

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.

"Tole 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

thin 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. "She 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 wine." 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 look 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 at 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 butterbeans 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 laying 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!?!?"