopped walking.

“Listen, you...” And she paused.

“Yes?” I replied.

“Listen...Mister.... You...whatever your name is. What is your name? She put her right hand on my shoulder and squeezed it. She squinted her eyes and peered intensely at me. “Who are you? Who the heck is you, Mister?”

I shrugged my shoulders and said, “I don’t know. Who do you want me to be?”



She was taken aback, “Well, I’ve already told you that I’m not going to call you Johnny or Dad or Daddy or Father!” She shook her body as if ridding herself of an invisible chill and continued, “That just give me the.... the...creeps.”

“Your grandmother seems to think that I’m Johnny. I even think The Old Man is starting to believe it.”

“Oh, maybe they’ve just gone crazy, “she said and threw up her arms.

“Maybe it’s you and me that are crazy, “I replied.

“Answer my question then.”

“Which question?”

“Who do you think you are then Mr. Smarty Pants. Who do you see when you look at yourself in the mirror?”

“I don’t see anything anymore. I see a face I no longer recognize.”

“Oh hush...you!” she cried.

“I think maybe I am your father reincarnated just like you said the other day. But I’m still me too. Me, David Oliver. Maybe somehow, your grandmother is the only person who can sense it.”

Angela moved further away from me over towards the corner of the barn. She picked a peach from one of the baskets, looked at it a bit and placed it in her bucket, “No, you ain’t. I don’t think so. You ain’t my daddy and you ain’t no reincarnation. Your just old David Oliver, runaway from Church Camp just like you told me when I caught you stealing those peaches. You are David. Do you hear me?”

Her voice got louder and louder. She stamped her feet with each exclamation. She began crying and added, “Stop it, David, don’t scare me anymore. I thought you were my friend. Quit all that talk!”

I shuffled close to her. “You are my friend, Angela. Do you want me to leave? I’ll leave right now if that’s what you want. If that will make you feel better and not be scared anymore.” I put my bucket down and began to walk towards the door.

She stepped in front of me and said, “No, I don’t want that. I don’t want you to go. I need a friend now more than ever.”

“So, then I’ll stay. I like it here. Like it better than any place I’ve ever been.”

“Let’s just be clear here, Mister, “she started. “You’re David when we are alone. You are my friend and my pal. You ain’t no ghost or my daddy re-born and reincarnated. I thought it was possible, but I just don’t believe it now. OR maybe just not yet. I’m a girl, I can change my mind when I want to, if I want to without you asking me twenty questions of me. Are we clear?”

“We are clear, Angela.”

“But when we are around them, we can play their game. You’re their ‘Johnny’. I just don’t see any point to breaking my Granny’s heart. She drew closer to me and looked at me in my eyes without blinking, “You’re good with this masquerade then? You can play that game for her?”

I nodded my head, “I can Angela. It doesn’t bother me at all. I just want you to be happy. I want your grandparents to be happy.

Three weeks ago at Church Camp all I could think about was getting back to my parents but in the last few days I could only come up with reasons that my real family was right here-Angela, The Old Man, and the Old Man’s wife, Clarisse.

“Angela, “I said, “I feel like I belong here.”

She shook her head violently to clear it out, “Oh enough of this going around and round talking.” She picked another peach out of the basket, “Look, Mister. Look at this here peach. It’s a Loring. Larger than a baseball. Almost grapefruit size. Slightly yellow. Fill your bucket with these. Chop Chop!” she commanded.

“Chop, Chop?” I asked.

“Yes, chop chop. Means right now, right away, hurry, Mister before I get cross with you.”

“And what if I don’t Chop chop?” I asked.

“I might just fetch the shotgun!” she blurted.

“You couldn’t even lift it, “I said.

“Oh yes, I can. You ain’t the only one who’s been out on a possum hunt in the middle of the night. The only difference is, I didn’t fall on my ass like you did!”

I blushed and shuffled over to the peach crib and began loading the peaches into my bucket. She nudged up to me and gently hit me on the forearm with her fist, “Hey you, you know I was only joking.” She said.

“I know, “I replied.

“You’re such a silly boy, “she said smiling. She slugged me on the shoulder with her fist and giggled.

We filled the buckets and hobbled back to the house only stopping once to each a peach, ourselves.

## Chapter 25

She met us at the door with bowls and utensils. She handed me a bowl and a knife, “Here, Johnny, you peel the peaches and then hand them to her!”. She pointed at Angela and gave her a knife and two large aluminum bowls. “Now put the peelings in your bowl, those are good, and we’ll need them later. You two can handle that?”

“Yes, mam. “we replied.

“Good. Now, start peeling.” She said.

“Now Angela, honey, “she said turning to her granddaughter, “When Johnny hands you a piece, you separate it from the pit and cut it into chunks. Put the chunks in the large bowl. When the large bowl is full, bring it to me in the kitchen and then come back out here on the porch. Keep filling those bowls for me! You got that sweetheart?” The lady talked a mile a minute like she was the happiest she had ever been with her renewed second chance of life.

Angela nodded her head and replied to her grandmother, “Shore do. What are we going to do with all the peach pits then?”

“Oh, we’ll take them out to the barn, let them dry. Walter will find a use for them.”

She went inside to the kitchen and left Angela and me on the porch. We began out peach processing assembly line. There was a gentle morning breeze blowing through several varieties of wind chimes hanging from the porch. Angela began humming a song which sounded vaguely familiar and then began to sing it as well. When she got to the chorus, I immediately recognized it.

“Bye, Bye Miss American Pie. Drove my Chevy to the levy but the levy was dry. Them good old boys were drinking whisky and rye singing this’ll be the day that I die. This’ll be the day that I die...”

She got up from the porch swing and took her bowl of peaches inside. In seconds, she had returned with an empty bowl. I kept peeling peaches, handing them to her and she kept dicing and removing the pits.

“You know, “she started, “That’s about the only thing my mom ever given me that I liked.”

What thing is that?” I asked.

“My record player. I think when I was about seven, she suddenly showed up from one of her road trips. She was around long enough to take me up to the five and dime to buy a few records, show me how to use it and...and...then she was going again.”

“What records do you have?” I asked.

Well, I got that one. I got a song called “Afternoon Delight” and I got one called “Love will Keep Us Together.” Then I got some Disney records that I used to listen to, but I don’t much listen to anymore like Marry Poppins and The Jungle Book Song. You got any records, David?” she asked me.

“No,” I replied. “But my parents have this big stereo in a cabinet with a bunch of records. They hardly ever listen to them though and they won’t let me touch it.

Angela got up and took another bowl of diced peaches into her grandmother. She came back out and resumed dicing and talking. “What is an American Pie anyway?” She asked me.

“I dunno,” I said shrugging my shoulders. “It kind of reminds me of Apple Pie-isn’t that supposed to be America...apple pie and all that stuff?”

“Oh, don’t let The Old Man hear you say that, he’d taken it personally.” It was the first time I’d heard her actually call him “The Old Man.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Well look in your bucket, Mister. He doesn’t like people singing the praises of any other fruit than The Peach. Finest food on the face of the earth, he says. Not too tart, not too sweet, he says. Always cold and juicy when you take a bite, he says.”

“Not too tart, not too sweet?” I asked.

“Lordy Mercy. If I’ve heard him say it once, I’ve heard him say it a thousand times.”

“He sure likes those peaches, “I interjected.

“You have no idea. Those trees out there are like his children!”

“Yeah, I see what you are saying. You know, Angela, until I came here, I don’t think I had ever had a Peach before. Well, maybe those that you get in a can at the grocery store. But nothing like this right off the tree.”

“Ain’t you ever had a peach cobbler, she said?”

“Cobbler?” I asked.

“You don’t know what a cobbler is?”

“Nope.”

“What’s wrong with you boy? You been living under a rock? A cobbler is kind of like a pie. A pie, but the crust and fruit are all kind of lumped together. Seriously...what kind of desserts does your mom make for you?”

“She doesn’t,” I replied. “We just keep a cookie jar full of Oreos.”

“Just Oreos?” she asked. “No cake. No ice cream. No cobbler?”

“No, none.”

“No wonder you are not in a hurry to get back to them.”

I didn’t reply to that statement, but I thought about it. I knew right from wrong. I knew I should be calling them or trying to contact them, but I was so happy here with the Old Man, his wife and Angela. I didn’t want to go back home to the fighting and screaming. The hiding in my closet until the fights were over. The being shipped off to other people’s house. The being shipped off to Church Camp. I felt safe for the first time in a long time. I felt like nothing back could happen to me here.

The fact that she thought I was her long-lost son didn’t bother me anymore. I was even starting to let myself believe in the re-incarnation mumbo-jumbo theory that Angela and I had conjured up. I knew that I was wrong, but it felt right. I didn’t want to think about it too deeply too often. At that moment, I wanted to push the thoughts from my mind.

Angela interrupted my line of thought, “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“Oh no, you didn’t,” I said. “I was just lost deep in thought and had blocked everything else out for a bit, that’s all.”

“I get like that too sometimes,” she added. “The last time I saw my Mom, she was drilling me with a lot of questions and I really wasn’t hearing them and finally she yelled my name over and over until I looked at her and she told me I was acting too spaced out for her tastes.”

“Spaced out?” I asked.

“Spaced out,” she affirmed to me. And then she said, “Angela, I swear sometimes you just act like a Space Cadet.”

“When was that?” I asked. “When did you last see her?”

“Well that was Thanksgiving last year and it’s July now, so it’s been about eight or nine months. She pops in once, maybe twice a year to check in on me, but that’s about it.”

“Do you know where she’s at right now?” I asked.

She threw up her hands in the air. “No idea at all. I think she just goes wherever she wants to go, with whoever will go with her. I think she still thinks she’s going to be a famous singer or actor. She won talent show at the county fair or something like that when I was just a baby.”

I finished the last peach and she diced it into her bowl. We got up from the porch, took our bowls inside to her Grandmother.

“We’re all finished, Granny.” Said Angela.

Her grandmother was in the kitchen at the stove. There were two giant pots. “Good, Good...” she said. “Now, Johnny. You set those peelings aside there. We’ll use those later.”

I put them out of the way on the cabinet. She handed both Angela and me a potato masher then put two large bowls of diced peaches on the table. “Now take those mashers and mash them peaches up. When you are done, bring them over to me at the stove.”

We started mashing the contents of the bowls. She went back to her stove and began to pour sugar into the large pots. She started stirring them rapidly. When we were finished, we took the bowls over to her. She took each one and poured the contents into the pots and stirred more.

She gave us both a large wooden spoon. “Here, “she commanded, “Each of you stir one of these pots until it comes to a rolling boil. And that’s not just tiny little bubbles either. A rolling boil looks like those peaches are about to explode out of the pot like a volcano. When you’ve stirred so much and it looks like it’s about to come out, let me know. I’m going over to the sink and start sanitizing these jars.”

“How long is it going to take to thicken up that thick” I asked.

“Oh, it’s gonna taken thirty or forty minutes, dearie. Your arms are gonna feel like they are about to fall off. You are going to wish you were out there with old Walter picking them peaches and not stirring them in here. Now, get to stirring you two!”

We began to stir the tall cast iron pots that were full of steaming hot peach pulp. We started to sweat. After about fifteen minutes, she moved back over to us from the sink and poured a small package of power into each pot.”

“What’s that you’re pouring?” questioned Angela.

“That’s pectin powder, Sweetie.” She answered. “That’s what will thicken and give it body.”

We kept stirring. When my right arm started hurting, I would switch to my left arm and then back to my right arm again. Finally, I got to the point where even switching arms provided no relief. About that time, she looked over our shoulders and said, “Yes, that will about do it.” She turned off the stove burners and handed me a funnel like device. “Now, Johnny,” she said. “Take this an put it in the first jar. I’m going to fill it with the hot jam. When I’ve got that one filled, place the funnel in the next jar and I’ll fill that one. We’ll do this until we run out of jam or jars, whichever happens first. You think you can handle that?”

“Uh huh, “I said taking the funnel and placing it in the jar.

She picked up the first large pot with towels on each side. She began pouring and when she indicated to me, I’d take the funnel and move it to the next jar. When the first pot was empty, she retrieved the second pot of hot jam and began pouring it into the jars. When there was no jam left in the pots, she took two small boxes and handed Angela and me a box each.

“Now, Johnny, you put a lid on each jar like this...” She took one of the lids from my box and put it on top of the jar.



“And you, Angela, sweetie,” she said, “You take a ring and tighten it around each jar lid like this.” She took a ring, put it on the lid and twisted it until it was tight.

Angela and I began our tasks of sealing the jam in the pint jars. While we were doing this, she got two more cooking pots from the cabinet and began boiling water in one and cooking sugar in the other pot. When the water was boiling, she grabbed the bowl of peach peelings and put them into the boiling water. She boiled them for fifteen minutes or so, removed the peach peelings from the pot and threw them away. She poured what was left into the pot of sugar.

Again, more stirring of this second concoction. All three of us took turns stirring. She was, at times humming and at other times singing to herself. Could have been some old church gospel tunes.

When the brew was thickened, we went through the whole process of pouring and sealing the mixture into pint jars. She pointed to the first set of jars and said, “Now, there’s peach preserves and there’s peach jelly.” Peach Jelly was the second set of jars.

“We’ll let them set and seal overnight then put them up in the pantry tomorrow morning. She shuffled over to a chair and fell into it, “Heaven’s to Betsy!” she exclaimed. “What a day, you two come over here and sit down with me. Take a load off your little feet.”

We all sat down, and she gave us both a warm smile. I had only known this woman for one day and I felt like I had known her all my life. I could hardly believe that this was the first time she had sat down in her house all day.

She began to gently rock in the chair. “Good to be back. Good to be back among family...” Her voice trailed off and her head tipped back as she nodded off for a nap. I looked at the clock, it was 7:00 pm in the evening. Angela walked out on the porch and I followed her. Angela sat down on the swing and motioned for me to sit down too.

We moved back and forth in the swing and were silent. It had been such a strange day to have the woman suddenly among us who had conceivably awakened from the dead.

We had been swinging for a few minutes watching the birds and breeze in the tree. Angela’s grandmother peeked back out through the screen door and said, “You two didn’t think I had slipped back into the deep forever sleep again, did ya?” She asked.

“Oh no, no, Granny!” answered Angela. “We know you were just having a little nap in there.”

“You two were good helpers today,” she said. And then she stepped out on the porch. She had a large bluish quart jar in her hands. It was full of crinkled up dollar bills. She took a seat on the porch rocking chair. “Can’t believe Walter never found this. I had hidden it above the stove behind the fine China.” She took off the lid, put her hand in and pulled out a couple of bills. She handed us both a ten-dollar bill and said, “Thank you so much for helping an old lady happy today.” She walked in and we followed.

About that time, The Old Man walked in. “Didn’t make it to The Market today,” he said. “I’ll put the peaches in the cooler and taken them first thing in the morning. Did get a chance to go into town today and hire a couple of young men to help with the rest of the harvest though. They’re supposed to show up day after next. Remains to be seen if they’re actually good to their word though.”

He brushed off his feet, put his hat on the wall and started to walk in.

“Walter!” said Clarisse.

He stopped suddenly in his tracks and gave her a frightened questioning look.

“Boots off. Or you’ll track a pound of that red dirt all over my floor.”

He shrugged his shoulders, took off his boots and walked towards his wife. He gave her a short kiss on the cheek and said, “It’s almost too good to be true Dear...too good to be true.”

She embraced her husband then put him back at arm’s length, smiled, then nodded. And out of nowhere, she said, “Walter, where the T.V.?”

“Mmmmm,” said The Old Man. “Broke a few years back, never bought a new one. Hardly see a point though. Reception in these woods is always been spotty at best.

“Well then,” she started, “When you go to The Market tomorrow, stop at Sears and Roebucks and buy us one. It would be nice to catch up on all my soaps even if the reception is poor.”

“Very well, Dear.” Said The Old Man.

“Now come out on the porch with me!” she said to her husband. She took his hand, held it and pulled him out the screen door to the porch. “Let’s sit down in our swing and watch the stars come out tonight. It’s been so long since I’ve seen the stars.”

Angela and I watched them walk out on the porch together. They sat on the swing. Clarisse grasped her husband’s right arm and moved closer to him. There were cicadas buzzing in the trees and a constant breeze going in and out of the wind chimes.

We stayed inside and played dominoes for a while. Angela then gave me another clarinet recital. We went to bed and I was counting the seals popping on the peach preserve and peach jelly jars still cooling on the kitchen counter. It was the first night since I had been there that I hadn’t sat awake in bed and tried to internally justify my decisions to myself. I just accepted events as they happened and fell asleep.

## 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 if it was not something they had in the garden, she would say, “Walter can you take a fresh 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 I’m a girl. Almost a teenage girl. You’d just be wasting your time trying to figure me out. I can’t even figure myself out. 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 peddling fruit from a wooden peach stand.

We had our normal customers-the neighbors from several miles around, the mailman would buy something from us every day 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 Ma’am, “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 sir, 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 rusty 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 new TV and see if we could 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 year. 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. After all, it was the first tractor I bought right after I came 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 started 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, but to a congregation of busy-body Southern Baptists. That’s another thing all together.

“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 eleven 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 an end. I just didn't know how to untangle this knot that I had helped tie without getting people hurt or getting 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.

## 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 title 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-blond 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, then 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 in 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 Oliver, 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 picket 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.

**Chapter 28**

It was a small car—a dark brown Ford Pinto with a driver’s side door that was yellow and obviously not part of the original body. The interior of the car was musty and cluttered. There was an assortment of clothes, books, 8-track tapes and a guitar in the back seat. I spent ten- or fifteen-minutes cleaning out a comfortable spot in the seat to sit on for the adventure.

When Doreen turned the car off the dirt road onto the pavement, she looked at me in the rearview mirror and said, “OK, sweetheart, you need to tell me what city in Texas we’re headed to...What town or city you live in.”

“It’s called Kerrville.” I replied

“Do you know what big city that might be closest to, Hon?” she asked me. Her eyes were still looking right at me in the mirror.

I thought about it for a little bit. “I think it’s not too far from San Antonio. We go back and forth to San Antonio pretty often.”

“Do you know your street name and number in Kerrville?” Doreen asked.

“Yes, Ma’am. 1502 North Pine Street.”

“Now Angela,” she said turning to her daughter. “There’s a U.S. highway map in the glove compartment there. Can you open it up, unfold it and find San Antonio on the Texas page? San Antonio is right smack dab in the center of Texas. Once you find San Antonio look closely around it and see if you can find a city called Kerrville.

Angela opened the glove compartment and found the map. She unfolded it and started looking. It only took a few seconds to find it. “OK,” she said, “Found San Antonio, and looking, looking, looking...Kerrville. There it is”

“How many miles from San Antonio to Kerrville?” asked Doreen of her daughter.

“How can I tell?” asked Angela.

“Down on the bottom of the map, Sweetie. There’s something down there that will tell you how many miles an inch of the map represents.”

Angela looked at the map, found the scale and said, “It’s about seventy-five miles I guess.”

“Good, honey. Now find Yazoo City. That’s where we are close to. Find the easiest highway route between there and Yazoo and San Antonio and then use the map scale to try to give me an estimate of how far we have to drive David here back to his folks.”

Angela followed the highway with her index finger and then marked off the route segment by segment with her thumb and index finger.”

“Momma, “she said, “It’s about seven hundred miles.”

“Lordy!” exclaimed Doreen, “That’s a good haul to do in one non-stopper. Doreen looked at her watch, then looked at me again in the rearview mirror, “David, Honey. We’ll have you home before the sun comes up tomorrow morning. Just sit tight, make yourself comfortable and let me know if there’s anything you need.”

“How long will it take to get him home, “asked Angela of her mother.

“Well, it’s 11:00 in the morning now, “she said checking her watch again. It will be twelve, thirteen hours, maybe fourteen. We’ll be in Yazoo City in just a few minutes. We’ll get something to eat there and fill the car up. Then we’ll head for Texas. We’re in for a long trip today, kids. We need to get it done as soon as possible. Get it done, get it over and get it behind us.”

We pulled into the city. Doreen filled her car and we went through the drive through at McDonalds. We twisted and turned down several side roads and turned onto the highway.

I slouched back in my seat and watched the trees, pastures and billboards passing by. The rain began to fall for what seemed to be hours. Angela crawled into the back seat with me and we tried to pass the time by counting license plates of the different states of cars we saw on the highway. Every now and again, Angela would start to sing a song and try to teach me. Occasionally, her mother would ask her to look for a particular music tape. It rained and it rained. The sun came out. And then it rained again. We stopped to get gas.

Mississippi turned into Louisiana, the miles and miles went by. They all looked the same to me.

Louisiana finally turned into Texas. Doreen turned around and said, “Look there, Hon. Texas state line! Don’t get too excited though, we still got hundreds of miles to go. Texas is a big damned state, y’all.”

Day turned into night and still the miles piled on. Angela crawled back into the front seat. She had said very little to her mother and very little had been said in return. She looked at Doreen and said, “Momma, he really did wake Granny up from her Long Sleep she was in. Honest. I mean, Paw-Paw had been taking me there every week for years and she had never even moved. And then we bring David in that morning and she just pretty near jumped right out of her bed and started talking to us. Don’t you think there’s something to that?”

“Angela, sweetie. I don’t know. I’m glad Clarisse is awake, alert and alive. But all I know for sure if this boy doesn’t belong to Walter and Clarisse. He doesn’t belong to you or me. He belongs to his own family.”

“Well,” proclaimed Angela, “Don’t you think maybe he was meant to pass through our lives in order to wake Granny up from the Sleep?”

“Honey,” said her mother, “I don’t know what I believe anymore. I wish I just had a simple answer for you. I wish I could just tell you God is in control, but child, I just don’t know.”

“Well, I believe it was all meant to be,” said Angela.

“And that’s your business and your right to think that, Sweetie. I don’t believe or disbelieve in anything these days. Right here and now is the only reality I can get my head wrapped around. We just got to get David here to his folks. They are probably just dying not knowing where he’s been.”

“And what are we going to do after that?” demanded Angela of her mother.

“I haven’t figured that out yet,” said Doreen.

“Are you going to take me back to Paw-Paw’s farm?”

“No Angela, I don’t think so. I don’t think Walter needs a little nagging nosey granddaughter in his hair every day, all day anymore now that he has Clarisse back in his life.”

“Then where do you think we will go?”



“I’ve got a friend in Arizona who will let us stay at his place until I get my act together.”

“And how long is it going to take for you to get your act together, Momma?” she asked Doreen.

“Don’t know, darling. It will take as long as it takes. But your crazy old Paw-Paw was right about one thing. It’s time for me to start being your mother while we still have the time.”

“Am I ever going to see Paw-Paw , the farm and the dogs again?” asked Angela.

“Why sure, dear. We’ll go see him for Thanksgiving or Christmas this year.”

Angela leaned her head on the window, fell asleep. The mile markers continued flying by outside the car. And it was long before I too, fell asleep in the back of Doreen’s Ford Pinto.

**Chapter 29**

I was still barely asleep. I was vaguely aware that I was in a car and that the car was quickly slowing down and making a turn. It was still dark, but I could sense artificial lights seeping through the window.

The car came to a complete stop. I opened my eyes. “Wake up you two!” said Doreen. “Wake up, we’re here!”

Angela stirred from her sleep.

“Where are we?” asked Angela.

“Kerrville, TX. Middle of night. Middle of nowhere.” Doreen looked out her window and nodded.

“What time is it?” asked Angela.

“About three in the morning, Hon.” Said her mother. You two wake up good now. I’m going to go in and get directions to David’s house.”

We were parked at a gas pump of the Exxon service station. I knew it very well. We called it “Bishop’s” after the man who own and ran it. I could walk here in minutes from my school and my house was just a minute beyond that walk.

And I knew my summer had come full circle. My nightmare, my dream, my fantasy world. I hadn’t decided which one it was yet. But whatever it was, it was coming to an end right now. I didn’t feel happy nor did I feel sad. I just felt empty and alone. And tired. I had never felt so tired.

Doreen walked out of the convenient store, stopped a few minutes at the gas pump to fill up her car and got back in. “Goodness! Never seen so many stars in the night sky! The stars at night are big and bright out here in the heart of Texas!” She smiled and winked at us.

“Who said that about the stars?” asked Angela.

“Just an old song, you silly girl.”

“Did you get directions to David’s house?”

“Sure did, “said her mother nodding, “Though that clerk in the store wasn’t too keen on giving out any information. Wasn’t going to tell me anything until I told him I’d fill the car up full of gas.

Doreen started the car, pulled out onto main street, turned right at the second signal, passed my school, went several more blocks then turned left on North Pine, my road. She slowed her little car down to a walking pace, trying to read out the addresses on the mailboxes in the dark. “1510, 1508,1506,1502....1502! This must be it, “she said.

She pulled into the driveway, put the car in park, turned around and looked at me, “Well, David, Sweetie, is this there your house?”

I looked at the house in the silhouette of the streetlight. There was no doubt about it. There was the family station wagon and my dad’s beat up rusty pick-up truck. And there was my basketball goal and trampoline where I had spent so many hours alone while my parents yelled and screamed at one another. So, I suppose there was no way out of the truth and reality any longer.”

“Yes, Ma’am” I said to Doreen. “That’s the one.”

“Do you think your parents are at home?”

“Yes, the cars are all here.” I said nodding my head at her.

“Well, listen here, honey. This is the end of the line. You got to get off at this stop.” She took a long breathe and took a long look at my house. “Here’s what you do, sweetie. You get out of this car; you go up to your momma and daddy’s house there. Ring the doorbell or knock on the door loudly. When they wake up and turn on the house lights. We’ll scoot on down the road easy and slow-like. And then we’ll make the block one more time, drive back around and make sure you are in and safe. Got that now?”

“Got it.” I said affirmatively.

“Now grab your bag there and go back to your own life. Your real life.” She motioned for me to exit with her hands in a “Shoo” manner.

I got out of the back seat. Angela got out of the front seat and met me outside. “David....” She said, “It ain’t like you’re my brother because I’m sure you’d annoy me more if

you were. And it's not like you've been my boyfriend or anything like that because I don't want to marry you and all since, we're only eleven years old. But I've enjoyed being your friend, we sure had good times together, didn't we?"

"We sure have, I echoed."

She hugged me. I embraced her momentarily and then we parted. She took the necklace with the trumpet charm off her neck that her mother had just given her and said, "Here. Take this old thing. I'm going to make Doreen buy the right one for me some day.

"Thank you, "I said as she put it over my head and around my neck.

"I don't know where I will be tomorrow. I don't know where I will be in a week, month or year, "She said, making a hand gesture towards her mother in the car, "But I know your address. I will write to you. Will you write me back?"

I nodded and said, "Of course I will."

I took the borrowed pair of glasses off my face and gave them to her, "Here, you should have these back. Keep them. Give them to your mother. Give them back to your grandparents. They belonged to your father. They don't belong to me."

She hugged me once more quickly, walked back around to the front of the Pinto and back to the passenger's seat.

I started to walk away but Doreen called to me, "David...Sweetie???"

I stepped back to her window, "Yes, Ma'am?"

"You know...Old Walter..." she began. "He didn't mean anything hurtful to you, son. He just made a bad decision. He loved his son dearly. I loved him dearly. His Johnny...My John...he was one in a million. He was one in a billion. And then the Lord, or whatever is out there in these big bright Texas stars, took him away from us. You just filled a gap in his and Clarisse's soul that needed mending. So, it's your choice, but maybe you can find it in your heart to forget his name or where he lived when people start asking you a bunch of questions about where you been."

"Yes, Ma'am, "I said. "I won't do anything to hurt him. He was nicer to me than anybody I had ever known."

“OK, Darling, “she said and then added, “What a long strange trip it’s been hasn’t it?”

I wasn’t completely sure what she meant by that, so I just nodded my head, “Where are you and Angela headed to?”

Doreen grinned from ear-to-ear, patted her daughter on the head and said, “We are going to Disney Land!”

“Oh, really, Momma? Is it true? Oh, please don’t be playing with me.” Said Angela.

“You bet we are, darling!” said Doreen. Then she turned back to me, “Now shuffle on up that driveway to that front door. We can’t put this off no more.”

I gave a silent wave, turned around and walked to the front door. The front door of the house I hadn’t seen in weeks. It was the only option I had. Couldn’t turn back now, there was nowhere to turn to.

Calmly and slowly, I moved up the front doorsteps. One, two, three, four. I rang the doorbell and then loudly knocked on the door with my knuckles. Knocked so hard that my knuckles hurt. I rang the doorbell again. And finally, I saw lights start to pop on inside the house. First my parent’s bedroom, then the hallway, finally the living room. I peeked over my shoulder and noticed Doreen’s Ford Pinto slowly disappearing down the road into the early morning darkness.

Then I heard the latch of the front door turn. I jerked back around to meet my father opening the door. His eyes bulged out. “David!!!” he shrieked with excitement.

“Hi, Dad. I’m home.” Was the only thing I could think of to say at the moment.

He fell to his knees, his face blushed red and he began to cry. I had never seen him cry before. He reached out his arms and grabbed me and squeezed me like a vice. He tried to talk but could hardly speak. It was as if he couldn’t get enough air to form a sentence.

He rose from his knees, still holding me. My feet were now dangling in the air and he finally said through tears and gasps for air, “Oh David, buddy! I never gave up on you, son. I knew you were out there. You’re a survivor. You’re a fighter. I knew it. I knew it! He kissed me on top of the head.

By this time, I was aware of my mother having joined the family clench. And she was crying even harder than my father. And then suddenly, I started sobbing too. I was so overcome with emotion I couldn't control myself. For every second of the past several weeks, I had convinced myself that since my parents didn't seem to love each other, that they must not have loved me either and there was no reason I should love them in return.

I was wrong though. I was so very wrong. I felt so horrible and guilty. But at the same time, I was so relieved that it was all over. And it took us awhile to calm down and control ourselves again. We calmed down. We all got in bed together and I told them the whole tale.

I told them the whole tale, but I bent the truth where it benefited me. I was overcome with guilt for not trying to come home. Overcome with guilt for not even wanting to come home. I felt horrible for losing myself in this new persona that had been thrust upon me. I couldn't bear to have told them the complete truth. I forced myself into spinning enough lies to hide my own selfishness. I made The Old Man and his wife out to be a couple of hardened looney codgers who had taken me in but had forcibly kept me there as their own child until I was wrestled away by their wayward daughter-in-law. I felt like I was betraying Angela, the Old Man and his wife, but it was all I could do-the only thing I could do was to sweep my own sins, my own compliance under the rug.

My parents listened to my story patiently and intensely. When it was over my mother started asking questions, "What was this man's name?", "Where did he live?", "What did he look like?" "We need to call the police first thing in the morning. I could tell she was working her temper up and getting overly excited.

My dad gently took my mother by the shoulders, "Rebecca, Rebecca. Calm down and look at me."

My mother looked at him.

"We need to let this go, dear. He's been through too much already. He doesn't need to be put through the wringer again. Let's just settle down and be thankful David has come home to us."

"But..." she interjected.

"Rebecca..." he beckoned her in a gentle soothing voice.

She closed her eyes, took in a heavy breath and let it out and then finally said, “Oh you’re right Mark...you’re right.”

My mother looked at me and said, “David, I’m sure you’re sleepy. Let’s all get some rest. You never ever have to talk about this again, do you understand?”

I nodded my head and I never did mention it again. Never mentioned the cover story that I told my parents. Never even let myself think about what really happened. I’ve lived with that guilt. The guilt of wanting to wash away myself when I was eleven years old and assume a new identity, with a new family.

And I crawled under the covers with my parents and I slept deeply between them until the sun woke me up. My mother pulled the curtains in front of the windows. There was a little thirteen-inch television in their room that they turned on. I heard the TV lady saying, “Good Morning America, It’s Tuesday August 31,1981.”

My summer was over. I felt like my childhood was over. Sleep overcame me once again. Sleep overcame my heavy, stuffy mind.

### Chapter 30

Life resumed like the summer had never happened. I entered Junior High School, joined band and began learning how to play the trumpet, I was on the math team, and no matter how hard I tried, I knew I was never going to be able to climb that rope in gym class to the top of the ceiling.

I took my parents advice about the events. I put it behind me and didn't think about it. The memory of my flight from Church Camp across state lines into The Old Man's peach barn and assuming an alternate identity seemed less and less real with every passing day. It was sort of like a fairy tale dream that seems so vivid in the morning but fuzzier as the day progresses.

The only real world reminder of the summer saga was the occasional letter or postcard from Angela that would arrive. It wasn't often, once every 2 or 3 months. The first of which arrived about a month after the summer and it was a postcard from Disney Land. Her and her mother seemed to migrate from one place to the next. The letters were always postmarked from different places; Alaska, El Paso, Shreveport, Chicago, Phoenix. My mother would retrieve the mail, pick out the letter from Angela, raise her eyebrows and hand it over to me with a look of suspicion but otherwise said nothing.

About two years after the whole ordeal, I received a letter postmarked "Yazoo, Mississippi". It read...

*Dear David,*

*Momma and I came back to The Farm and the peach orchard the first time since that day we left with you. My Paw-Paw died. We buried him yesterday. He had an accident while working on that old tractor. It fell off the ramps that he had jacked it up on and he was crushed beneath. He died right there in the shade under the sycamore tree next to the house.*

*You remember Douglas? He was the guy who used to buy peaches from us at the peach stand. He was the one who found Paw-Paw dead beneath the tractor. All the dogs had just snuggled up to him and were sleeping by him. He had been dead for a few days according to the Sherriff.*



*We buried him right next to Granny who died the week after you and I left. She had a stroke or something like that when she realized that my daddy (her Johnny) was never coming back to her again. They are both buried right next to him in the cemetery. You remember the cemetery, David? You remember the peach orchard and the caboose too? We should make plans to runaway one day and meet each other at the old caboose, don't you think?*

*Paw-Paw left the house, farm and orchard to Momma in his will. We are sticking around long enough to sell it. She's selling in to "BAMA". They are the company who makes all that jam and jelly you get at the supermarket. I bet it doesn't taste as good as what we made with Granny two summers ago.*

*I think Momma wants to go back to California from here. I play my clarinet a lot and sit around thinking about whether or not there is a God and a Heaven out there somewhere in the universe. I hope there is, but I really don't know. I hope there is a Heaven. A place to Paw-Paw and Granny to finally be with their son again. A place where I can one day meet my father. But I don't think I'll ever know. All I know is that I hope we can come by and visit you one day when we are passing through Texas.*

*Love Angela.*

And the letters continued with a strange sparse regularity from random locations throughout North America. And one summer, three years later in 1986, her and her mother did stop by for that visit.

My mother answered the door. "David, "my mother called to me, "There are two ladies here who say they know you."

I came to the door. I could hardly believe it. There stood Angela and her mother, Doreen on my front doorsteps and they were both pregnant. Yes, both pregnant. Not a lie. I swear they were. Angela smiled a little smile at me and said, "Well, are you going to let us in Mister? You silly boy! Or am I going to have to fetch the shotgun? She reached over the threshold and hugged me.

I looked at Doreen and she said, "Well, you turned out nice and strong, didn't you Sugar?" And then she winked at me.

I turned to my mother and said, “Mom...this is.” And I never finished that statement. It seemed that she immediately understood. She moved over to Doreen and introduced herself, “Hello,” she said extending her hand to Doreen, “I’m Rebecca Oliver, David’s mother.”

My mother paused, and then turned around. She held her face as if she was about to sneeze but instead turned back around to face Doreen. She collapsed into Doreen’s shoulders and began sobbing. “Oh, thank you, thank you so much. Thank you for bringing my baby back to me. We were just about to fall over the edge. We just weren’t going to make it any longer and then just when it was too much to handle, you brought him back to me.”

Doreen hugged my mother and patted her on the back, “There, there, sweetie,” she said to my mother. “You let it out. It was a tough time. It’s been all over now for five years.”

My mother made Angela’s acquaintance but fell into long conversation with Doreen about children, Tupperware, furniture and room colors. She gave me some money and the keys to her car. “Why don’t you and Angela go out, see a movie and spend some time together. Y’all have a lot of catching up to do.”

It was only the second time I had been given the opportunity to drive the car by myself since getting my driver’s license. We drove into town and talked. After a few minutes of driving and silence I asked, “So are you going to marry the father?”

“No,” she said. “He was just some asshole I met at a party. The biggest mistake I ever made. But hopefully...” she added patting her stomach, “Something wonderful is going to come out of this.”

“It will be wonderful. I’m sure of it.” I suggested.

“It’s hso weird? Me and my mom being pregnant at the same time?”

I nodded and said, “Very weird.” I continued driving, fairly nervous behind the wheel.

“Are you curious as to what name I’ve picked out for the baby?”

“Well, of course, I’m curious.”

“Well, if he’s a boy I’m going to name him after my Daddy. But I don’t want anybody calling him John or Johnny or Jack. I want him to be called ‘Jonathan’ properly. Got that?”

“Check. “I said. “If I ever meet him, I’ll make sure I call him Jonathan properly and not John or Jack.”

“Oh of course you’ll meet him you silly boy. You’re never gonna shake me. I’m gonna keep on writing you and popping in on you like this until we are old, gray and bent over like The Old Man was.”

“And what if you have a girl?” I asked.

“Peaches.” She replied.

I turned my head away from the road and looked at Angela. “Peaches?” I asked.

“Yes, Peaches, “she stated. “Don’t you think it’s an appropriate name for a girl?”

“Suppose so, “I said. “but if it’s all the same to you, I’m hoping you have that little boy.”

“Me too!” she agreed. “Girls are nothing but trouble. Trouble. Trouble. Trouble. Step on your toes when they’re toddlers. Step all over your heart when they are teenagers.”

“And you’ll have a child and a brother or sister that are the same age?” I asked.

She giggled and nodded. “Weird, I know. None of it was planned. Momma never plans anything. She just gets up in the morning and goes whichever way the wind is blowing that day.

“Doesn’t that get old?” I asked, “Don’t you ever want to put down roots and find a place to call home?”

“Oh, what fun would that be?” she asked. “The minute you start planning life is the minute that life doesn’t live up to your expectations. And then you’re just disappointed and depressed.”

“That’s one way of looking at it, “I commented.

She smiled and slugged me one on my shoulder. “but if and when I do ever settle down, I’ll be sure and let you know. You can come visit me. Bring your wife, your three kids and your station wagon. But until then, I’ll just keep you guessing. Hell. I’ll keep myself guessing.” She giggled to herself.”

“Roger Dodger, “I said as we pulled into the parking lot of the movie theater.

We saw a movie called “Short Circuit” It was about a military robot who gets struck by lightning and suddenly wakes up to its own consciousness then decides that killing should no longer be part of its programming. So, it decides to reprogram itself and decides it’s a living sentient being. That makes it sound more thought provoking than it really was but that is neither here nor there as the saying goes.

I pulled out of the parking lot. Angela started laughing.

I turned to her and said, “What’s so funny?”

“You know that’s only the second movie I’ve ever been to.”

I blinked and smiled, “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Well then, what’s the other movie you’ve been to” I asked.

“Coal Miner’s Daughter.” She said.

“Coal Miner’s Daughter?”

“Yep. Momma was going through her country music singer phase and she took me to see it.”

“You didn’t see Star Wars?”

“Nope?”

“E.T.?”

“Nope!”

“Ghostbusters?”

“Never heard of it.”

It was mine turn to laugh.

Angela slugged me and said, “Stop it, Mister.

I nodded and whispered, “Amazing.”

I kept driving. We smiled at one another and laughed.

We got back to my house. I have no idea what Doreen and my mother talked about the whole time, but they were still gossiping when we got back. Eventually, though, we all said our pleasantries and goodbyes.

Angela walked out to their car. I put my hand out to shake her hand and she said, “Oh for goodness sake, you silly boy!” She leaned over, embraced me and hugged me tightly.

I smiled and said, “Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie.”

“It ain’t goodbye, David. You can’t get rid of me that easy. Let’s just leave it at see you later. OK?”

“OK, then, “I conceded, “See you later.”

Their car backed out of the driveway and then it was gone. Again, gone. Disappeared down our road. I walked back inside. My mother was putting dishes in the dishwasher. As I walked past her, she said, “David?”

“Yeah, mom?” I replied.

“Your father is going to be home any minute now. He doesn’t need to know about this little visitation. Are we clear?”

“But why?” I questioned.

“Just trust me on this one. Let’s pretend like it didn’t happen. Let’s leave it way back in the past, please?”

“OK. I can do that.” I shrugged my shoulders and walked away

### Chapter 31

I wish I could put the “Hollywood ending” on this story for you. I wish I could tie a nice little bow on it and hand it to you gift wrapped. I wish I could tell you that I got in the car, chased after them down the road just like Dustin Hoffman did in “The Graduate”. Or at least I wish could tell you that we got back in touch again years later, got married and lived happily ever after.

But I can't do that, can I? why? Because at the very beginning of this saga, I promised to cut through the noise and lies and tell it like it happened. So, I owe that to you. I owe that to myself. I owe that to Angela.

And here's the truth. This is how it really happened. This is how it really happened that day when Angela and Doreen popped in unexpectedly for that visit. They popped in, we had a great day and then they left again. The truth is that when they rolled down North Pine Street at the end of that day, I never saw either one of them again. Never heard from either one of them again. My next few letters that I wrote to Angela were never answered. After a year of non-response, I took this as a hint that no further communication was wanted or required.

I was almost out of high school by then. I moved on and forgot about Angela. I forgot about Church Camp and The Hooligans who tormented me. I did just what my mother told me to do. I put it in the past. I put it all in the past, that is, until minutes before I started writing down these words to finally “tell the truth”.

You see, an event occurred that brought all these memories, the pain, the guilt, the fear, and yes...the happiness of that summer of 1981 back to me. But before I tell you about that, I need to back track and bring you up to speed (as succinctly as possible) about the last thirty-five years or so.

Upon the return of my summer saga, the situation between my parents got a little better. It would get a little better, then take a nosedive. But then things would improve again. It went back and forth like this for fifteen years. Hot war, cold war, hot war and then cold war again. But every time they would hit that bad patch, the bad patch would be a little less severe and a little shorter than the bad patch before. And one day, I realized they had finally made it through

the storm. It was a twenty-five-year storm that finally petered out. Perhaps, they even finally forgot what they were even fighting about. I knew they would be all right.

By this time, though, they had grown old. They had grown as old as The Old Man and his wife Clarisse had been when I had lived with them that short summer all those years ago. Better late than never, I suppose.

And while my parents were busy trying to figure their shit out between one another during those decades, I was busy getting on with my life. I adhered to the script-graduated from high school, went to college, got an engineering degree, move into a non-descript suburb of Houston and moved my parents there as well to be close to me. They live just twenty minutes away.

Somewhere along the way, quite randomly and miraculously (if that's your cup of tea), I bumped into the most amazing, beautiful girl I had ever met. We bumped into one another, spent the day together and were engaged by the time sun set on that very day (another story I will tell soon). We've been married fifteen years and have two beautiful kids and a pet Beagle. We take a vacation in the minivan during the summers and watch the kids play softball and baseball in the spring.

On weekdays, I come home from work and make meaningless conversation with the neighbors about home improvements, the weather and silly homeowners association scuttlebutt. And on the weekends, I partake in all the suburban rituals of mowing the lawn, washing the car, grilling steaks and walking the dog.

Day in and day out, year after year I play that part. I've been playing that part for nearly forty years without thinking about that summer of 1981 again. Until, that is, just a few weeks ago, I found the key that unlocked this Pandora's box in my mind. The event I mentioned just moments ago.

I came home from work two weeks ago. My wife's face was beaming. "Guess what!?" she said. "A Farmer's Market just opened up on Thursdays in the Town Center. The kids and I brought home fresh carrots, homemade bread, onion and tomatoes!" She was obviously very excited.

I tried to share the enthusiasm. “That’s great to hear, we could use something like the in the middle of this big brick box store suburb we’re living in.” I reached for the mail and started separating the bills from the junk mail.

“And I got these too!” she said with excitement. She pushed a large green bowl full of peaches across the counter towards me.”

“Hmmm, peaches, “I commented.

“Go ahead and take one!” she prodded. “They’re quite lovely!”

“Gosh, “I commented. “I can’t remember the last time I ate a peach.”

I took one from the bowl, put the mail down on the counter, walked out the front door and sat down on the curbside. I examined the peach, sunk my teeth into its flesh and extracted a huge bite. The cold nectar cooled the dryness in the back of my throat, and I could smell the bouquet of aromas that were released.

And with that, the flood of memories came right back to me. Forty-year-old memories flooded into my mind like a hurricane blowing over the seawalls of the shore. It took me right back to my hideaway in The Old Man’s peach barn after my flight from Church Camp. I flashed through the whole episode. My brain was on high speed instant replay.

I relived the whole hell of church camp over then my mind forwarded through the whole experience of posing as the reincarnation of an old man and woman’s dead son. I recalled the deep profound friendship that us two tumbleweed eleven-year old’s had made with each other running through a peach orchard and up and down red dirt roads. I then relived the whole saga of being whisked away from my siege by a woman called Doreen, back across America to my old life. My parents, my real life.

I remembered the letters from Angela and seeing her that one last time in the summer of 1986. And then I put it all behind me after that. I locked it away. I locked it away and forgot about it.

And I relived the whole thing all in the short few seconds it took to eat a peach on a concrete suburban curbside. I suddenly found myself with tears in my eyes and nothing, but a wet slimy peach pit left in my hands. I threw the pit into the storm drain, walked inside and started writing this whole story down. I wrote it in spiral notebooks, on envelopes, on notebook



paper, on hotel stationary using every spare second, I could find. I wrote in airports, at traffic lights, on my lunch breaks, late at night while the family was asleep, in hotels and at city parks. In cursive, in print, in black ink, in blue ink, in red ink and green ink.

It took me three months and now the tale is almost told. It's told just as it happened forty years ago. It's official, done on paper for some future descendant to discover in the attic and gawk at

It's almost told, but not quite finished yet. There's one more loose end that I must tie up before I leave you.

## Chapter 32

And now that everything is all down on paper for you and the world to read, I find myself thinking about Angela. She'd be about fifty years old now, give or a take a year here or there. And that baby she was pregnant with would now be in his (Jonathan) or her (Peaches) early thirties. Hell, she's probably a grandmother now. I wonder if she ever stopped rolling like a stone from state to state and settled down.

It would be so easy in this day and age of digital footprinting to hunt her down and drop her a line. But I am resisting that urge. If I did, I may not like what I find. She may not like what she finds either. Some things are best left as memories in the past. To me, I just want to leave her deep in my warm used up, passed over memories-a precocious, skinny girl with red hair, an attitude, a mind that flew ninety miles an hour, the eleven year old with a clarinet walking around a farm and through a peach orchard. And I don't think that stirring up present incarnations would serve any purpose at all.

I'll tell you what I did do though. Using what memories I had of The Old Man and a pretty good knowledge of where his farm and peach orchard were, I searched the internet for tax records, real estate and probate records to discover what may have become of the Old Man's Peach Orchard. It seems that the jam and jelly company, BAMA, eventually sold his house and farm to a property investment company who had "held it" for a decade. All the while, I'm sure the house and his orchard fell into disrepair and disregard.

And eventually, according to property tax records, it was sold. The house was demolished and what trees were still producing in the orchard were bulldozed over. I even found a local article from the Yazoo City newspaper about the old railroad tracks that were discovered on his property and how they led to an old rusting caboose car that had been sitting there for decades. The caboose was taken to a local McDonald's and made a playhouse for kids.

The land that was The Old Man's orchard was paved over into a huge concrete parking lot with electricity, water and sewage hookups. It's now an RV park where people can hook up their motorhomes while they are on the road from point "A" to point "B". They call the RV park

“Peach Tree Estates”. They even have a website. You can look it up online. I’ve taken a virtual tour on Google Earth Street View.

This leaves me quite empty and angry. Matter of fact, telling this whole tale and having to relive it on these pages word-by-word has flooded me with a variety of harsh emotions. I’m angry at all those kids at Church camp who abused me. I’m angry at the church camp staff who enabled it. I’m mad at myself for wanting to abandon my family that summer and live as someone else. I’m angry at myself for having made The Old Man out to be a villain when I was finally reunited with my parents. And finally, I’m left with a sense of loneliness for having never seen my friend, Angela again.

And I’m just pissed off as hell at Peach Tree Estates RV park.

It’s been hard for me hashing over the whole story one final time. But I’ve learned something. I’ve learned that you got to let all that shit go. You got to let it go, or it will eat you like a cancer from the inside out. You got to forgive and forget. So, as I come to a close, on my last page of smudgy, tear stained, cursive writing, I’m relinquishing my burdens.

I’m letting go of my guilt. I forgive myself. I forgive myself because perhaps I was meant to pass through Walter Parker’s life and “awaken” his wife so they could have one more summer together before she passed on into the next plane of existence.

I forgive whoever made The Old Man’s orchard into an RV park. Can’t change what’s already been done.

I forgive my parents for their two decades of fighting tooth-and-nail at the top of their lungs. They were doing the best they could do given their circumstances.

I forgive Counselor Quentin at the church camp. He was just a young teenager himself, still with acne and barely out of high school. What the hell did he know about making a bunch of boys walk the line?

And finally, I forgive The Hooligans, wherever you may be. Whether you are happily ever after in some suburban home or whether you are in the state lock up in Huntsville.

I forgive you, Hooligans.

But you know what, I’ll never forget, you fuckers.

Yeah you read me right, you're still a bunch of fuckers. I forgive you, but I can't forget you.

Damn, that felt good. Now. Now, I lay me down to sleep, lighter on my toes, higher in spirit.

Goodnight, all.