

*Meet Me
on the
Paisley Roof*

MURRAY TILLMAN

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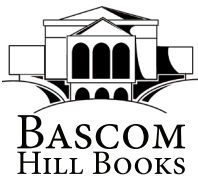
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Dedication

This book and my heart are for Dorris.

Author's Note

Although this book is set in Columbus, Georgia in the summer of 1956, I have repopulated the locale with my own characters, all of whom are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is completely unintended.

While many sites referred to in the text do exist today or did at the time, others such as WFAB-TV or Loretta's Parlor of Beauty did not. Any events portrayed as taking place at real locations are fictitious and to my knowledge bear no resemblance to an actual event.

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Sweet Escapes

I listened for the sound that would free me from my dark cell. So far, there was just the familiar drone of our attic fan, punctuated by the flap, flap, flap of the louvers beating against the metal frame. Any other night the warden, my stepmother, would already be asleep in the bedroom next to mine, grunting and snorting her way through dreamland like a porker happy to be in the food trough. Just one delicious snort was all I needed to hear.

I rolled over in my bed toward the window, grabbed the burglar bars and pulled up into the stream of cooler air. Everybody else in Columbus, Georgia could get in their car and go wherever they wanted. But here I was on my sixteenth birthday, banished by my wicked stepmother from ever driving her car, Mr. Nobody going nowhere.

I had hoped that as a birthday present she would at least let me get a learner's license. Some present. It just turned out to be another fight. I started off with a reasonable offer: let me get a learner's license, and I would not ask to drive her car. I would get my friends to teach me. She looked at me with her cat-like eyes. "You're apt to let a drunk soldier from Fort Benning tear up my car." No, I said, not your car. I would be driving somebody else's car. "Then, I'd get sued," she fired back.

I used other angles, like getting a job if I could drive, but as fast as I would toss out an idea, she'd blast it away with her shotgun logic. Yeah. Like shooting at clay pigeons with a shotgun.

But there was one major reason we didn't talk about, a giant turkey buzzard reason soaring above all the clay pigeons, why she wouldn't let me drive: turkey manure. To be more specific, I had put turkey manure where it shouldn't have been.

Now the Great Turkey Fling, as I like to call it, happened

back in May, and it wasn't all my fault anyway. First, you have to understand that my stepmother liked things to be neat, orderly, and clean. If I happened to dribble a few drops of water or anything else on the floor, she got riled up. Was I ever tired of hearing "Sit down on the toilet seat!"

Anyway, my stepmother, whose real name was Loretta but whose code name was Shrimp Boat, ordered a load of chicken manure to fertilize the flower beds. The factory was out of chicken on that particular day, but, lucky us, they had plenty of turkey. And yes, they delivered. In fact, they dumped a truckload just outside my bedroom window.

Late that afternoon, me and my buddies Cassidy and Ronnie Childs strolled around the corner of the house and nearly walked right into this huge pile of turkey manure. Now I knew it was going to be delivered; I just didn't know when. But there it was. I explained to my friends what it was and how it was supposed to be used.

Cassidy and I looked at each other and grinned. I think we had the same thought: Ronnie buried up to his neck in that pile.

I said to Cassidy, "We can't do that."

"Do what?" Cassidy asked, looking like a giant-sized Dopey.

"You know, we can't get into this or do anything with it,"

I replied.

"Hey, this stuff is dried out. It's hard. In layers," said Ronnie. He broke off a piece and tossed it up in his hand like he was trying to guess the weight. He paused, then chunked it sidearm across my yard toward the widow Briggs' garden. It cleared her dilapidated picket fence and landed near a small concrete statue of St. Francis.

We all marveled at its aerodynamic properties. It lifted so easily into the air, curved, and dropped down right next to St. Francis.

"Throws real well, doesn't it?" said Ronnie. "It doesn't smell so bad either."

Cassidy scooped up a piece and stuffed it in Ronnie's back pocket. "If you like it so well, why don't you take a souvenir home?"

"Quit that, Cassidy!" Ronnie turned his pocket inside out.

"What are you going to tell Mama? You done mussed up your britches?"

It was easy to see how this situation could get out of hand: Cassidy, the big seventeen-year-old brother who weighs two tons, goads Ronnie, the thirteen-year-old brother who weighs nothing, into retaliatory action. Cassidy then stuffs Ronnie deep in the turkey pile. Ronnie goes home mad and not smelling so good either. He tells his mother. She calls my stepmother. Then I get blasted again.

So I proposed a plan. “Okay. We all want to throw a little bit of this, but we’ve got to be rational and civilized about it. Like countries would be. You know, have a firing squad. Why don’t we lag to a line, and the farthest away is the traitor. He has to stand against the garage doors over there while the other two get one shot apiece at him. If he gets hit, he’s dead. If he doesn’t, he gets to shoot at the firing squad. We go until one person gets hit.” I paused. “How’s that sound?”

They both said okay.

I lost the lag, instantly becoming the traitor, and headed for the garage. I hadn’t noticed before but one of the two sets of garage doors was open and the car gone, meaning that the Shrimp Boat was out to sea. I closed the doors and leaned carefully back against them.

The executioners, meanwhile, had already loaded up. Cassidy would throw first. Perhaps I exaggerate a little, but I swear his big palm held a bucket’s worth of manure. This would not be a clean kill, I thought.

I bravely stood as tall, and therefore as slimly, as I could. I put my hands over my face for protection and peeped through my fingers in time to see Cassidy prepare to throw. He was staring at me like a bull at a red cape. His right arm, loaded and ready, stretched behind his back and low to the ground. His arm started in motion like a playground swing, forward then backwards, stretching out his other arm for balance. This went on several times, building up energy, getting a feel for the range, and giving me time to tremble at what was coming.

As Ronnie yelled “Fire,” Cassidy lunged forward with a great underhanded pitch. I covered my face and braced for the coming jolt. Amazingly, however, it didn’t strike. Nor did it hit

the garage doors. I guessed by looking at my skyward gazing friends that Cassidy had not only missed me, he missed the entire building. His load sailed over the garage and landed somewhere in Ellen Harmond's backyard. What a throw!

Ronnie was next. He took several steps back from the line, positioned his load, which wobbled uneasily in the palm of his hand, and assumed the stance of a shot putter. As Cassidy yelled "Fire," Ronnie ran forward. After his third step, I closed my protective hand-visor and waited for the hit. Again, no hit. The load scattered against the garage door to my left.

They had gone for load size, not accuracy, and missed. And so I escaped, smelling normal as ever.

"And now," I said very business-like, "it's my turn." I headed toward the pile, wondering how I could carry enough for two throws.

None of us was sure what happened next. I didn't know *who* hit me, but I sure knew *what* hit me. It may have been Cassidy firing some unspent ammunition at Ronnie, or vice versa, which sailed over in my direction. I didn't care. After I got hit with my back turned, I fulfilled my part of the agreement with a vengeance.

We dived into the turkey pile like it was gold for the taking. At first we just stayed close to the mother lode, scooping fast and throwing hard. Unfortunately, that meant you were also close to the other two throwers. So we drifted away from the pile, cradling as much as we could carry, bombarding one another from a distance, moving in quickly to restock, then back out again, mounting a quick sortie toward an opponent when he was low on ammo. He would flee and then you would have the thrill of trying to hit a fast-moving target. You were stung from behind, and you had to zigzag away as fast as you could. Unspoken alliances were formed and broken till all of us had been set upon by the other two, several times.

Only nightfall made us call a truce and halt the game. I reopened the garage doors, swept off the driveway between the garage and back door, and, as a precaution, unscrewed the outside garage light. Cassidy, Ronnie, and I chatted for just a few minutes, agreeing that there were no losers in the Great Turkey Fling, just winners. Tired but happy, we said goodbye as the darkness tried in vain to hide our presence.

Next morning, Shrimp Boat's radar worked overtime as she surveyed the damage. I would say that "smoking volcano" best described her mood. She stared at the clumps near her feet, then at me. She coughed into a small, white handkerchief, then sneezed violently. Green lava oozed from her nostrils.

She knew better than to slap me as she did on several occasions before. The last time she tried, I caught her hand and held it tightly, looking into her green eyes all the while as she tried to squirm free. I told her no more of that, and she believed me. I wasn't a kid anymore. At least physically. She understood that.

She asked me to walk around the house with her and explain, if I could, what had happened. Did I do this? How many people helped me? Those were fair questions. Yes, I told her, three of us did it.

She rumbled words I couldn't hear, then spit out: "Those Childs boys!" She didn't like the Childses.

Looking around, I was surprised at the extent of the fertilization. The turkey pile itself, which looked like ground zero, was half gone. Turkey manure was everywhere. Of course, all over the lawn, but surprisingly even in bushes, trees, window sills. And in the neighbors' yards as well.

I tried a little humor. "Doesn't it remind you of a song? It's like 'Old McDonald Had a Farm.' You know...*Here a turkey, there a turkey, everywhere a turkey, turkey.*"

Then, I spotted a small slab of manure on the driveway in front of me, scooped it up, and tossed it out of the way. It sailed across the lawn and landed on a bush in front of her.

She glared at me, then pointed at the top of the house. Tears welled up as she spoke. "See that? How did it get way up there on the roof?"

"Somebody must have missed."

"Couldn't you see the house!"

"It was dark."

She let go with a broadside. "I've had just about all I can take from you, Trussell. I try to keep a clean house, a nice yard." She came to the final question, the vein in her neck pulsing. "Why, Trussell? Why did you do this?"

Of course, I had no real answer. No need to explain that I tried to keep things from getting out of hand. “It was there and we were there” was the best I could manage.

What a lousy mess. I should have apologized, but I couldn’t. I could see why the Shrimp Boat didn’t like me.

She wanted to reply but, as they say, words could not express how she felt. However, her stomach could and did. She leaned over and threw up on the Sanders’ side of the property line.

I looked around at Mrs. Sanders’ house, and sure enough there she was watching from her kitchen window. I waved at her and gave her a weak smile. Mrs. Sanders waved back. She was a real sport. She didn’t care much for my stepmother either.

Later on, Shrimp Boat started telling me about the phone calls she had received from various neighbors. Mrs. Briggs had said her statue of St. Francis was desecrated. She even saw the six desecrators fling their loads at him. She had almost called the police but prayed for their souls instead. Mrs. Sanders reported manure everywhere. That was because our houses were so close, separated by a shared driveway that divided in the backyard, one fork going to her garage and the other to ours.

Mrs. Sanders told me later that my stepmother had called her and asked for a damage report. She said she had watched the battle, and it was quite interesting. She recalled a similar event from her childhood when her older brothers were cleaning out the pig pens. Funny how history repeats itself.

I volunteered to clean off the driveways, the walks, the windows, the trees, and so forth. Plus I had to spread the rest of the turkey pile. The proper way, with a shovel. All that took several days. I even tried hosing the turkey clumps off the roof, which was not a good idea. The clumps came apart and drained down the slate roof, staining it a rusty orange color in just a matter of days.

Looking back, I guess I do see why the Shrimp Boat was so upset. When she married my daddy back in 1951, she was living in public housing, had no car, not much of anything except a job in a beauty parlor. She gained a family, a house, a car. In a word, security. Now, five years later, her husband was dead, and she was living with a stepson who threatened her status in the

neighborhood, the existence of her house, and now he wanted the car. Maybe, too, that was why she bought the .38 revolver. She sure let me know she had it “hidden away somewhere.”

* * *

“Sznarttz!”

The sound I was waiting for. I sat up in bed and strained to locate my discarded clothes in the darkness. I slipped off the bed, picked up my clothes, and headed for the door.

I paused, then walked over to the window, undid the screen latches, shoved my clothes and shoes through the burglar bars. The Shrimp Boat had them put in recently to protect herself from the outside world, but the only thing they would ever do in this neighborhood was protect the outside world from me.

This was not my usual escape procedure at all. Nor was stepping out of my sleeping shorts and tossing them out the window. But I did. I stood naked and free. If I got stopped by the Shrimp Boat or spotted by a neighbor, I would have no feeble excuse to offer. I would just honestly say, “Yes. I did it. I threw my clothes away.”

I felt like Superman. My legs were revving up to go. I had to tell myself “Don’t run, stay calm.” I slipped through the kitchen, dining room, around the piano in the living room, through the French doors to the screen porch and out into the night.

I crouched behind the big tea olive bush just outside the porch, listening, looking. The Sanders’ garage light was still on, the garage doors open, their car gone. Mr. Sanders would be coming in later than usual since it was a Saturday night. I would have to scoot around in full view of the Sanders’ house, our kitchen window, and the street. Not so good, but no choice.

So off I ran, into the bright glare of the garage lights (or were they prison lights exposing the escapee) around the corner of our house and into the bushes by my bedroom window.

I dressed quickly, looked inside my window, and listened carefully. Okay. Checked the Paisleys’ house and driveway. Okay. Clear for rendezvous atop the Paisley garage.

I found our booster board leaning against the side of the Paisley garage, jumped up and caught the overhanging roof with

both hands, pushed against the top of the board with one foot, and pulled myself up.

Yep. There they were on the dark side, away from the Sanders' garage lights, two heads turning my way, the Childs brothers. I scrambled up the sloping roof and sat down between them.

"Where have you been? We've been up here half an hour," said Cassidy.

"Sorry. She took her time going to sleep."

"What made you run across the yard naked as a jay bird?" asked Ronnie.

"Maybe I feel like a jay bird." I looked over at the Sanders' brightly lit garage and driveway. "So how's the neighborhood tonight?"

"Pretty quiet," said Cassidy. "The Paisleys are asleep. The widow's lights are out. Mr. Sanders isn't home yet."

"Did y'all have any trouble getting out?" I asked.

"No, not a bit. Just the usual," said Cassidy, "waiting for the old man to finish off his evening pint. But we may have a problem. Two cops moved in on our street. We don't know their schedules yet. They could show up any time of night."

We spoke very softly at night and felt uneasy until all the neighbors' lights were out. Especially the Sanders'. They were our major problem. Mr. Sanders owned a late-night diner and usually brought home the cash receipts. For that reason, he also carried a sawed-off shotgun inside a paper bag. And he never went directly from his garage into his house. He smoked a cigarette and watched their little dog Rocket, who was part terrier and part rat, scamper around, barking at everything.

"We didn't have any trouble getting here tonight," Cassidy continued, "but you seemed to. You been thinking too much. Something's bothering you."

"Yeah, sort of. It's lots of things. Mainly, it's about not getting my driver's license."

"Yeah, that's tough."

Cassidy was lucky. He did have a driver's license and sometimes drove his old man's truck.

"Shrimp Boat's still mad about the turkey pile. But it's not

just that. She's afraid I'm out to destroy her prized possessions. The house, the car. And money. She's having trouble with the beauty parlor." I brushed away some small bits of roofing embedded in the heel of my hand. "I may have to get a job. Anyway, I need to stay away from her as much as I can. Did I tell you she bought a .38?"

"Yeah, you told us," said Cassidy, not seeming too concerned about any of my news. "I wish I could get a job, but I've got to take that English class this summer. It's going to meet at Columbus High. Umph! That's miles away. I'll have to get a ride with somebody, I guess. The old man is using the truck on a construction job in Americus. I may have to borrow your bicycle for a few days."

"Sure," I said, not knowing if he were asking for permission or just kidding.

"You're too big for Trussell's bicycle," said Ronnie.

Be careful, Ronnie, I thought. Cassidy doesn't like remarks about his size, even if they were true. At seventeen he looked nineteen or older. Already six feet tall and weighing over two hundred pounds, Cassidy seemed bigger every time I saw him.

"You know what?" I said, "we've got to do something different this summer. We can't just fool around the neighborhood. We've done just about everything we can."

That was no exaggeration. Since grammar school days, the three of us had always found something to do. We found mortal dangers and challenges in our quiet neighborhood. From our headquarters in my garage, we plotted secret missions, made detailed assignments, synchronized imaginary watches. We climbed atop garages and crawled under most houses around here. Underneath some, we dug trenches and set up secret hideaways stocked with candles, matches, and cans of Vienna sausage. This particular night, we had just one hideaway left, our best ever, the old Dunbar house. But we long since ate all the Vienna sausage.

"Trussell." It was Cassidy again. "Do your daydreaming in the daytime. We need to *do* something." He nudged me with his fist. "Hey. I dare y'all to do this." He got up on his knees.

The "I-dare-you" challenge usually meant Cassidy was about to do something stupid, or in other words, something only

he would do, exposing Ronnie and me as the two big chickens. I tried to head him off.

“We’ve done some crazy things, some risky things,” I said. “We shouldn’t take big chances for little things. If you do something that’s worth doing in the first place, then that justifies the risk. But just to take a risk...” I shrugged.

“And what about the thrill of the moment and to heck with everything else!” Cassidy said, standing up.

“Yeah,” said Ronnie, turning toward me. “You just ran out of the house naked all over for nothing except the thrill.”

“I don’t know why I did that,” I said, “but that was just a little risk. Now, if I did...”

“That’s butt naked, Ronnie,” said Cassidy.

“Now, if I did that in broad daylight on Broadway,” I continued, “that’s what I’m saying would be dumb.”

“What would you call this?” asked Cassidy. He stretched out his arms, strode toward the back of the garage, and leaped off. He sailed across the seven-foot gap between the Paisley garage and Mrs. Briggs’ old abandoned hen house, crashed onto and through the rotten roof, disappearing completely into the black hole he just created. The crash, though not particularly loud, was sudden, startling, like when someone cannonballs into a swimming pool beside you.

We’d known for years that hen house was rotten and especially the roof. It was made of thin strips of wood, thatched with wooden shingles, then overlaid with several strips of roofing. Nothing there would support any kind of weight, especially not Cassidy.

“I call that dumb!” said Ronnie. “What do you call it, Trussell?”

“I call it dumb, too.”

We scrambled over to the edge of the roof and peered at the large, irregularly shaped hole. “Wow! He took out a quarter of the roof on that side!” said Ronnie.

“Hey! You up there! What do you call that?” asked the voice from below.

“We call it dumb! Are you all right?” I asked, trying to whisper.

“Yep! I reckon so. Nothing’s missing,” said Cassidy. “It’s dark in here.”

I turned to Ronnie. "Has he been drinking tonight?"

"Okay," came the voice from the dark hole, "who's going to be next?"

"Just a little," said Ronnie.

"I thought so."

"It's not just that. He's been acting strange lately. Something's wrong," said Ronnie, shaking his head.

"Well, are you coming or not," said Cassidy, raising his voice. "Two brave Indians or two big chickens?"

"We better get down and see what he's done," I said. We started across the top of the roof, intending to jump down the same place we climbed up. Suddenly, the familiar whine of the Sanders' '52 Chevy pulling up the driveway caused us to stop, then scramble again to the dark side, this time stretching out closer to the top so we could look across my yard to the Sanders' driveway.

I told Cassidy to be quiet, that Mr. Sanders was here. I don't think he heard because he yelled back at me.

"You know what we need? We need wheels and we need money. Simple as that."

I dispatched Ronnie to climb down the dark side and tell Cassidy to hush up. Ronnie slid down the roof and dropped to the ground without making a sound.

"Do you hear me, Trussell? We need wheels and money!"

By now the car was inside the Sanders' garage. It was hard to see well through the branches of the mimosa tree that separated the two backyards.

I heard the car door slam and waited for the little rat terrier to make his appearance. Rocket started barking somewhere near the brick barbecue pit by the side of our garage.

Mr. Sanders, as usual, stepped into full view, his right hand inside a sack which, curiously, extended straight out from his hip. He strolled down the driveway with his brown bag pointing the way, trailing a cloud of cigarette smoke.

I was relieved that Cassidy had stopped talking and just hoped that Rocket would not venture too far from Mr. Sanders. Rocket continued fussing around the barbecue pit until Mr. Sanders called him and they both went inside. The Sanders' bright

floodlights darkened, replaced by a much smaller fluorescent glow from their kitchen.

Now it was my turn to slide off the roof and see what happened to Cassidy Childs, the human bomb. I dropped to the ground and saw Ronnie go by holding a large rock, which he had probably retrieved from underneath the Paisley house. “What are you doing?” I asked.

“Cassidy told me to get him this big rock. I’ll need you to help me lift it up through the window.”

I obliged. We slipped between two loose boards in Mrs. Briggs’ fence, pushed chicken wire away from the small opening, and together lifted the rock to Cassidy. He grunted and threw the rock down.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Look at this,” said the voice from the darkness, “I put the rock just underneath the hole in the roof. Mrs. Briggs will think somebody dropped a rock through the roof!”

“Even as crazy as she is,” I began, “do you really think she’s going to believe that someone climbed up on her hen house, lugging this rock, then somehow managed to drop it through the roof? That’s nuts!”

“Maybe she’ll think it was a falling star. I don’t care. It just makes things more interesting, that’s all. Let her figure it out,” Cassidy said, annoyed that I had questioned his idea.

“She might think it’s a sign from St. Francis,” I said.

“Come on,” said Ronnie. “She’s not going to think that rock’s from heaven. She is going to think some fool fell through the roof and for some stupid reason marked the spot with a rock.”

I laughed and gave Cassidy a hand while he struggled out the window.

Ronnie, meanwhile, studied the dilapidated old building, running his hands along the bare planks. I made a mental note of that. You had to stay ahead of Ronnie. Why was he so interested in the hen house?

With Mr. Sanders inside and Cassidy satisfied with his rock, we were ready to make a dash to headquarters, a small, safe place inside my garage. I led the way across my lawn, ducked

underneath the clotheslines, and stopped by the double doors on the near side of our garage.

The kitchen light was out at the Sanders' house. Everything was quiet.

I moved quickly, shoving against one door with the top of my shoulder while pushing the other door out with my arms. I squeezed inside, stepped over to the '53 Plymouth, leaned against the back fender, and waited. The big doors moved slightly.

"Trussell, where are you?" asked Ronnie.

Before I could reply, Ronnie kicked a gallon jug of gasoline. "Be careful," I said.

"It wasn't here before."

"It's always been there. Where's Cassidy?"

"He's picking up a few things we stashed outside," Ronnie replied, coming closer. We moved along the side of the car, Ronnie holding on to the back of my shirt. About midway along the front fender, I veered to the left.

"I've got to bend down." I picked up a droplight with a big round metal shade, switched it on, and held it near the floor.

Ronnie found his green oak rocker in the corner, settling in carefully so that the narrow slats, loosened with age, wouldn't pinch his rear. I found my rocker, a mate to Ronnie's, and, for the same reason, eased down carefully. Cassidy's chair with its tattered stuffing wasn't a problem.

"Look how I scraped myself," said Ronnie, holding his wrists closer to the light.

"That roof is like a big piece of sandpaper," I said, noticing scratches on the heel of my right hand. "You know, Mrs. Briggs won't even know about that hole. It's in the back side, and she never goes around there."

"She might go inside."

"Naugh. She tends to her flowers and the St. Francis statue but that's about all. And she's not crazy. She's just old. Why did we punch a hole in her roof? It's her property! We've never gone around busting up property before. You remember when we found termites under the Wardlows' house? We sent them an anonymous letter with a map showing where the termites were."

“We can’t always be the neighborhood Robin Hoods. Cassidy didn’t mean to, Trussell. He didn’t know the roof would fall in.”

“He showed poor judgment. He could have killed himself!” I could tell these things to Ronnie, but I would be wasting my time talking to bullheaded Cassidy.

Ronnie leaned forward, looking at the floor. He spoke softly. “We’ve got bad problems at home. I mean a lot worse than our usual ones. I can’t say what.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. The garage doors creaked and a dark figure stumbled in and hurried along the car toward us.

“Trussell, cut off that light quick! There’s somebody out there!” said Cassidy.

Without a word, I snapped off the lamp, reached into the bottom left drawer of my daddy’s old desk and withdrew three one-foot sections of lead pipe. I handed one to Ronnie, then turned to find Cassidy. We bumped into each other near the front fender of the car.

“Watch it,” whispered Cassidy.

“What’s going on? What did you see?” I asked.

Cassidy took a piece of pipe, smacking it a few times in the open palm of his left hand. “Let’s get ready, boys,” he said.

“Come on, Cassidy,” I said, “get ready for what?”

“How about...happy birthday!” said Cassidy.

They chimed together with a loud “Surprise!”

I turned the lamp on, then hooked it on a nail bent down from a joist.

“Trussell, you go sit in your chair,” said Cassidy, handing me his lead pipe. “Ronnie, come on and help me with this stuff.”

Ronnie passed by, handing me his lead pipe. They slipped between the garage doors, their excited voices trailing away. I returned the lead pipes to the desk drawer and sat down. From the sounds they were making, I guessed they were up to something out near the barbecue pit.

Soon the doors creaked again and in came Cassidy holding a cake box and Ronnie holding some packages behind his back. Cassidy paused, took the cake out of the box, looked at Ronnie, and wonder of wonders, they sang “Happy Birthday” more or less

in tune as they ambled toward me, swaying from side to side in their happy birthday dance.

They reminded me of Brer Bear and Brer Fox coming out of the bushes right after they caught Brer Rabbit in a snare: Two of the happiest critters on this earth, dancing and singing all 'round that poor Brer Rabbit who was a-swingin' high up in the air from a rope.

After the song, Cassidy set the cake on my desk, and Ronnie handed me two packages wrapped in brown grocery store bags.

"Fellows, this is really...something...great," I said, struggling for words.

"First, the cake," said Cassidy. "Your favorite, orange chiffon cake from the Magic Oven Bakery. Ope, I didn't bring a knife. Ronnie, you got your comb? Well never mind, we don't want Vitalis dripping on our cake. Trussell, you make a wish!"

"That's easy. I want to drive that car," I said, thumbing like a hitchhiker at the '53 Plymouth behind me.

"But isn't there something you'd like to get your hands on worse than the car?" asked Ronnie.

"No, I just want to drive the car."

"Trussell is playing dumb with us," said Ronnie. "It may be time for the Tickle Test of Truth."

Before I could say "Oh, no you don't," the two of them lunged at me. I stood up in time to shove Ronnie away, but Cassidy grabbed me from behind, and I was caught in a tight bear hug.

"I'm not ticklish anymore. I swear. You're both wasting your time."

"We'll give you another chance," said Cassidy, lifting me off my feet and setting me back down again.

Ronnie picked up a jar holding the long-stemmed paint brushes I used on model airplanes and selected a brush to administer the torture. He put the brush handle in his mouth and reached down to take my shoe off. "Lif" his leg up."

If I wanted to, I could have kicked Ronnie into the next county. But I didn't want to. I'd rather have a piece of that cake. Besides, they already knew. They just wanted to make me say it.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll make another wish.”

“And tell the truth!” said Cassidy, releasing me from his hold.

We stood around my desk. I hesitated, looking at the cake.

“Go on, Trussell,” said Ronnie.

“Promise y’all won’t laugh.”

“We promise, we promise,” said Ronnie, grinning.

“Well, I wish I could have a nice conversation with Ellen Harmond. Like a normal person.”

Ronnie and Cassidy looked at each other, smiling. Without any trouble at all, they infected each other with a snickering kind of laughter, common to the bear and the fox.

“Thanks for not laughing at me. For not ridiculing me on my birthday,” I said, feigning a wounded heart. After the laughter, came the advice.

“Just pick up the telephone and call her,” said Cassidy.

“Right, Trussell, call her. Haven’t you ever talked with her before?”

“Once in the sixth grade. Mrs. Lambert had us memorize all the capital cities in Africa and paired us off to practice. I got to ask Ellen all the capitals, and then she asked me.”

“And that’s all?” said Ronnie.

“That’s about it for the sixth grade. I was in her seventh grade class. Sat right across from her. We’ve both gone to Junior High and Columbus High but not in the same classes. So I really haven’t been around her in the last three or four years.”

“What about the eighth grade?” asked Ronnie. “You told us once you walked home with her. That’s a long walk from here to Junior High.”

“Yeah. Once or twice.”

“Well, what did you do?” asked Cassidy.

“Looking back, I can’t say I did much. I just followed her home. I tried to talk to her, but I mainly threw rocks.”

“You tried to hit her?” asked Ronnie.

“No, I didn’t try to hit her,” I said, irritated at the thought. “I just threw rocks at things...you know...trees, sewer grates, stop signs.”

Cassidy looked at me strangely, kind of tilting his head

sideways, “You didn’t show off spittin’ tobacco juice, did you?”

“Augh, come off it, Cassidy.” He could never forget that I beat him fair and square in a tobacco spittin’ contest behind the garage. As my Latin teacher would say, that was a Pyrrhic victory. I won the contest but got sick. And even worse, Cassidy didn’t get sick at all.

“Did she say anything to you or do anything?” asked Ronnie.

“Yeah,” said Cassidy, “did she cry for help?”

“When I hit a stop sign with a rock, it made a loud sound like a gong. Then, I said ‘Welcome to the Casbah, ladies.’ She and Jenny Moore laughed even though they were trying to pretend I wasn’t there.”

“Yeah. I can see why they might wish you weren’t there,” said Ronnie, grinning like ol’ Brer Fox. “Tagging along throwing rocks and spitting all over the place. I wouldn’t want you around me neither.”

I paused long enough for Ronnie and Cassidy to catch up with their chuckling and wheezing, which was not even close to human laughter. I felt a sudden rush of sympathy for Brer Rabbit swinging back and forth on that long rope.

“She never said anything directly,” I continued. “But when we were just about home, Jenny got riled up and mumbled something bad about me to Ellen. Then, Jenny turns toward me and says loud enough for me to hear, ‘Somebody ought to tell his father.’ Then Ellen just says in a low voice ‘Shhhh!’ You see, she knew he was dead. So I figure she didn’t want to hurt my feelings. That was nice of her.”

Ronnie stuck his chin out and moved his head sideways, trying hard to act innocent about something. He handed me one of the packages. “Here,” he said, “open this one first. It ties right in with your wish. Be careful not to tear it.”

I opened the long thin package carefully. “Let me guess. It’s something you’ve drawn.”

“Yep.” Ronnie grinned like he owned Boardwalk and Park Place with hotels.

Whatever it was, it would be a masterpiece. Ronnie could draw like a young Michelangelo, and I do mean Michelangelo. In

grammar school, he once painted a mural of Oglethorpe landing below the bluffs of what is today the city of Savannah. Oglethorpe stood like the conquering Lord Nelson of Trafalgar on a column of fire. Two angels, one on either side of a heavenly vision, pointed to the modern day city of Savannah. So it wasn't exactly man reaching for God, maybe more like Rocket Man Meets the Space Zombies, but it was close.

I peeled off the brown wrapping paper starting at the bottom. I saw red high heel shoes with feet inside them, attached to two long Betty Grable-type legs, leaning back in a high cut, black skirt. From what I'd seen so far, these red shoes did not belong to Dorothy from Kansas.

I tore the paper carefully. Bare breasts overwhelmed her small white blouse. Her left hand rested on her thigh. Her right hand held up four cards. Four aces. Across the bottom of the picture in tall, block letters the two words, ACES HIGH, were printed on a slant. I carefully removed the final bit of paper. The face! I know that face! "My Gosh," I said. "Ellen Harmond!"

"She don't look quite like that yet," said Ronnie, "but she might when she gets through growing. I got the idea from looking at a picture of the nose art on a bomber. I think it was a B-17 or a..."

"Hey, Trussell," interrupted Cassidy, "when you have your 'conversation' with her, why don't you ask her if she has any red high heel shoes?"

At that moment, I knew it was very doubtful that I could ever speak to Ellen Harmond again or look at her without blushing. My face was already on fire.

"Thanks, Ronnie. This is a fine drawing." I struggled to find something nice to say. "You did it with colored chalk?"

"Yeah, pastels."

"How come you could draw her face so well?" I asked.

"I just called her up and told her I would like to draw her picture for you and could I please see her. She said sure."

"You what!?"

"Trussell, keep it down. Don't wake up the Shrimp Boat," said Cassidy, chuckling.

I was Brer Rabbit again dangling on the end of the rope, caught good and proper. And when I tried to wiggle free, the knot got tighter.

“Well, actually,” said Ronnie, “she gave me a picture.” He reached in his billfold and produced a small photo. He flashed it and tried to put it back.

“Wait a minute.” I snatched it from him. “This picture was cut out of an annual, this year’s annual. Who did you get it from?”

“I cannot tell a lie,” said Cassidy. “I have a friend who goes to Columbus High so I borrowed it and cut the picture out.”

“Who do you know that goes to Columbus High?” I asked.

Cassidy and Ronnie swapped innocent looks.

“Ronnie,” said Cassidy, “who do we know that goes to Columbus High?” Ronnie shrugged his shoulders. They looked at me.

Oh, no, I thought. Me! “Do you mean that you cut her picture out of my annual?”

“Look at it this way,” said Cassidy. “When you have your ‘normal conversation’ with her, you could mention that her picture somehow disappeared from your annual.”

They howled with laughter.

I felt the rope jerk tight once again, and po’ ol’ Brer Rabbit longed to be free.