

Chasing Teddy Ballgame

By

Donald Cooper

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Jacksonville, FL

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International Standard Book Number 13: 978-1-60452-006-4

International Standard Book Number 10: 1-60452-006-X

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008925274

BluewaterPress LLC
2220 CR 210 W Ste 108 #132
Jacksonville, FL 32559
<http://bluewaterpress.com>

This book may be purchased online at -

<http://www.bluewaterpress.com/teddy>

Author's Note

Many of the events recounted in "Chasing Teddy Ballgame" occurred during the summer of 1957, although literary license has been taken in the telling. While the book is written in an autobiographical style, it is a work of fiction. I wish to express gratitude to the people of the small city of Nashville, Arkansas, which provided inspiration for the book. I also want to thank Annette, my wife, lover, mentor and best friend, for her support and encouragement.

1

The cows were restless, shuffling their hooves on the concrete floor in the barracks-like cinderblock dairy barn when I ran inside the dairy barn. Uncle Bo was attaching a milking machine to a Jersey cow in an elevated milking chute. He turned and noticed the Boston Red Sox baseball cap I was wearing.

“When did you get the cap?” he said.

“I got it in the mail today,” I said proudly. “I saved Cracker Jack boxtops. I heard about it on the radio.” Then I took the cap off and tipped it like a major league baseball player would do after hitting a home run.

Uncle Bo reached and took the dark blue cap from my hand. He looked at it closely, turning it over and checking the red ‘B’ outlined in white on the front of the cap. Then he put it back on my head.

“Go get me a bucket of feed,” he said.

I grabbed the bucket that was sitting on the floor next to his feet, walked to the large box about midway in the room, and scooped the feed out of the bucket, then I walked back to stand next to Uncle Bo. When I did, I caught the aroma of fresh-mown hay that he had stacked in a small shed next to the dairy barn, where it would be easy to toss over the fence to the cows.

I loved the smell of the hay, and to this day whenever I pass a field of fresh-mown hay, I think of Uncle Bo.

There are sounds or smells that you associate with someone, and the clean smell of fresh-mown hay always triggers a memory of my uncle, the man who was my surrogate father for several years.

When he was born on the family farm in Howard County, Arkansas, he was named James Matthew McCrary, but to his nephews and nieces that wasn't him, it was too formal and too adult. To us, he was just "Uncle Bo."

He was a stocky childlike man with an easy laugh, and he never lost his enthusiasm for life, for work on his dairy farm or in his woodworking shop, for play, for laughter.

When his oldest daughters were in junior high school and beginning to think of themselves as grownups, they decided to ride along with him one Saturday morning when he drove into town. They expected to go to the feed store, the grocery store and maybe the five-and-dime, but they didn't expect to have their father hold a whirly-gig out the window as he drove down Main Street, laughing as the wind spun the wooden propeller.

While their baby sister giggled, the two older girls slid lower and lower in the seat.

For several years, my mother and I lived in a small farmhouse about a quarter-mile west of my grandparents' home. Mom cared for Grandpa's older brother, Shunkle, a confirmed bachelor in his eighties. Dad drove a truck for Texas & Pacific, and rented a room in a Texarkana boarding house. After making his last run of the week, he'd catch the bus to Nashville, where he'd spend his days off with Mom and me.

For those years, my father was the man who showed up on the weekends. We didn't do much together. He usually was too tired to play catch when he arrived in the evening; he didn't fish; he didn't enjoy going for walks in the woods. He wanted to spend as much time as possible with my mother.

As a result, we were almost strangers, and he and I looked at each other regarded each other warily.

For father-son things, I relied on Uncle Bo.

He was the one who taught me to drive on an old 1939 Farmall tractor. He taught me how to put a worm on a hook, how to find the

best places to drop your line in the water, and the simple pleasure of taking a break from work to sit under a tree in the shade — like the summer before when he showed his childlike pleasure of play. Uncle Bo was pouring concrete in the waiting pen at the dairy barn, so he hitched a dump trailer behind the tractor and went to Temperanceville Creek to get gravel. I rode along to help, or just to be doing something with him. While we were loading the gravel, he put down his shovel and said, “I’m taking a break.”

While I watched, he walked up to a high spot on the bank and jumped — fully dressed — into the water. Within seconds, I followed him, and we played in the water for several minutes. Then we finished loading the gravel.

While Uncle Bo was preparing the cows for milking, I was holding a bucket of feed. When he finished, he nodded, and I walked to the small trough at the front of the chute, stood on tiptoes and dumped the feed into the trough, managing to annoy the cow by dropping some of the feed on her head.

Bo moved to the next chute and was preparing a second cow for milking.

I saw his single-shot .22-caliber rifle leaning against the wall.

“When you going to teach me to shoot, Uncle Bo?” I said.

“Can’t today, Buzz. Marie’s not feeling too good and I got started late,” Uncle Bo said as he adjusted the strap over the cow’s back and hung the milk tank from it. “It’s going to be way after dark before I finish. Don’t you want your daddy to teach you? He’s going to be in before I get the barn cleaned up. He oughta have time.”

“He’ll be too tired,” I said, with a trace of annoyance. “He’s always too tired.”

“Well, he works hard, and that bus ride’d wear anyone out. You ask him to teach you to shoot. That rifle’s not going anywhere,” he said, stepping back from the chute and wiping his hands on the front of his overalls.

“He’ll be too tired. Teach me if he is?”

“Well, all right,” Uncle Bo said with a smile. “But I can’t until Monday. Marie’ll be better by then, and I take a few minutes off. We can go over there by the smokehouse, where it’s safe.”

I grinned broadly.

“Great.”

Uncle Bo walked to the first chute to check the cow. Satisfied that the milking was completed, he unhooked the machine, opened the front gate of the chute and lightly slapped the animal's flank. The cow ambled out of the chute and through the door into a walkway leading to a pasture. He carried the milk tank toward the front of the barn, where a huge cooling tank hummed.

"Okay, Buzz, bring in the next one, but keep Ol' June out — she's dry," he said as he walked along a small hallway.

I rushed past the milking chutes to a door at the far end. I opened the door and looked at the nearest cow. It wasn't Ol' June, so I let the cow in and closed the door. The cow walked into the end chute, and Uncle Bo closed the gate as I leaned against the door, watching closely.

We looked up when we heard a woman calling.

"Buzz! Buzz! We've got to go."

I walked briskly past the milking chutes and down the steps. I stopped and looked at Uncle Bo.

"Do you need some help? Mom'll let me stay if you do," I said. He shook his head.

"Uhn-uhn. Everything's under control. You go ahead."

I nodded and ran down the hallway to the front door. I paused to wave at Uncle Bo, then I burst out of the door, which slammed loudly behind me.

I ran along a pathway, through an open gate and stopped breathless at the screened-in back porch of an old, single-story white farmhouse, which was surrounded by towering oaks.

"Take it easy, you'll get all sweaty," my mother said.

My mother, Katie, was of medium height and weight, with dark wavy hair and enormous brown eyes. She was wearing a red sundress and standing beside a brown-over-yellow 1953 Oldsmobile. The car was parked an oak tree directly behind the house. My grandmother, Viola McCrary, a tall, heavyset elderly woman with steel gray hair, is standing in the doorway. Just as I ran up, my grandfather, Clyde McCrary, a short, wiry man in his seventies, came around the corner of the house.

I waved at them and jumped into the front seat of the car.

"Bye, Gramma. Bye, Grandpa," I said.

Mom opened the driver's side door, but paused before sliding behind the wheel.

"Daddy? Mamma? Do you want anything from the store? I'll have plenty of time."

"I can't think of anything. Can you, Clyde?" Grandmother said.

Grandpa rubbed his chin, then pushed his hat to the back of his head.

"Well, lemme see. I needed something," he said slowly. "For the life of me, I can't think of what it was."

He shrugged and gestured.

"Just forget it, Noofie," he said, using my mother's childhood nickname. Her father was the only person who still called her by the nickname, something that she would have preferred that he forget. Grandpa may have forgotten its origin, but he never forgot the nickname.

"Well, if you think of it, just make a note," Mom said. "I've got an appointment at Ruth Stuart's tomorrow, and Donald wants to have John Rigsby take a look at the car. We'll be by about 8:30 or 9."

She slid behind the steering wheel, started the car's engine and backed up. The car scattered gravel when it lurched forward, and Katie steered it carefully along a small lane to a gravel road where she stopped. She turned onto the road and accelerated.

"Noofie?" I said with a grin.

"Daddy forgets everything else," Katie said with a smile. "I don't know why he remembers that."

I knelt on the front seat and reached across to the back seat to get a battered baseball glove. Then I settled back into the front seat, put the glove on my left hand and slapped it like I were catching a ball.

"Ted Williams went two-for-four against Detroit last night," I said, referring to the talented, but eccentric Boston Red Sox slugger. Although most sports writers called him the "Splendid Splinter," Williams sarcastically referred to himself as "Teddy Ballgame."

"How'd you find that out?"

"Uncle Bo picked up a paper in town. He let me look at the sports section first," I said, then looked sideways at his mother. "How come Uncle Bo doesn't ever play pitch or go to any games?"

"I don't know. He just never seemed to care about baseball, or any other sport for that matter. He'd rather go fishing or make things in his shop."

"He's a good fisherman, but I wish he'd play catch with me."

"Oh, he's way too busy to play catch," she said, slowing as she drove across an old wood bridge over Temperanceville Creek. "I wish they'd put in a new bridge. I get the heebie-jeebies every time I have to drive across this thing."

"I bet he would.."

"Would what?"

"I bet Uncle Bo'd play some catch if I asked him."

She looked at me sharply, her dark eyes seeming to glow.

"I'm sure he would, but don't you be hounding him to play catch. He's got a lot of things to do, and he's already taking you fishing and teaching you how to drive that tractor," she said. "You just ask your father. He's going to be here all weekend."

"He'll probably be too tired," I said, a bit too sullenly to suit Mom.

"You just don't need to be like that. He works hard and probably is tired, but he's not too tired to take care of you," she said.

"He was last week," I said, trying to keep the petulance out of my voice.

"Well, his arthritis was just flaring up. You know he has arthritis. You just don't be snippy about your father, young man. If he feels like playing catch, he will."

I scrunched down in the front seat, jammed my knees against the dashboard, and stared straight ahead. I heard her sigh softly.

A few minutes later, we were driving slowly down Main Street. Mom parked at the curb in front of the bus station, a red brick building on the corner. We hadn't been stopped more than two or three minutes when my bladder began to hurt.

"I gotta go to the bathroom," I said.

"Well, go in the station. You know where it is."

I tossed my glove onto the back seat and made sure my cap was on snugly before opening the car door and getting out. I walked rapidly to the front door of the bus station, pushed it open and entered the waiting room.

The waiting room was a long rectangular room. To the left of the door was a rack filled with magazines and newspapers. A long counter faced the left wall, with metal stools bracketed to the floor in front of the counter.

Three elderly men, drinking coffee, sat near the cash register. A box of King Edward cigars was beside the register, and a bored, blonde waitress, wearing a pale green uniform and applying bright red polish to her fingernails, sat behind the register. Metal double doors about halfway down the length of the counter led to the kitchen.

A coffee machine was on a counter behind the bar, and a metal rack holding small bags of chips and two trays filled with day-old doughnuts and other pastries were beside it. Against the right wall, next to a door with an exit sign over it, were two pinball machines. A young man wearing a Navy uniform and with a seabag on the floor beside him was playing one of the machines.

In the far right corner, two rooms extend into the center, creating a short hallway. A bench with the sign "Colored" is against the wall of these rooms.

I walked the length of the room and stopped outside a door marked "White Gentlemen." Next to that door was another marked "White Ladies." I rattled the door handle to check if anyone was in the restroom before I entered.

When I came out of the restroom, I saw a Trailways bus pull to a stop at the side of the depot. The driver, Paul Fleming, a short, slender man in his mid-forties, opened the door, exited the bus and stretched. He walked to the cargo compartment, pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked the compartments.

Maurice Dansby, a short, heavyset middle-aged black man who was pulling a cart, came around the corner of the depot and walked to the bus. He began to stack suitcases and packages on the cart, just as he had for more than twenty years.

But Maurice Dansby hadn't always been a porter at the bus station. Grandpa told me once that Maurice was a war hero. A few days after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Maurice quit his job as porter, went to the Army recruiting office and enlisted.

He went through the rigors of basic training and endured the cramped conditions of the troop trains as he was shipped from one military base to another before finally getting overseas duty. During the war, as Sgt. Dansby's unit moved up the Italian boot heel, he and his buddies received warm welcomes and expressions of gratitude from the residents of the cities and villages who had suffered from the brutal

German occupation. After the war, he went home, proudly wearing his sergeant's stripes and his medals, including a Purple Heart that he was awarded after he was wounded during the liberation of Italy.

But back at home, he wasn't a war hero, he was still Maurice, the porter at the bus station.

"Hey, Maurice," Fleming said and wiped his forehead with a white handkerchief. "We got a lot of stuff today. Whew, it's a scorcher. You sure it's not already summer?"

"Not according to my calendar," Maurice said as he pulled a suitcase from the compartment and stacked it on the cart. He was sweating profusely.

"I tell you one thing. If it's already like this now, what's it going to be in August?" Fleming said.

"We most likely be getting some rain, Mr. Fleming. When it's this hot and still, we generally gets rain," Maurice said.

"You're probably right. Damn me, though, it's hot."

I walked to the door and peered out as Fleming moved back to stand by the door as the passengers disembarked.

A young woman, holding the hands of two small boys, moved carefully down the steps. Fleming reached out to grasp her by the elbow, helping down to the pavement. She smiled, thanked him, and then walked around the front of the bus, where she was greeted by a young man who hugged her, then picked up the two boys. They walked away together, talking softly.

An older couple disembarked slowly, the man first and then the woman. They were followed by my father, a dark-haired man in his late thirties. He was wearing a pair of khaki pants and a white shirt with short sleeves, and was carrying straw hat in his right hand and a brown leather overnight bag in his left. He grinned pleasantly at the driver.

"See you Sunday, Paul," he said.

"You won't be seeing me, D.W. I'm taking a vacation."

"Going anywhere special?"

The driver laughed and said, "Well, it's not going to be on a bus. I'm probably just going to take the boat to the lake and feed the fish."

"Well, enjoy yourself. See you when you get back," Dad said and slapped Fleming on the shoulder. He didn't notice me as he

entered the bus station, and I stayed quiet, just following behind him as he walked to the ticket agent's booth. He spoke briefly to the agent, nodded and then walked toward the front exit.

I heard Fleming talking to the passengers who were still on the bus.

"Folks, if you want to get a bite to eat, we're going to be here about twenty minutes," he said before swinging down from the bus steps and walking into the depot.

When he passed me, he paused.

"Your daddy's already outside, son," he said.

"Thanks, Mr. Fleming," I said, then I walked to the front door. When I came outside, I saw my parents, shielding their eyes from the sun, looking up and down the sidewalk. I supposed they were trying to see where I had gone.

"We were beginning to think you'd taken up residence in there," Mom said, then she slid into the front seat on the passenger side, letting my father do the driving. Mom was a good driver, but she never drove if Dad was around. I guess she thought that was his job.

Dad walked around to the driver's side, then gestured toward the back seat.

"Hey, boy. Come on, we're heading home," he said, then tossed his overnight bag through the rear window into the back seat, got into the car and reached across to pat Mom's leg.

I got in the back seat and put my feet up on the seat.

"Don't put your feet on the seat, son. You'll get it dirty," he said.

I sat upright and looked out the window, glancing back to see if Dad knew I was annoyed, but he didn't pay any attention.

"Do you mind stopping at your folks' place?" he said. "I got that bottle for Mr. Clyde."

"Daddy and his toddy. I swear, I don't know why he won't just say he wants to have a drink before bedtime. He has to make out like it's for his health," Mom said.

She and Dad laughed as he drove slowly down Main Street, looking around to see if anyone he knew was walking down the sidewalk. I leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Dad, will you play catch when we get home?" I said.

"Not this evening, son. I'm just too beat. Maybe tomorrow," he said.

I sat back and stared out the window, but I could sense Mom glancing back at me.

"Well, maybe you can play just a few minutes, Donald. It's going to be a while before I have supper ready," she said.

"No, no. I just want to sit in the swing for a while. He can wait until tomorrow. You can do that, can't you, son?"

I didn't respond, just pulled my baseball glove out from under the overnight bag. I put it on and slapped the pocket, getting ready to play a ball off the leftfield wall in Boston's Fenway Park, just like Ted Williams. Known for his hitting prowess, Williams nonetheless was a master at knowing exactly where a ball that hit the wall would go and could cut down runners trying to stretch a single into a double.

A few minutes later, we turned off the road into a gravel driveway that curved upward toward my grandparents' house. Grandpa was sitting on the swing on the left side of the porch, while Grandmother sat in a rocking chair on the other end of the porch and shelled black-eyed peas, dropping the shells in a paper sack on the floor beside her chair. Uncle Bo, holding a tall bottle of Coca-Cola was sitting on the porch steps. They all waved when the car turned into the driveway, and Uncle Bo was standing up when Dad stopped in front of the front steps. Mom walked up the steps, patting Uncle Bo on arm as she passed him. She pulled up a rocking chair beside Grandmother and began to shell peas. I got out of the car and walked to the front of it and leaned on the hood.

"Hey, Donald, how's business?" Uncle Bo said cheerfully.

Dad opened the car door and stepped out. He put his hands on his back and stretched.

"Same old six and seven. You taking a break?" he said.

"Yeah, milking's done, but I still gotta clean up. You want to give me a hand?"

Dad laughed and waved dismissively.

"Maybe, but first I have to get something for Mr. Clyde," he said and leaned into the side to rummage through his overnight bag. He pulled out a brown paper bag and handed it to me.

"Buzz, would you take that to Mr. Clyde?" he said.

I peeked in the bag and saw it was a fifth of bourbon. I carried it carefully up the steps, walked to the swing and sat

down, handing the bottle to Grandpa, who took it, slid it out of the bag and looked at it.

"Hm, good brand, Donald. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing. I was glad to get it for you."

"You sure? I got the money right here," Grandpa said and patted his hip pocket.

Dad shook his head.

"No, you do a lot for me, watching after Katie and the boy."

"Why don't y'all stay for supper? We're having fresh fish and hushpuppies," Grandmother said. Holding the bowl of freshly shelled peas, she stood and brushed her apron.

"Mamma caught a mess of perch over at the pond," Uncle Bo said.

Mom looked at me.

"What do you say, Buzz? Does that sound good to you?" she said.

I grinned and nodded. If there was anything that Grandmother did better than catch fish, it was cook them. They would be golden fried, not too greasy, and would be served up with hushpuppies and fresh black-eyed peas. I was convinced that there could be nothing better to eat in any fancy restaurant anywhere in the world.

"Bo, looks like we're going to be here a while," Dad said. "If you need a hand out at the barn, I'll help out."

"Can I help out, too?" I said.

"No, son, why don't you stay here with Mr. Clyde. I'm sure he can use the company," Dad said and followed Uncle Bo around the corner of the house toward the barn. Mom and Grandmother went inside the house, leaving Grandpa and me sitting in the swing.

We were swinging easily, but I suppose I was looking sullen because Grandpa looked at me.

"What's the matter, young'un. You look like you got your shorts in wad," he said.

"It's Dad. He's too tired to play catch with me, but he's not too tired to go work out at the barn."

"I wouldn't be too hard on your daddy, boy. He works hard to take care of you and your mama. He's got a lot of things on his mind when he gets home," he said softly.

“Well, sometimes I just wish he wouldn’t come home at all. He just messes everything up,” I said truculently.

“You don’t mean that, son. You don’t mean that,” Grandpa said and patted my leg.

I didn’t respond, just pulled my knees up under my chin and sat in the swing, rocking gently back and forth.

2

The next morning, I got up early, dressing rapidly and grabbing my baseball and glove. I went out the backdoor of the red frame farmhouse. The house had a porch across the front and a steep tin-covered roof that sloped down in the back. It was perfect for a young boy who wanted to play catch. I threw the ball high up on the roof and watched as it rolled down, picking up speed until it shot off the roof. I would run to catch it, just like Ted Williams ran to play the ball off the wall in Fenway Park — or so I imagined. In these solitary games, I had to imagine him as an outfielder, not as a batter, because I had no one to pitch to me.

When I ran after the ball, I imitated one of the announcers who did the Mutual “Game of the Day” broadcasts that I listened to during the summer.

“Mantle swings! It’s a long fly to left; Williams goes back! It’s off the top of the wall! Williams grabs it and throws to second — Mantle slides and he’s out.”

I caught the ball and threw it back on the roof. Just as the ball slammed near the top of the roof, the back door flew open and Mom looked out.

“Buzz! Stop it! Your father’s trying to sleep.”

I caught the ball as it spun off the roof, then took the ball

and tossed it as high as I could into the air. I circled under it and caught it.

I did that two more times until losing interest. Then I walked to the covered well and sat down at the base of the brickwork and tossed the ball into the glove. I was sitting there when Dad, carrying a metal wash pan, opened the back door and walked to the well. He lowered the bucket into the water and started pulling the rope, hand over hand, until he could reach the bucket.

"Hey, Dad, can we play catch?" I said.

"Maybe this afternoon — if I feel up to it. I've got to help Bo and Dale move a piano," he said.

Before I could say anything, Mom opened the back door and called us.

"Donald, Buzz — breakfast's ready."

She held the door open for Dad as he carefully carried the wash pan into the house and put it on the basin just inside the door. I waited, but she still stood there, holding the door open. I went in and she stepped back, letting the screen door close gently.

"Are you helping Bo and Dale with the piano?" she said as Dad took a seat on one side of the small metal table with the Formica top. I sat on the other side from him. Mom had already put a saucer with toast on it in the middle of the table. Pear preserves and a dish of butter were beside the toast. Dad began smoothing globs of butter onto his toast.

"Yeah, but I don't know why Dale's buying a piano," Dad said. "He and Missie don't play."

Mom looked up from the skillet as she pushed scrambled eggs onto our plates.

"Missie said Cathy's going to take lessons. If she learns how to play, maybe she can play for Dale. He loves to sing," she said, and placed a plate in front of Dad and me.

"What about Shunkle?" Dad asked. "Is he having breakfast?"

"Oh, he had some cereal about an hour ago," Mom said. "He's walking over the hill to the spring."

Dad nodded and began eating his eggs, then took a sip of his coffee.

"Well, Dale can hit all around the note, but he just can't hit on it," Dad said. He fancied himself a crooner like Frank

Sinatra and my mother used to tell she enjoyed hearing him sing, but she just didn't want to hurt his feelings.

"How come Cathy's gonna take piano lessons? She said she didn't want to," I said.

"She's doing it because her father wants her to," Mom said. "I know someone else who ought to think about that. I love to listen to someone play the piano."

"I'd rather play guitar," I said.

Mom sniffed with irritation.

My Uncle Dale didn't have a musical bone in his body, but he loved music and tried to sing, but he couldn't carry a tune to save his life.

Everyone knew Uncle Dale couldn't sing, even his wife, my mother's baby sister, and I guess that's why she dawdled so much on Sunday mornings, so the family would be late to church and he wouldn't try to sing in the choir.

But even though he had finally come to realize he'd never been able to sing or play an instrument, Uncle Dale still loved music; he used to sit and tap his foot, always out of rhythm, when he heard one of Eddie Arnold's records on the big RCA radio against the wall next to his green easy chair.

The radio had all kinds of lights and dials, making it look something like the Wurlitzer jukebox at the Tastee Freez, and Uncle Dale said sometimes he could tune the dial just right and pick up one of the stations in Little Rock, the big station that played the music of Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington and the Dorsey Brothers orchestras.

Uncle Dale dearly loved music, especially music played on a piano, and he wanted one of his children to learn how to play the piano; I guess he wanted to sit quietly in that old green easy chair, close his eyes and listen to the notes floating through the house.

His oldest child, David, had no musical inclinations, preferring to go to the spring-fed pond in the middle of a growth of tall sweetgums, oaks and elms and play Tarzan, swinging on grapevines high into the air and out over the pond, or going down the road to Kelsey Ferguson's house to watch the neighbor work on his battered, green John Deere tractor.

I went with David to swing on the grapevines, but when he decided to go down the road to watch Kelsey work on the

tractor, I always headed back to the house to read a magazine or a book, or just to sit in the dirt under the pin oak towering over the driveway to the little white frame house with the porch running across the full width of the front.

So, when the second child, Cathy, said she'd like to take music lessons, Uncle Dale couldn't contain himself, hugging his daughter, who probably had agreed to music lessons because she wanted to make her father happy. Uncle Dale rushed into the kitchen where his wife, Gladys, spent most of her days. My aunt Gladys, or Missie as just about everybody called her, baked and decorated cakes to make a little extra money for the family.

"Missie, did you hear what I said? Cathy wants to play the piano," Uncle Dale said.

Missie, sitting on a stool and concentrating entirely on the swirls of pink frosting she was turning into a rose petal, didn't answer, just nodded and continued carefully squeezing the frosting out of the decorating tube, a stainless steel contraption looking like an oversize syringe.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, what do you think about Cathy wanting to play the piano?"

I looked at Cathy, but she didn't say anything, just smiled uncomfortably.

"Are you sure she wants to play the piano because she wants to or because you want her to?"

"No question about it, she wants to play. I asked her real seriously. 'Cathy,' I said, 'Do you really want to play the piano?' And she said, 'Yes, Daddy, I do.' If that's not something she wants to do, then I don't know what would be."

"Can we afford a piano? David and Cathy both need to go to the dentist."

"We can get a second-hand one. I think Mr. Foshee's interested in selling his piano now that his daughter's off to college," Uncle Dale said, referring to Mark Foshee, his boss at the power company in town.

"Well, if we can afford it, I guess it's all right," Missie said, still concentrating on her cake and not looking at her husband, who now looked disappointed his wife didn't seem to share his enthusiasm.

The two men haggled for several days before finally agreeing on two hundred dollars for the Baldwin upright piano. After sealing the deal with a handshake, Uncle Dale drove out to the farm house, where Cathy, now less enthusiastic about taking piano lessons, and I piled into the white-over-green 1951 Chevrolet and went to the Foshee house to see the piano. Cathy seemed more interested in lessons when she saw the well-polished piano, which seemed to tower over her. She slid cautiously onto the bench and timidly touched the ivory keys, now yellowed with age.

Dale smiled broadly when Cathy pressed a key, gently as if she were afraid it would break, and an almost-inaudible musical note sounded.

"What do you think, honey? Do you like it?" Dale said, his voice booming in the small, dimly lit parlor.

Cathy nodded and slid off the bench.

Uncle Dale pulled out his wallet and counted out four crisp fifty-dollar bills he had gotten earlier in the day at Citizens Bank.

"Well, Mr. Foshee, will it be all right if I come by about nine o'clock tomorrow?" Uncle Dale said as he ushered Cathy and me down the hallway toward the front door.

"Fine with me. Do you have anyone to help you? I'd give you a hand, but my back's been giving me fits lately. Maybe I can get the boy from the bus station to come over and lend a hand."

"No, that's okay. My brother-in-laws are going to help out."

The humidity and heat already had become oppressive the next morning when Dad and I drove down the gravel road to the white farmhouse, surrounded by tall oaks, where my Uncle Bo and his family lived with my grandparents. Uncle Bo and Uncle Dale came out of the house and stood on the front porch when Dad pulled to a stop under the tallest of the oaks next to the silver butane tank.

Uncle Bo tossed the keys to his new 1953 Chevrolet pickup toward Uncle Dale, who raised his eyebrows as he caught the keys as carefully as if they were eggs.

"You do the driving, Dale," Uncle Bo said. He reached down, grabbed me under the arms and heaved me, like a sack of potatoes, into the truck bed. "Buzz and me'll ride back here." Then he swung over the side and sat with his back against the cab.

At the Foshee house, they used one-inch by eight-inch planks

to make a ramp from the front porch down to the driveway. They carefully maneuvered the piano down the planks and guided it to the rear of the pickup, which Uncle Dale had backed up the driveway to get as close as possible to the house.

It took a lot of heaving, grunting and sweating, but they managed to push the piano up the planks into the back of the pickup, and Uncle Dale slammed the tailgate shut with a flourish. Then he and Uncle Bo dropped the two hooks into their slots to lock the tailgate into place and, joined by Dad, they leaned on the sides of the pickup and looked at the piano, now sitting proudly in the back of the truck.

"Did you bring some ropes to tie it down?" Uncle Bo said as he wiped his brow.

"No, I thought you had some in the pickup," Uncle Dale said.

Uncle Bo shook his head.

Dad looked closely at the piano and then leaned over the side of the bed and pursed his lips.

"I think we'll be just fine if you take it easy, Dale," he said. "The side panels are pretty high and if we don't get going too fast, it'll probably ride fine. What do you think, Bo?"

"Heck if I know. I'd sure feel a lot better if we had some rope to tie it down," he said and shrugged.

"Dan Futrell's place is four or five blocks from here. I bet he'd let us borrow some rope," Uncle Dale said.

"I think he's closed today. I heard he was going to Little Rock because his boy's running in the state track meet," Uncle Bo said.

"Well, I guess I'll just take it real easy. It's sitting pretty steady and there're not any really sharp curves between here and the house. Besides after we get off the highway and on our road, there's not going to be any traffic to worry about," Uncle Dale said.

Uncle Bo looked at the piano, his brow furrowed and shook his head.

Dad glanced at Uncle Bo, then he looked at the piano and said, "Dale, just take it real gentle and I think it'll make it. Just don't hit the brakes real hard or do anything that might get it to wiggling."

Uncle Bo hoisted himself into the pickup bed. I started to climb over the tailgate, but Dad stopped me.

"Get in the cab with Dale. If that piano should shift, you'd be smushed."

"I'll be fine. I can help Uncle Bo."

"No, I think it's better if you're in the cab. I'll be back here with Bo."

I looked at Uncle Bo and he grinned at me.

"Your dad's right. Better ride up front with Dale."

I didn't want to get in the cab, but I slid into the front seat next to Uncle Dale. As I looked through the rear window, I saw Dad climb stiffly over the side of the pickup. He and Uncle Bo took positions on either side of the piano, so they could keep it steady.

Uncle Dale started the engine and gently pushed the accelerator, carefully easing out the clutch to let the pickup move slowly down the driveway and into the street.

He couldn't have been doing more than fifteen miles per hour as he drove down Fourth Street toward the high school and Yarberry's Grocery, a small red brick building directly across the street from the campus. Uncle Dale kept his eye on the mirror, watching the piano, making sure it didn't shift.

As he approached the corner, he shifted to second and prepared to turn the corner. He looked in the mirror to see if he were turning in front of a car or truck whose driver wanted to go faster. Satisfied, he began to push the accelerator toward the floor to give the pickup a little more power because the road turned and went up a slight incline. The engine sputtered and he eased off the accelerator, then when the pickup began to move smoothly again, he resumed his acceleration. But this time, the accelerator's linkage stuck and when he pushed it down to give the engine more fuel, the pedal wouldn't go any farther. He tapped it, but the linkage remained stuck, so he tapped it more firmly. Nothing happened, so he tapped it much more firmly, and this time the linkage became unstuck, and the accelerator pedal suddenly went to the floorboard.

I heard shouts of surprise from Uncle Bo and Dad when the pickup suddenly lurched forward. I looked toward Uncle Dale and he had taken his foot off the accelerator and started swinging the steering wheel so he would make the turn and avoid hitting the car coming toward him on Fourth.

"Dale! We're losing it," Uncle Bo shouted.

Dale stomped on the brake, and I whirled to look through the cab's rear window just in time to see the piano take flight. The sun's rays glistened as the piano rose, almost majestically, and seemed to float up, up and out of the pickup bed. For a moment, it seemed to be suspended in mid-air, then it smashed onto the pavement, scattering pieces of polished ivory, wood and strings across the roadway and onto the parking area in front of the grocery store.

Both Uncle Bo and Dad stood in the bed of the pickup, their mouths gaping and their eyes wide as they watched the piano's flight to destruction. I looked at Dale, and his entire face seemed to have collapsed, and he slumped in the seat, his left hand resting on top of the steering wheel.

He rubbed his eyes with his right hand, took a deep breath, and said, "Well, goddam."

That was the first and only time I ever heard Uncle Dale swear.

He took his foot off the brake and allowed the pickup to coast to the side of the road. He sighed, switched off the ignition and sat, with both hands gripping the steering wheel, staring down the road as if he were thinking if he could back up the pieces of the piano might rejoin and it would float back into the pickup bed.

"Well, I guess we've got to get it out of the street," he said. Because he didn't look at me, I guess he just said something to keep from crying.

We got out of the pickup and walked slowly back to where Dad and Uncle Bo already had begun picking up the pieces of the piano, or what had just a few minutes earlier been a piano.

A few minutes later, all of the pieces had been tossed into the back of the pickup; Uncle Bo and I again sat in the bed, resting our backs against the cab; and Dad and Uncle Dale had gotten back in the cab.

"When you're hauling furniture, always make sure you bring some rope," Uncle Bo said and grinned. "Don't tell Dale, but that piano looked kind of beautiful floating through the air like that."

I didn't tell Uncle Dale what Uncle Bo said; I don't think he saw anything beautiful about his piano floating through the air.

No one ever talked much about the piano, not even three or four months later when Uncle Dale bought a used piano from a

music store. This time he didn't worry about ropes or the piano floating through the air; the music store delivered it.

After the disaster with the piano, Dad and I went back to the house. He took a copy of the Arkansas Gazette and went out to the front porch, where Shunkle was sitting in the swing, pulled a rocking chair into the shade and began reading his paper.

I went out back and started tossing the baseball high into the air, circling beneath it and catching the ball. I had done my Ted Williams imitation for several minutes when Mom opened the door and called to me.

"Buzz! Your father's going into town. You want to go with him?"

I shook my head and continued to toss the ball up and catch. Mom shrugged and started back inside the house, but then turned and walked across the yard to me.

"Why don't you go with him?"

"Why won't he ask me himself?"

"He probably just didn't think about it."

"He never thinks about it," I said snappishly.

"Don't be that way. He doesn't have much time with us, and he has a lot on his mind. Put that glove and ball up and go with your father," Mom said.

I slapped the ball in the glove and stalked into the house. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mom shake her head as she walked toward the house.

3

I knew that when we got to town, Grandpa would join the group of his friends who spent most Saturday afternoons sitting on the rough-hewn church pew under the faded green awning at the entrance to Luck's Feed & Seed.

The old men, retired farmers who reluctantly let a son or son-in-law run their farms, spent their Saturday afternoons on the old pew, chewing tobacco or dipping snuff, whittling and telling tall tales. When Henry Luck locked the front door at the end of the day, he would frown at the brown splotches of tobacco juice staining the brick sidewalk and piles of wood shavings.

Henry had rescued the old pew from the woodpile outside County Line Baptist Church. The oak slats had been polished smooth by years of sore Baptist bottoms, and there were initials carved by bored children furtively wielding their Case knives. The old bench was the last of those installed in the sanctuary when the new church opened sixty years earlier, a few weeks after the original church building was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. During the summer of 1941, the deacons decided the church needed electricity. When the power flowed into the sanctuary for the first time, the deacons got their first look at the pews under the bright lights, and they didn't like what they saw.

New modern pews were ordered, so the old benches were donated to Mount Shiloh A.M.E. Church, about three miles south of the larger, white church. The Mount Shiloh members gladly took as many of the old pews as they could, leaving one on the woodpile where Henry found it.

He put the church pew on his front porch, but he never figured on the reaction of his wife, Lavelle, a quiet, stooped little woman with fine, curly blonde hair that seemed to have a mind of its own. She seldom spoke above a whisper, talking in such low tones her husband had to ask more than once what she had just said. But when Henry showed her the pew on their front porch, the vehemence of her reaction startled him, causing his oversize green eyes to bug out even more than usual.

"You will not leave that thing on my front porch, Henry Luck!" Lavelle said so loudly that Charlie Mae Ferguson, daydreaming as she washed dishes in her kitchen across the gravel road, thinking someone was wandering around in her yard, pushed the curtain back and peered out the kitchen window. Then she heard the slam of a door and, squinting against the setting sun, saw Henry's green pickup pull out of the driveway in a cloud of dust and seconds later heard it roar past her house.

"Well, I never," Charlie Mae said, and a smile broadened. "Mousy little thing's put her foot down."

Henry didn't bring up the subject of the church pew again, but a couple of days later on Saturday, he quietly loaded it in the back of his pickup and hauled it into town, where he and Alger Lee Merrill put it against the wall in under the awning next to the Main Street entrance to his store.

Rabbit, a short, fidgety old man who had been leaning casually against the doorframe while Henry and Alger Lee, who was the warehouse manager, wrestled the pew into place, sidled up and put his hand on it.

"I just thought all you fellers could use something more comfortable than the sidewalk," Henry said proudly.

"Lavelle won't let you keep at the house?" Rabbit said. His nose twitched and he grinned broadly when he heard Henry snort.

"Hell, no," Henry snapped.

"She told him either him or that thing was going to leave the house, and she didn't care which one," Alger Lee said and laughed.

"Alger Lee, don't you have something to do in the warehouse?" Henry said. Ignoring Henry's glare, Alger Lee grinned and strolled around the corner, heading down the long sidewalk that ran from the front of the red brick building to the huge sliding double doors of the warehouse.

Rabbit took a seat, settling himself at an end of the pew, and looked up at Henry, who stood with his hands in his pocket.

"Well, how is it?"

"You know, Henry, I think we'll like it. I have to tell you my ass is a bit sore after sitting on that sidewalk for a couple of hours. I think this'll work out just fine. When you get home, why don't you thank Lavelle for us."

Henry's eyes bugged, and his mouth dropped open. He glared at Rabbit, spun on heel and stomped heavily back into the store, slamming the door behind him.

Over the next several years, Henry had to replace some slats and many nails in the old pew, but he never thought about getting rid of it. One reason was purely business — if he got rid of the old pew, the annoyed old men might encourage their sons and sons-in-law to buy their seed and feed at Hughes Seed, the new company that opened in a brand-new metal building on the south end of Main Street. Henry also didn't want to get rid of the old pew because he enjoyed listening to the old men swap yarns.

So the pew—and the old men—stayed in front of the store.

Main Street was crowded when Dad, Grandpa and I got to town. On Saturdays, most of the farmers came to town to pick up supplies and just meet with their friends. Grandpa, who was sitting in the front seat with Dad, saw some people he knew and waved.

"Well, ol' Ira Ponder's in town," he said. "Probably will run over someone's magnolia tree later today."

The magnolia tree was a sore spot with Grandpa, even though it had happened nearly thirty years earlier. Ira Ponder had come by my grandparents' house to borrow some carpenter's tools from Grandpa. When he left, he backed his pickup over my grandfather's prized magnolia tree. Grandpa had never gotten over it.

Dad chuckled as he pulled into a slot in front of the five-