

*“Former pro baseball pitcher, Lou Vickery, has delivered a book that offers a ‘Big League’ story... and it has nothing to do with baseball.”*

*-Dr. Larry Cosper*

## **A TOUCH OF GRAY**

### **A Great American Story Revisited**

**Lou Vickery**

*“A TOUCH OF GRAY is a compelling tale filled with passion and expression. It is about a very special friendship between two young boys of different races – Victor and Tater – a friendship that is sustained by courage and an enterprising spirit... In the beginning, the book’s intrigue will touch your mind. At the end, the story will have touched your heart.”*

*-Jerry Walden, Book Reviewer*

*“A TOUCH OF GRAY has real life written all through it. It is a story about the risk of looking beyond the color of ones’ skin to find the real person within.”*

*-Dr. Priscilla Wilson, Educator*

*As an African-American who grew up in the 40’s and 50’s in Alabama, I was struck by how well Lou Vickery captured in a brilliant, if not brave, way a difficult era in the history of the south ... I believe A TOUCH OF GRAY should be required reading for every school age child.”*

*-Dr. Ulysses McBride, Retired College President*

#### **BOOK FACTS:**

**Title:** A TOUCH OF GRAY: A Great American Story Revisited

**Publisher:** UPWORD Press

**Author:** Lou Vickery

**Address:** P.O. Box 974, Atmore, Alabama 36504

**ISBN:** 0-9654140-3-5

**Pages:** 256

**Available:** E-Book (April, 2016) Print Book (May, 2016)\

**Trim Size:** 6 x 9

**Reading Level:** 10 Years - Up

**Price:** \$16.95 Print Book; \$ 6.99 e-Book

**Distribution:** Amazon.com, Create Space, louvickerybooks.com, and Books-A-Million

*“The many uncertainties and wondrous adventures of Tater and Victor makes A TOUCH OF GRAY an entertaining and endearing book... one geared to touch every human emotion.”*

*-Dr. John Omohundro*

*“Lou Vickery is an excellent storyteller, pure and simple. He has a fine sense of the turbulent times in which Tater and Victor grow their relationship... a time in which I as an African-American remember all too well.*

*-William Johnson, Businessman*

Available at amazon.com and  
louvickerybooks.com (autographed copy)

# Prologue

Ever watch a fire in its last throes? Mostly ashes. A few embers glow, first faintly, then more faintly, until finally the embers appear dead. But what happens when you pick up a poke and stoke the embers? The glow returns and gets brighter. Streaks of flames rise up. The blaze stirs and crackles and leaps back to life. Our memories work the same way. Sometimes the flame that carries some of our greatest memories wanes and even dies because we fail to pick up the poke and stoke the memory embers.

As human beings, our memories seldom carry us back to the day, the week, or even the year, an event or situation occurred. What we tend to recall are priceless moments.

It is no secret that the older we get, the more we come to realize that the years have a way of softening the edges of those moments that we recall. Time and circumstance tend to erode our memories of the way things actually happened. But that is not necessarily the case with the moments I want to share with you in our time together.

The reason is simple: Over fifty years ago, I scribbled my first notes for the book you are about to read. It was the summer of 1962. I was a professional baseball player in those days. That year I was playing in Atlanta, a southern city that at the time was striving to overcome its segregationist past. The racial issues that were front and center in the newspapers and on television made it easier to recall incidents and occurrences from my own childhood.

The next twenty plus years, I jotted notes on everything imaginable, including hundreds of napkins in restaurants. Then I placed the notes in a small tin box for safe keeping. There they resided for decades. In the meantime, I wrote several books in the sports and motivational fields, but none of those came close to resembling the storyline found in A TOUCH OF GRAY.

There was a significant “reason” behind my failure to bring these notes together in a book. I bought into the bill of goods of those who questioned if a former professional athlete could write a book about something not sports related. Come on now: How many professional athletes do you know who have written a book that stretches out to envelop real life activities? The negative comments of others circled around in my mind for decades, producing what I thought was a valid reason for not writing A TOUCH OF GRAY. In retrospect, it wasn’t.

Then came the news that would spark me to action. It all started on an unusually hot day in May several years back. A friend and I were taking advantage of the weather by hitting tennis balls. Suddenly, I became extremely nauseous and briefly passed out. The next thing I recalled was being put into an ambulance for the trip to a local hospital.

The original diagnosis was a heat stroke. But a thorough examination showed that wasn’t the case. After numerous tests, I was told me that I had “Hairy Cell” leukemia. What? Maybe I had heard wrong. Maybe the doctor had made an erroneous diagnosis. Maybe it was something else.

After a lifetime of avoiding doctors, avoidance now was out of the question. In a few minutes I learned all I wanted to know about Hairy Cell Leukemia. It was a real shock to an ex-jock in the prime of life.

It is not necessary to discuss my full battle with this medical challenge in any depth. But I do want you to know that I agreed to be a volunteer for a drug program that led to this being a very treatable form of leukemia. Today I am cancer free.

The major point of bringing the medical issue up, is my doctor at the onset of the discovery of leukemia made a very poignant suggestion: “Mr. Vickery, if there is something that you have wanted to do, but have not done up to this point, now is the time to do it.”

That was it! Those words struck a vital cord. They were the spark that kindled the creative flame. The time was at hand to truly loosen the strings that held those memories in place in the corner of my heart, and write *A TOUCH OF GRAY*. While the years had weathered my body, the years had not weathered my recollection of some special times and events in our community.

It took me several days to find that old tin box that housed my notes. Once found, I began the process of writing the first draft. It was not an easy two years. Medical treatments that made me weak all over were wrapped my around my “day job” and pulling together hundreds of notes. While there were trying moments, they were always followed by moments of hope and dedication. The inward motivation to finish *A TOUCH OF GRAY* was well entrenched.

It is a real challenge to compress years of life into a few pages. But I had a story to tell based on true events. In baseball, when the starting pitcher leaves the game, the baseball is handed to a relief pitcher. The relief pitcher in this case is Victor Louis Anderson. It is Victor who will tell you the story of an enduring relationship with William Erasmus Jackson, better known as "Tater," and their respective families. The decision to let Victor tell the story was based on the need to change some names, characters, places, and occasionally alter an event, to fit the storyline.

There would be nothing really unusual about the relationship between Victor and Tater unless you understand that they lived in rural south Alabama, and Tater was black and Victor was white. Set in the early 1950s, the social climate in the farming community where they lived was highly unfavorable for two youngsters of different races developing and sustaining any kind of relationship. Tater and Victor attended separate schools and churches, and the houses they lived in were worlds apart, although their homes were only about one hundred yards from each other. But despite these differences, Tater and Victor were virtually inseparable during their time on the farm, until the social and cultural pressures of the times irreversibly altered the course of their relationship.

The storyline itself is a compellingly honest portrayal of life in the segregated south in the 1950s. There are references and resemblances to actual events, places, or persons that will ooze with truth for some readers. It might even jolt other readers back to a time they had just as soon forget. Either way, the story is true, the characters are real.

I ask as you read *A TOUCH OF GRAY* to put yourself in the place of the characters... feel with them their pain and disappointments... thrill with them in their joy and good times... sense their excitement for life under sometimes difficult and trying circumstances. And as you read, capture the reality of the times in which they lived. Let their realism enliven your spirit, warm your heart and touch your emotions.

It will not be long into your reading journey before you grasp the fact that the speech pattern was different for each family. There was a distinct difference between the way most blacks and whites communicated with each other in that era, but the message of communication was always clear. I tried to capture the authenticity of this difference in speech as I remembered it. It was not necessarily the mode of communication for either the blacks or whites in our community; some spoke a great deal more fluent than others. Early on as you read, you may have to read a statement twice to grab hold of what was said. But it will become easier as you get deeper into the story.

If our storyline clearly demonstrates anything, it is how the desires of the heart can be eclipsed by circumstances. It is a story that portrays how easily vision can be constricted and human understanding rendered insufficient by attitudes, prejudices and even traditions. It is a tale that stretches from the humorous to the tragic... from the tender to the frightful... from the exciting to the dangerous. It is a story that is filled with a full range of human emotions. But then again, it is more than that.

It is equally important to grasp what the storyline is not about. It is not a story about race, yet the issue of race is inescapable. It is not a tale about being black or white, although the differences are evident throughout. It is a

story about reaching out, of looking beyond the color of one's skin, to find the real person within. It is a story about a small group of people who understood the importance of painting life with a touch of gray – the coming together of black and white.

## Chapter Four

### The Visitor

The summer of 1951 was in full swing, which meant we would spend a lot of time at the swimming holes. There were two swimming holes, one for the whites and the other for the blacks, located about a half-mile from the farm. The swimming holes were a special place for us. We spent a lot of time there every year from May to September.

The swimming holes were separated only by the bridge on County Road 1 that crossed over Bush Creek. The irony of this was the whites swam downstream from where the blacks swam. I presumed the whites had chosen the east side off the bridge because there was a small sandbar on its north bank. This made the east side a great deal more attractive to the eye than the west side, which was surrounded by under bush and overhanging limbs.

Tater and I were not supposed to swim together, but we found a way around the restrictions. We began to swim together under the bridge out of the sight of eyes that would frown on such an arrangement. We did this when just the three of us swam, or when Buck went with us.

The relatives who came to see us during the summer enjoyed swimming there as much as anything we did during their stay. Two frequent summer visitors over the years were Momma's sister, Aunt Helen Forte, and her son Allen, Jr. Aunt Helen's husband, Allen, Sr., owned a hardware store in Mobile. He rarely came with them to visit, with the exception of an occasional drive up for Sunday dinner. He loved Rosie's fried chicken.

I must confess it sometimes was difficult for me to eat Rosie's fried chicken, regardless how great it smelled and tasted. My problem with chicken was how it made its way from the chicken yard to our table.

When Rosie planned to cook a chicken, she went out to the chicken yard with Tater to select a pullet, the name for a fat, young chicken. Tater's job was to catch the pullet for Rosie, and he was quite talented at it. He delivered his catch to her with a big grin of satisfaction on his face.

Rosie grasped the chicken's body firmly with her left hand and gripped its head with her right hand. Holding its head stationery, she spun the pullet in a circular motion until its neck was broken. Then she dropped it on the ground where it flopped about until all life was gone. Tater would retrieve the lifeless chicken and place it on a tree stump, where with a quick swing of a hatchet Rosie would leave the chicken headless. Next she hung the headless chicken upside down from a hanging branch of a willow tree to allow the blood to drain from the chicken into a pail. Not a pretty sight.

Now you have a better understanding of why eating chicken was a real mental test for me. "Victor, ya be jus' a big, old sissy," Tater would reply, every time I felt a bit woozy watching the headless chicken bounce all over the place.

Let's get back to Aunt Helen and Allen, Jr. Aunt Helen was taller than Momma but not as pretty, and the way she dressed and carried herself gave her an air of importance. Allen Jr. was her only child. He was a year older and slightly taller than me, with ruddy complexion like his father. He had a big head of brown hair that was unkempt. He always wore expensive-looking clothes. The way Aunt Helen hovered over him and catered to him, it was a wonder he could do anything on his own.

The second weekend in July, 1951, Aunt Helen and Cousin Allen came to spend a few days with us. I often thought that they only came to see us when they wanted to show off something new they had bought. This time it was Aunt Helen's new Studebaker automobile. But she did enjoy visiting with Momma, and Allen enjoyed swimming... and harassing Tater.

Allen didn't want us to include Tater in anything we did together. He had a real streak of meanness toward Tater. The few times we included Tater in our activities, Allen would target him for one of his hurtful pranks or comments. "Whaddaya goin' to school for, Tater? You don't need ta know how to read and write ta pick cotton." This was indicative of Allen's venom.

Allen loathed Tater for one simple reason: he was black. Daddy said Uncle Allen acted one way toward colored people around his hardware store, but differently behind their backs. There was little doubt that Allen had learned well from his father.

Tater only stared at Allen, saying nothing when he made one of his malicious remarks. I wanted to tell him, "Allen, if ya don't shut up, I'm liable to bust ya right in yore fat mouth." But I knew if he answered with a smart aleck remark, I would have to refrain from following through on my threat. A punch in the mouth would definitely bring the wrath of Momma down on me. So I kept my mouth shut.

It was mid-afternoon on Friday when Aunt Helen and Allen arrived at the big house. Will and I determined before Allen arrived that we were not going to exclude Tater from any activities, regardless of Allen's desires. We decided it was best that I confront Allen early with our decision. "I suppose you don't wanta play with Tater, do ya?" I asked Allen shortly after we had unpacked Aunt Helen's new car.

"Yeah, I want us to do some things that include Tater." Allen said surprisingly, taking the starch out of my confrontational plans. Allen continued, "By the way, where is he?"

"I think he's down by the barnyard messin' round," Will interjected. "He's probably waitin' on us ta cum down and do somethin' together," Will added.

Tater had grown to distrust Allen. He tried to stay in the background when Allen came around with his hostility. Without saying a word, Allen turned and headed toward the barn, with Will and me in pursuit.

Tater was sitting in the hayloft, feet dangling over the side. Allen greeted Tater with a wide smile and dancing eyes. "Whatcha been up to, Tater?" Allen's tone had a pleasant ring to it.

I think Tater's instincts told him to be cautious. "I just be doin' a dab of this and a dab of that," he answered skeptically.

"Been riding old Buddy any lately?" Allen asked Tater. The question of "Why would Allen be interested in talkin' about Buddy?" shot through my mind. Allen had never shown any interest in Buddy before.

Buddy was a big dark brown horse that we all liked to ride. His stiff mane was white and a white stripe ran down his back, ending at his black tail. Buddy was very patient with us, which made him easy to ride.

"Nah, not none... I kin recollect," Tater replied hesitantly.

"Whaddayasay tomorrow mornin' we saddle old Buddy up and do some ridin'?" Allen asked while looking at Buddy casually grazing in the late afternoon sun.

Tater stared at Allen, his dark eyes confirming his wariness. He said nothing. After a few moments of silence, Will said excitedly, "Sounds good ta me!" I nodded my approval. But Tater didn't offer his agreement. It was evident that he still held reservations about Allen's motives.

The next morning Allen hurried through breakfast. We were hardly half finished with a Saturday morning breakfast of ham, biscuits, fig preserves, and sweet milk, when Allen stood up, shoved his chair back and asked to be excused from the table. "Where do you think you're going, young man?" Aunt Helen asked sharply.

"I'm just not hongry," Allen said evasively.

"Well, are ya not feelin' all right, honey?" Aunt Helen asked in a syrupy way, her demeanor quickly changing.

"Yes, Mother, I'm feelin' fine. I'm just not up to eatin'. I wanta go on down to the barn and get ready to ride

Buddy," Allen countered, as he headed toward the door.

"That boy hardly eats nothin' when he comes here," Momma said, shaking her head as Allen pushed his way out the door.

Then as an afterthought, Aunt Helen yelled behind him, "Allen, do you have your cap on. It's gonna be hot." Allen didn't respond. He was gone.

Will and I looked at each other as if to say "What's he up to?" We finished eating and sat around the house a bit, letting our meal settle before making our way out to the barnyard to find out. Tater came running up shortly after Will and I arrived at the barn. "I be ready ta show Mr. Allen how good a rider I is," Tater stated confidently.

Allen had Buddy all saddled up when we arrived at the stables. A big wily smile covered Allen's face as Will open the stable door so Allen, with reins in hand, could lead Buddy out into the barnyard. He walked Buddy briskly around the barnyard, working him into a slight sweat. "Who's fixin' to be the first one to ride?" Will asked, hoping it was him.

"I think it should be Tater," Allen responded forcefully.

"Why Tater?" I asked, while in the background my instincts were speaking to me again. But I didn't act on this premonition.

"Well, I don't think Tater can ride a horse as good as me. I'd like to see jus' how good he is," Allen challenged.

Tater's pride would not let him back away, "Sho' kin." A half grin swept across his lips. "I thinks I oughta goes first ta shows Mr. Allen heah how ta ride old Buddy."

Allen's baby face was aglow as he brought Buddy to a halt and handed the reins to Tater. Will whispered to me, "Allen' up to somethin'. I just know it." Before I could respond, Tater asked me to help him mount Buddy.

I led Buddy over to the fence and held the reins while Tater stepped onto the wire fence and swung himself up in the saddle. I handed Tater the reins and eased out of the way. Tater settled into the saddle and nudged his legs against Buddy's sides to get him in motion.

Suddenly, Buddy bucked, bellowed, neighed, and pivoted erratically. His eyes rolled back in his head, his nostrils flared and his tail lashed about violently. Startled, Tater pulled back on the reins. When he did Buddy broke into a pitch. Tater grabbed for the saddle horn. Too late! He sailed over Buddy's right shoulder and hit the ground on his right side with a loud thud.

As Buddy raced off kicking and rearing to the far corner of the pen, Allen broke into a loud laugh, stamping his feet in rhythm. His laughter had come so quickly it seemed he knew exactly what was going to happen.

Will and I stood there in stunned disbelief for a moment. When reality hit us, we rushed to our fallen friend sprawled in the dirt. "Are ya okay, Tater?" we hollered in unison.

Tater was caked with dust from head to toe. He couldn't even open his eyelids! The collision with the ground had taken most of his breath and much of his pride. Tater gasped heavily as he answered, "I...be...fine."

"You're lucky ya didn't get hurt real bad, Tater," Will said with concern.

"Wonder why Buddy startin' buckin' like that?" I asked, shaking my head in bewilderment. Tater and Buddy knew each other, understood each other and trusted each other. Many times Tater had climbed on Buddy's back and ridden like the wind. Each time Tater finished riding Buddy, he would wipe him down and show him some special attention. Their companionship had grown with each ride. That made this irrational behavior on Buddy's part even more surprising.

"Could be that old Buddy don't care much for colored boys," Allen said, still grinning broadly. Indignantly, Tater stared at Allen. He was in physical pain, but the pain to his spirit was greater.

I reached down to give Tater a hand, but he pushed me away. The look on his face was one that I had seen before. It told me that he was burning mad on the inside. He rose unsteadily to his feet and advanced toward Allen, hands clenched. Tater's hard, fixed stare made Allen uncomfortable. "Why're ya lookin at me like that?" I didn't do nothin' to ya." Allen said defensively, taking a couple of backward steps.

"I oughtha whup yo' butt." Tater had a razor-sharp edge to his words.

"Whadda I do?" Allen asked, lifting his arms in a gesture of innocence. "I don't know yet, but I knowed ya done sumthin' ta Buddy to cause him ta pitch like thet," Tater said, as he moved closer to Allen.

"Yeah," Will broke in, "Buddy ain't never done that b'fore."

Allen didn't say anything. The previous big grin on his face had been replaced by a look of concern, notably after Tater moved within a couple yards of him, fists still clenched. Allen was bigger than Tater, but bigger or not, it was obvious that he wanted no part of an irate Tater.

Sensing that Tater was just about to the point of popping Allen with a solid right, I gripped his right arm. "Hold on, Tater, maybe Allen didn't do anythin' ta cause Buddy ta act like that," I remarked, trying to ease the tension.

Allen took a step backwards, nervous sweat forming beads on his upper lip. Tater continued to glare at him. Allen gathered a little courage to say, "I ain't scared..." The sentence was never completed because Will broke in, "Allen, ya better hush yore big, fat mouth 'fore ya get it busted."

Daddy and Buck had been doing some work in the cotton field. We were so engrossed with what was going on in the barnyard that we didn't hear them driving up on the tractor. After parking the tractor in front of the barn, Daddy overheard the heated conversation going on in back of the barn. "What's all the commotion 'bout 'round heah?" Daddy asked sternly, coming through the barnyard gate.

"Buddy threw Tater." Will responded.

"What made him do that?" Daddy asked in a puzzled voice.

We don't know 'cause he just went inta a pitch when Tater started ridin; him," I said excitedly, giving Daddy a brief explanation.

"I don't ever 'member him doin' that before," Daddy declared, shaking his head. "Do y'all?" He asked, looking in the direction of Will and me.

"No, sir," Will and I answered together.

"Huh. That worries me a bit. We probably need ta be keepin' an eye on old Buddy for a while," Daddy said as he turned to walk out of the barnyard. Suddenly, he looked back over this shoulder in the direction of Tater, "Are ya all right, son?" Daddy asked, with a worried look on his face.

Tater nodded, signaling he was okay. Buck, who had entered the barnyard a few moments behind Daddy, walked over toward Tater to check on him.

In the meantime, Allen, who had been uncommonly quiet since Daddy entered the barnyard, opened his fat trap again. "I don't think there's much of a chance of him being' hurt, since he landed on his head," a wryly grin spread across Allen's face.

"That's 'nuff outta ya, young man," Daddy chided Allen as he turned around and glared at him. Daddy surveyed all of us and said, "Now y'all get on up ta the house and get yourselves ready ta go inta town." We had forgotten in all the excitement that we were going to town to the movie.

Tension still filled the air as we exited the barnyard toward the house. Tater came up by Allen and pointed a finger in his face. "I gonna settles t'is withcha later." For once Allen kept his big mouth shut.

Suddenly, Allen turned back toward the barnyard. "Gosh, I forgot to unbridle and unsaddle old Buddy," Allen

said smartly.

"Thet ain't yo' job. Thet be mine and Buck's." Tater's fiery eyes suggested that Allen best get on toward the big house.

"Well, okay... I almost forgot that job belongs to colored folks," Allen countered sarcastically. Buck jerked his head around and looked hard at Allen. He didn't like the sound of those words, but he didn't say anything. Meanwhile, Tater silently glared at Allen. Will and I simply shook our heads, amazed at Buck's and Tater's restraint.

"I'll see y'all later," Allen shouted as he ran toward the house. He was smart enough to notice that he had started a fire burning in both Buck and Tater, and the wise move would be to put some distance between himself and them. Will and I turned to follow Allen toward the house, leaving Tater and Buck to put Buddy in the stable.

On most Saturdays during the spring and summer, Daddy and Buck would work until noon. Then in the afternoon, Daddy would take Momma and us kids into Hanceford. Normally, if the weather was good we would ride in the back of the pickup. Every other Saturday, we took Momma's 1950 Chevrolet Bel Air, because Buck would drive Rosie and her family into town in the pickup.

"Going to town" was a big deal. It was six miles from the farm to Hanceford. Hanceford was a city of about five thousand people. It swelled to much more than that on Saturday.

On the way, we would stop at Billy Frank's service station to gas up. While the gas was being pumped, Billy Frank would check the oil and clean the windshields. Daddy never asked him to do it. "It's jus' part of my job," Billy Frank would drawl.

We always tried to get to town as early in the afternoon as possible, in order to secure a good parking spot. There were just so many of those choice angle parking spaces along Main Street. You would want to be in one those spots so you could see all the people as they walked up and down the sidewalks.

We would go to the movie theatre on most Saturdays to watch a good cowboy picture show. The picture shows would alternate between Roy and Dale Rogers, Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy, Johnny Mack Brown and Rocky Lane. Johnny Mack Brown was an Alabama native and had played football at the University of Alabama. He was a favorite of mine.

It cost a dime to get into the picture show. A bag of popcorn and a big orange drink were each a nickel. With the left over nickel from the quarter each of us brought along, we would splurge on a candy bar. Goobers, chocolate-covered peanuts, was generally my choice.

Momma and Rosie did the grocery shopping while all the kids were at the picture show. Tater, Betty Ann and Mary Jane couldn't sit with us at the picture show because the blacks were confined to the balcony. They also had separate restroom facilities and concession counter.

Daddy and Buck used the time in town to check on new farm equipment, purchase repair parts for the old equipment, and have the corn milled. On some occasions after the picture shows were over, Daddy took us to the soda fountain at Dean's Drug Store for a cone of ice cream. This was my way of knowing that farm profits were good.

Colored folks could make purchases in the drug store, but were not allowed at the soda fountain. I would buy Tater a five-cent ice cream cone (chocolate was his favorite) and sneaked it outside to him. No one ever reprimanded me for it.

On this particular Saturday, Aunt Helen decided that she wanted to drive Momma and Sissy into town in her new Studebaker. It would give her the perfect chance to parade around in her new car in case she saw some of her old friends. Daddy, Will, Allen, and I followed in Momma's car.

The two picture shows we saw were great. The first show was vintage Bud Abbott and Lou Costello. The

second was classic Gene Autry. By the time we arrived home, the sun was passing behind the trees, leaving barely enough light for our afternoon chores. Allen went down to the barn to help us feed the animals and chickens. His presence kept Tater away.

"Guess Tater's too scared ta come 'round," Allen replied disdainfully.

"Allen, if I've told ya once, I've told ya a dozen times, ya best lay off Tater or he's apt ta wax yore behind good." Will warned.

"Him and what army?" Allen was being brave with Tater out of sight.

Momma called us to supper just as we were finishing our chores. The popcorn and Goobers I had at the picture show should have spoiled my supper, but they didn't. I was ready to eat. After a supper of hamburgers and French fries, Momma, Aunt Helen and Sissy went out to the screened in back porch to visit. Allen and Will headed upstairs to play a game of checkers in the bedroom. Daddy and I sat in the living room talking baseball. The New York Giants had a new outfielder from Alabama by the name of Willie Mays. He was black. Daddy said he had a chance to be a really good player, even better than Jackie Robinson, who had been the first black player in the Major Leagues.

A bit later, there was a knock on the front door. "Wonder who that could be at this hour?" Daddy asked as he went to open the front door. I followed. "Probably som' one we know. I didn't hear old Sport barkin' up a storm, did ya?" Daddy asked as he opened the big oak front door.

"Tater... it's you?" Daddy acted surprised. "Are ya okay, son?" He added worriedly.

"Yessuh, I be jus' a little sor', Mr. Bud. But I needs ta see Victor foh a bit. It be 'portant," Tater didn't explain why he came to the front door instead of the back door. It was probably because Momma and Aunt Helen were sitting on the back porch.

"You sure it's not somethin' I need to 'tend to, Tater?" Daddy appeared very concerned.

"Nosuh, I just need ta talk ta Victor foh a minute or so." Tater countered.

"Okay, but 'member it's late. So ya boys don't be long, ya heah?" With that, Daddy turned and headed back into the house.

"Whaddaya need to ask me 'bout, Tater?" I asked curiously. There was nothing to keep me from visiting with Tater for a few minutes with Allen and Will upstairs in the bedroom. It was still hot and muggy with very little movement in the air as Tater and I climbed onto the front porch swing to visit. In between chasing away mosquitoes and gnats, Tater and I revisited his getting thrown by Buddy.

"I finds out why Buddy went inta thet pitch," Tater started out, his dark eyes twinkling in the dim light coming from the living room.

"Yeah, why?" I asked haltingly.

"Dis," he said, holding out a couple of big cockle-burs on a page out of a catalog. A cockle-bur is about the size of a quarter and has zillions of prickly fins with pointed ends on them. "They be stuck right under th' saddle blanket." Tater's tone indicated that he knew they didn't get there by accident, either.

"Do ya think Allen put 'em there?" The words were not out of my mouth good before it occurred to me that's the only way they could have gotten there. Tater simply confirmed it. "I knows he done put' em thair," he said without hesitation.

"Well, it's over and done with now, so why don't ya just forget 'bout it?" I suggested, knowing that was the last thing that Tater wanted to do.

Suddenly, I was in a fight for my life with a giant mosquito that buzzed around my uncovered legs. As I fought

it off, Tater continued. "I ain't gonna forgit it none. I done figgered out how us kin git even," Tater declared with a glimpse of a smile flirting across his lips.

"Whaddaya mean, 'us'?" I asked warily.

"I fixin' ta shows Mr. Allen I ain't as dumb as he thinks I is, but I needs yo' and Will's help." Thunder grumbled in the west, followed by a streak of lightening. We both ducked as the lightning struck nearby. A summer thundershower was definitely headed our way.

"Ah, come on Tater, what good is it gonna do to get even with Allen?" I asked in a monotone, with little conviction.

"I ain't tryin' ta gits even. I jus' gonna show h'm I be a bit smarter than he gives me credit foh. Is ya with me?" Tater's dark eyes stared right at me as he asked. In the hazy light, I could see his eyes were full of anticipation.

The thought of putting one over on Allen was very intriguing to me. "Whatcha got in mind won't hurt him none, will it?" I was concerned that if we did something to physically hurt Allen, we would be in a heap of trouble.

The big mosquito was still zinging around my legs. WHACK! Gotcha!!" I finally put an end to our ongoing battle.

"Heck no," Tater said after watching me put the finishing touches on the mosquito. "Us jus' gonna has a little fun with h'm."

"Well, what is it?" I asked, my interest peaking.

"I still be workin' on it in my mind. So I tell ya mo' 'bout it inter mornin'." Tater's face glowed with delight in the shallow light.

"Well, I wish you'd tell me now. But whatever it is we fixin' to do to Mr. Allen, I hope we can pull it off," I said with an element of mischief in my voice.

"I be seeing ya down at the barn inter mornin' bright and early 'fore we go ta church." With that, Tater disappeared into the darkness.

"See ya then," I shouted behind him with a smile in my voice.

I stood by the door a moment listening to Tater whistling in the muggy summer evening. Rain was in the air. He would have to hurry to keep from getting wet.

When I got back inside the house, I went looking for Allen. He was still in the bedroom playing checkers with Will. "Hey, Allen, when y'all finish that game, I need to talk widcha a minute," I said as I entered the room.

"Whaddaya got on your mind, Victor?" Allen asked, turning toward me. He had a bit of a worried look on his face.

"I just need to ask ya somethin'"

"Like what?" Apprehension weighed on each word.

"Com'on, Allen, let' finish this game," Will pleaded, noticing that Allen's attention had drifted away from checkers. Allen finished the checkers game, but his nervousness helped Will win the game. Soon, Allen followed me toward the door, so I could talk privately with him.

"Whadda 'bout me?" Will asked hurtfully.

"I need ta hava little man-ta-man talk with Allen. We'll be back in no time atall," I told Will, as Allen and I left the bedroom. Momma and Aunt Helen were still talking on the back porch, so we headed toward the front porch. I needed some privacy with Allen, even at the price of my continuing battle with biting insects, and a brewing thunderstorm.

Once on the front porch, I took my customary seat in the swing. Many private conversations had taken place

in that old swing through the years.

Allen took a seat in the rocking chair. We had just taken our seats when it began to rain. Between claps of thunder and streaks of lightning, Allen and I talked.

"Allen, I got somethin' I wanta ask ya..." I didn't finish my sentence before Allen broke in, "Does it have anythin' ta do with Tater getting thrown...?" A big mosquito buzzed around Allen's left earlobe, briefly breaking his train of thought. He vigorously slapped it away.

"Yeah, it does. I wanta know why ya put 'em cockleburs under th' saddle blanket?" I asked, straight up.

"Ya think I'd do somethin' like that?"

"I sure do. And I'm waitin' for ya to tell me why."

"Okay... I wanted to... ah... teach Tater a lesson." There was hesitancy in Allen's voice.

"What kinda lesson?"

"That white folks are smarter than colored folks."

Anger boiled in me and brought me to my feet. "I oughta..." Momma's voice at the front door kept me from knocking Allen into next week.

You boys come on in the house now. It's time to get ready for bed." The sternness of Momma's tone told me she may have overheard some of the conversation. Yet, she said nothing about it.

We generally slept in a little later than normal on Sunday morning, even though we still had our regular chores to do. Yet, on this Sunday, Tater and I had some real planning to do, and we needed to do it before Allen joined us at the barn.

No such luck. Allen was up early and down at the barn with us. So Tater and I would have to go to Plan B and meet down at the pier before going to church. Tater had his fishing gear with him just in case, so he went on ahead to the pier when Allen showed up at the barn.

After finishing the morning chores, I hustled back up to the house for a quick breakfast. I grabbed a couple of Rosie's world-renowned biscuits and plugged them with some homemade blackberry jam. Washing them down with a glass of cold sweet milk, I started for the kitchen door on my way to the pond. "Where do ya think you're going, young man?" Momma asked, walking into the kitchen just as I reached for the doorknob.

"Momma, me and Tater are gonna get a little fishin' in before we get ready for church."

"Fishing? You only got about forty-five minutes before time to leave for Sunday School. Are you sure that's what you boys are gonna do?" A question mark was written all over her face.

"Momma, we sure do need to talk over somethin' that's 'mportant," I pleaded, with as much emphasis as I could garner.

"I want to know what's so important that it can't wait 'til after church?"

"I can't tell ya right now, but I promise I'll tell ya 'fore the day is out. Okay?" I figured that if we pulled off Tater's plan, she would know all about it soon enough. "You're going be in a heap of trouble if you're not back here in forty minutes. Do you hear me, Victor Louis?" Momma stated firmly. I was at the door before she finished.

By the time I arrived at the pier, Tater had already hooked a couple of small bass. The rain the night before had sweetened the air and the entire pond area was alive with color and sound. "Okay, let me in on what we're gonna do with Mr. Allen," I asked, not wanting to waste a minute of time.

"Whatazneed is fo' ya and Will ta get Allen ta goes skinny-dippin' down ta th' swimmin' hole." The resentment that had smoldered in Tater yesterday seem to have disappeared. It had been replaced by a hint of intrigue.

"Skinny-dippin'?" I asked, trying to figure out what Tater was plotting.

"Yep, that be right. I need y'all ta git h'm in the swimmin' hole with his birt' day suit on, and I be takin' care of th' rest."

"Now, ya did promise me that we ain't gonna hurt Allen none. Ya did say that, right?" I was still concerned that Tater might do something that would physically harm Allen.

"Nah, we ain't gonna hurt 'em none, jus' has a tad of fun wid h'm," Tater said. He filled me in on a few more details of his plan.

I liked what I heard. It would be a great way to get back at Allen. "Gosh, I wish we didn't have to go to church today," I thought to myself. I was anxious to get on with putting some humility in Mr. Allen's life. I left the pier mumbling, "I can't wait 'til this afternoon!"

"Me neether." Tater responded. I didn't turn around to look, but I knew he had a huge grin on his face. I had one, too.

The church pew was harder than usual on my backside. Sunday church service and Sunday dinner seemed to last forever. We always had to rest at least one hour after eating before we could go swimming. Momma was afraid we would develop stomach cramps and drown before anyone could pull us out of the water.

Aunt Helen and Allen used this time to pack their Studebaker for the drive back to Mobile. They planned to leave shortly after we finished our swim. This waiting period also gave me an opportunity to fill Will in on Tater's plan. As he listened, a broad smile swept across his face. He loved the plan, but he liked the potential results better.

Finally, we were out the door and on our way down to the creek. Shortly before we arrived at the swimming hole, I acted like a great idea just hit me: "Hey Allen, since this heah is yore last day with us for a while, whaddaya say we do somethin' special... like go skinny- dippin'?"

"Ya mean take all my clothes off?" A frown covered Allen's face. "Yep, that's what Victor means," Will chimed in.

"Whadda if someon' comes 'long?" Allen asked skeptically.

"Ain't no one gonna know we're butt naked, Allen, if we're in the water, now are they?" Will asked with a chuckle in his voice. From the vantage point of the highway, it was easy to see the swimming hole. Yet, as long as we were in the water, our bare bottoms would be out of sight of any human eyes.

"Sides, who'd wanta see yore white fanny anyway?" I laughed loudly. Will joined me with a big laugh of his own. Allen was not amused.

"What if some girls come 'long to swim?" Allen asked, still trying to find an excuse to keep his swimming trunks on.

"Heck, there ain't no girls bound ta come down here. Allen. This swimmin' hole is jus' for boys," Will said reassuringly as we arrived at the swimming hole.

"I don't care. I ain't 'bout to take my clothes off," Allen stated firmly as he sat down on a fallen tree near the swimming hole.

"Okay, then have it your way. But Will and me are goin' skinnin-dippin'," I said emphatically. I was trying my best to disguise my disappointment because indications were that we were going to let Tater down.

Will and I eased in behind a thicket of brush which bordered the creek on the south side and removed our clothing. In a jiffy, we rushed out of the brush for the water. Naked as jaybirds, we both launched head-first dives into the creek. The water was chilling. Bush Creek wound for miles through a covering of trees and underbrush, rarely exposed to direct sunlight. Even in hundred-degree summer temperatures, its waters could chill a swimmer right to the bone. That's the reason most swimmers waited until late June and or early July to swim.

Allen sat immobile on the log as Will and I splashed around playfully in the water. We both must have been thinking that if Allen saw what a good time we were having he would join us. Shortly, Allen stood up and began to remove his shirt. "I'm comin' in," he said hurriedly.

"I'd say ya best step ov'r yonder behind 'em bushes, or somebody's apt to see yore naked booty," Will laughed as he pointed toward a big bush.

"I'm comin' in with my trunks on," Allen said firmly.

"If ya do, Will and me will just take 'em off," I told him.

"Y'all won't do that, will ya?" Allen asked hesitantly.

"Try us," Will answered.

Allen pondered for a moment. "Okay then, I'm gonna go back to the house."

A quick-thinking Will immediately began to sing, "Allen is a scairy cat! Allen is a scairy cat!" His voice rose with each word.

Allen's cheeks flushed immediately. "I ain't no scairy cat, either."

Will started chanting again, "Allen is a scairy cat! Allen is a scairy cat!" I joined in, and we repeated several times: "Allen is a scairy cat! "Allen is a scairy cat! "Allen is a scairy cat!"

"I'll show y'all who's a scairy cat," Allen said, as he hastily retreated behind a big bush.

"Reckon he's comin' in?" Will whispered to me. In a brief moment we got our answer. "Dang it, got my drawstring in a knot." After seconds of silence, that seem like eternity to us, he blurted out, "There, got it!" Suddenly, a white blur emerged from the underbrush and belly flopped into the water.

Finally, it had happened! Allen was in the water with his clothes secure in the underbrush. A great chance for Tater to get even with Allen was about to unfold. First we played a game where we would dive down, touch bottom, and come up with a handful of mud. The one with the largest handful of mud was the winner. When Allen went down under the water, Tater put his plan into action. Allen obviously felt he had the largest handful, although both Will and I had him beaten hands down. We put up no argument. Mr. Allen's arrogance was about to be broken like a cowboy breaks a new colt.

"Whoday'all suppose these heah clothes b'longs ta?" We turned toward the sound of Tater's voice and there he was holding Allen's pants and trunks above his head.

"They're mine and ya better put them down if ya know what's good for ya!" Allen yelled, splashing the water while trying to stay afloat in the swift stream of Bush Creek.

"Howda I knows they be yo's?" Tater asked, dangling the pants and shirt back and forth above his head.

"Cause I say they are mine," Allen answered angrily as he swam toward the bank.

"Well, I don't b'lieve ya," Tater said curtly, as he finished rolling the pants and shirt into a bundle and placed it under his arm.

"Stop!" Allen cried out in desperation, grasping the bank's edge. "Whaddaya gonna do with my clothes?" Allen's voice echoed a deep concern for what was going to happen to his clothing.

Tater started toward the thicket, but stopped. It was evident that he was going to play this scene to the hilt.

Will and I were at the creek bank holding onto a low hanging tree branch, working hard to constrain ourselves from laughing out loud at what was unfolding before our eyes. We had to at least fake our concern for Allen, so I said "Tater, I think it best that ya just put Allen's clothes back where you are found them, okay?" There was little conviction in my voice.

Ignoring me, Tater said, "Suppose these pants and thes' heah swimmin' trunks I done found gonna fits me?"

With that, he turned to depart.

Allen turned belligerent when he realized Tater was leaving with his clothes. "Ya little porch monkey, you'd better bring my pants back heah right now. Do ya heah me?" I cut my eyes toward Will and saw that he was astonished as I was at Allen's language. "There's no tellin' where Allen clothes would end up now," I said softly to Will.

Tater had planned to keep the clothes only a few minutes then return them. I was afraid that part of the plan now had gone out of the window.

"Ya two are in on this, ain't ya?" Allen charged.

"What makes ya think that?" I asked, not looking Allen in the eye.

Before Allen could answer, Will put the second part of the plan in place: "Look over yonder, ain't that a moccasin?"

Let's get out of heah!" I shouted, as the three of us scurried out of the water onto the south bank. Once in the underbrush, Will and I got dressed.

"Where're y'all goin'?" Allen asked, definitely sounding worried.

"We're gonna go find Tater and git yore clothes back," I quickly offered, with tongue-in-cheek.

"While we're gone, I'd suggest ya get back in the water 'fore someone sees ya ain't got no clothes on," Will said gleefully, as both he and I giggled.

"By the way, we was just kiddin' 'bout that moccasin," Will confessed between giggles.

Ya'll in on this. I know ya'll are," Allen again said, while shivering in his birthday suit.

As we walked away, Will turned back to Allen, "I don't know what we'll do if we don't find yore clothes. Do ya, Victor?" Will snickered under his breath. I didn't respond. I was laughing too hard under my breath to speak.

In the meantime, Allen raced from behind the brush and jumped back into the creek. Half submerged in the water, he yelled deliriously: "I don't wanta stay heah by myself!" Will and I had not gone but a few feet into the woods when we heard Allen beginning to sob behind us. "Please," he cried out, his voice cracking, "don't leave me... y'all can't leave me here like this."

I wanted to look back and say something. Will probably did, too. But we started to run, and we neither looked back nor said a word. Allen needed to learn a valuable lesson and the three of us were going to teach it to him.

Allen's pitiful crying hung with us for a few seconds, but soon the wind whipped his cries away. "Reckon Tater's up by the big pine where he said he'd be?" I asked Will, knowing his guess would be as good as mine.

"Won't know 'til we get there, will we?" Will remarked curtly.

Will and I moved quickly along the trail through the thicket and woods until we sighted the big pine tree. This pine tree was much bigger in diameter than a normal pine tree, and served as a landmark for us on our trips to and from the swimming holes.

"Do ya see Tater anywhere?" I asked, looking in the direction of the big pine tree.

"Nope," Will answered.

"Hey, Tater, where are ya?" I yelled at the top of my lungs.

Silence.

"Tell you what, Will ya go up toward the house ta look for Tater. I'm goin' back ta the swimmin' hole to check on Allen." Guilt feelings had taken root in the pit of my stomach. "Whaddaya wanta do that for?" Will asked with a sneer on his face. "He needs ta simmer a bit ta get some of that meanness out of h'm."

I ignored my younger brother's response. "Doncha quit lookin' til ya find Tater. Okay?" I spoke as firmly as I could. "Our fannies are gonna be in big trouble if somethin' happens ta Allen," I reminded Will.

Will threw his head back and rolled his eyes. "He's too darn mean for anythin' ta happen ta him." Will didn't appear to have the same concern as I did for Allen's well-being.

I had not gone a hundred yards in the direction of the swimmin' hole when I literally bumped into Tater. "Where in the world have ya been?" I ask, with a touch of anger in my voice. "I thought ya were gonna meet us up by the big pine tree?"

"I be down ta th' crick."

"You've been down there harassin' Allen, haven't ya?"

"Nah. I be takin' his clothes back ta h'm."

"You done did what?"

"I said I be takin' Allen's clothes back down ta the crick ta h'm."

"What didcha do that for?"

"'Cause I felt like it be th' right thang ta do."

"Well, what did..." I stopped in mid-sentence as a red-eyes, weary-looking Allen came up the trail. He was still sniffing and wiping his runny nose with the bottom of his tee shirt. "Whaddaya think 'bout Tater bringin' your clothes back to ya?" I asked smartly, while quickly switching my streams of thought.

"I hasn't got nothin' to say, 'cept y'all in a lot of troubl'," Allen muttered as he continued walking toward the house.

"Serves ya right for the way you've been treatin' Tater," I said unsympathetically, falling in behind Allen with Tater right behind me.

"Just wait 'til I tell Aunt Alice and my mother what y'all done."

"I don't think I'd be doing that if I were ya, Allen. I believe I'd be more inclined ta forget it and go on."

"Forget it and go on my butt."

"Well, are ya gonna tell 'em how Tater snitched yore clothes? I believe they're liable ta see that he outsmarted ya on that one."

"He wouldn't have done it without ya'll helpin' him, now would he?" Allen replied, while quickened his pace.

"Bull. He pulled it off by himself."

"I'm still gonna tell 'em though."

"Okay. Have it your way. But ya can bet yore bottom dollar me and Will's gonna tell 'em 'bout them cockleburs." I stated strongly, as Allen suddenly stopped.

"I'd just deny I know anythin' 'bout 'em cockleburs?" Allen stated defiantly.

"Allen, we know ya the one who done it, and Tater got even with ya for doin' it. My thinkin' is y'all are even, so why don't ya both just say y'all sorry and go on," I suggested with emphasis.

Tater, who had been unusually quiet during this exchange, surprised us by saying, "Allen, I be willin' ta say I be sorry and forget it, if ya is."

"I ain't never gonna say I'm sorry ta no colored person," Allen shot back, looking straight ahead as he spoke.

"Maybe now's a good time ta start," I challenged.

Allen came to a halt. He stood there for a moment, hesitant in responding. The fact he was pondering a possible apology was a good sign. Shortly, Allen said weakly, "Okay, I'm sorry 'bout puttin' those cockleburs under Buddy's

saddle."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. After a brief pause, Tater stuck out his right hand and said, "No hard feelin's Allen."

Allen looked at Tater's hand for a few seconds. "C'mon Allen," I said to myself, "Do what's right." Then Allen extended his right hand without saying a word. The brief handshake completed, Allen turned and began running toward the big house, yelling as he went, "See y'all next time."

I put my arm around Tater's shoulders as we started walking again. "Reckon he'll be pullin' any more of his stunts?" I asked.

Tater shook his head, "Naw, I has a feelin' he ain't. I believe he now knows I be a bit smarter than he thinks." He smiled, a big smile. I laughed under my breath. Pretty soon both of us were giggling and carrying on as we raced home.

As promised, I told Momma the whole story. She showed no emotion until I finished. Then she smiled and said, "Serves Mr. Allen right. I hope he learned a lesson." Time proved he had.

## Chapter Five

### The Moonshine Still

Conroe County, where we lived, was dry. That meant no legal alcoholic beverages were sold in our county. The moonshine whiskey business was one of the top businesses in the county. "Bootleggers" thrived. Daddy once said that The South Alabama Journal reported that there were as many moonshine stills in the county as there were churches.

The one person on the farm who knew something about moonshine stills was Preacher. A few months back, he was 'holding school' with Tater and me on the front porch of the old house. Will wasn't present because he had been grounded for turning in a term paper too late. Out of the blue, Preacher began firing on all cylinders about the evils of moonshine whiskey. He told us things like: "Shine be th' devil's brew." "Y'all yungins' best stays 'way from th' shine." "Thet moonshine licker dooms ya ta goes right ta th' pits of hell."

He also told us at this gathering that a big moonshine existed up along Bush Creek past Turkey Hill. He said it was the biggest one in the county and that more folks worked there than any other 'business' around. He went on to tell us about how the devil was going to get all those folks. Their judgment day was coming. Preacher never got around to telling us that he was one of the bootleggers' biggest customers.

Now Preacher was known to stretch the truth a tad, but his story about the moonshine still had a ring of truth to it. It was certainly appealing to a couple of inquiring young minds getting ready to take on the world. Now a year later, Tater and I talked on and off about what it might be like to discover for ourselves if this still was real or not.

What we needed was a legitimate reason to ask our parents to let us go on a field trip up in the woods along Bush Creek. We had never been more than two hundred yards off the highway by ourselves, but we were ready to take on whatever the wilds could throw at us. And if we were lucky, we just might stumble upon that big moonshine still.

Our "legitimate reason" turned up in October, 1951, in the form of a nature project for my science class. I had two weeks to collect items for it. No place would be better for finding plants and rocks than the woods along Bush Creek.

Tater and I talked it over. I would first ask my folks for approval to make the field trip. With their okay secured, then we would approach Rosie. Surely, she would give her approval for Tater to go, especially if Daddy and Momma had said "yes" for me to go. Now to execute the plan.

I explained to Momma what we wanted to do. I was so frightened I don't even remember what I said to hear. I know I was deeply afraid the answer would be no. "You want to do what?" Momma's voice was filled with disbelief. Obviously her response indicated I had said something she understood.

I repeated as confidently and persuasively as I possibly could, "Me and Tater wanta take a field trip up 'long Bush Creek ta look for some things for my science project."

"Absolutely not, young man! I'm not about to let you wander around up there in those woods without a grown-up-along. And how many times do I havata tell you that it's Tater and I?"

Ignoring the English lesson, I replied, "Ya see, Momma... this science project is due in two weeks... and I want some... unusual things for it." I stumbled all over my words.

"Can't you find those things around here?"

"No, ma'am, I don't think so. I wanta put some things from Turkey Hill in my exhibit."

"Turkey Hill! Do you know how far it is to Turkey Hill?"

"Yes, ma'am, I think so. It's not really that far. 'Sides Tater and me, we'll be okay, Momma. Please let me go." I was in my begging mode now.

After a long pause, Momma said, "Well, I want to talk it ov'r with your daddy."

"Momma, let's you and I talk with h'm. Okay?" I spoke up as quickly as I could without interrupting, trying to remember my English lesson. I wanted to be able to explain to Daddy why I needed to go. Momma just didn't have the same motivation as I did.

Momma paused again. "Okay, we'll talk with him after supper tonight."

"That's great! Thanks a million, Momma."

My taking this field trip was big stuff to Momma. It was a giant step in the "letting go" process. Rosie often said there were four stages to children growing up. "First," she said, "Theys be lap younguns. Then theys be floor younguns. Next theys be out th' door and become yard younguns. And 'fore ya knows it, theys be road younguns goin' heah and yonder." Tater and I were trying to move from being yard younguns to being road younguns, and it wasn't going down too easily with Momma, and probably wasn't with Rosie, as well.

I think the four stages of child development originated with Preacher because I once heard him say that all mamas want to keep their younguns in the yard stage as long as possible, while their daddies wanted to ease them on out into the road stage as soon as possible. These descriptions of the stages of being a youngun hadn't made a lot of sense to me when Preacher and Rosie talked about them, but I was now finding out firsthand what they meant.

Finally, supertime came, I was too nervous to eat much. I hardly had anything to say at the supper table, either. Daddy asked me if I wasn't feeling well. I just shrugged it off as being full from dinner. I was full all right, full of anticipation.

Momma, Daddy and I went out on the back porch shortly after supper. Will and Sissy were told to stay inside and do their homework. Momma asked me to tell Daddy what I wanted to do.

As I finished my sales pitch, I was trying to get a read on him. He rubbed his chin and the lines in his brow deepened. He was in deep thought. After a brief moment of silence, Daddy asked, "I got one question for ya, Victor. Where exactly up the creek do ya boys plan on goin'?"

"We thought we'd go up a ways by Bush Creek. Then we'll swing over to Turkey Hill to search for my science project items. I want it to be the best'un in the class." I answered persuasively. At least I thought I had.

"Turkey Hill, huh? Is ya sure that's as far as y'all goin'?" From the sound of that question, I realized Daddy probably had heard about the big moonshine still, too. Otherwise, why would he be asking us if we are going further than Turkey Hill?

"I reckon so, I gonna borrow a compass to use so we don't get lost." The last thing I wanted was Daddy to think that we had planned to go past Turkey Hill.

"I notice that you conveniently left Will out. Why isn't he included in this trip?" Momma asked suspiciously, finally getting into the conversation.

"Alice, I don't think Will's old 'nuff ta make a trip like that." Daddy's answer took me off the hook, but I had to put in my two cents worth. "Sides, Momma, all Will does when he hasta walk any distance is complain, and ya know he won't care none 'bout lookin' for insects and rocks and that kind of stuff."

Momma seemed to accept our reasoning for excluding Will and quietly changed the line of questioning. "Sounds to me, Bud, like you might be for these boys going," she fretted. "What happens if one of them gets bitten by a snake or something?"

"Momma, we'll be okay. We ain't 'bout to do nothin' crazy." I said quickly.

"Victor, I'm tired of you using the word 'ain't' so much. Ain't isn't in the dictionary." Momma's voice was filled with irritation.

"Yes, ma'am," I answered quietly, head down.

Thoughtfully, she stared at Daddy. After a long pause, she said, "I still don't think this is a good idea, Bud. I wish you thought the same way I do."

Daddy looked at me, ignoring Momma's sentiments. His expression was serious. "Son, goin' out like that on your own isn't any fun if you get lost or run into some kind of trouble. But if ya promise that you'll stay close to the creek bank and don't go past where the creek takes a ninety-degree turn toward Turkey Hill, it'll be all right with me for ya to go." Hurrah! Daddy was ready for me to become a road young'un!

Momma's face had a stricken look. "Bud Anderson..." Momma didn't finish her sentence. She just sat there shaking her head side-to-side as if she couldn't believe what was going on. It was obvious that Momma wasn't ready for me to leave the yard stage.

"Alice, I believe these boys will be fine if they'll just use som' common sense." Daddy reassured her. Preacher's definition of common sense raced through my mind: "*C'mom sense be wat ya need when ya needs ta know whats ta do ta stays out of troubles.*" There was no way Tater and I could run into trouble, was there?

After a brief pause that seemed to last forever, Momma said, "Okay, I'm going along with your Daddy against my better judgment. But we're going ta have some time restrictions, young man. If you're not back before dark, either your Daddy or I will tan your hide. Do you understand me, Victor Louis?" Momma left no doubt where she stood.

"Yes, ma'am," I said meekly as I could with my whole insides ready to explode with excitement. I thanked both parents and excused myself. It was too late to tell Tater. It would have to wait until morning. I had a difficult time settling down enough to sleep. My enthusiasm level was high as the ceiling.

Tater was as excited as I was the next morning when I told him that my folks had given me permission to go. It shouldn't be any problem for Rosie to agree for us to go. Wrong.

"Ya boys ain't grown up 'nuff to be traipsing 'round out'em woods by yo'self. Lord knows whadda mighta happens upon." Rosie had the same worried look on her face that Momma had on hers. "But if Mister Bud and Miss Alice feels it be all right for y'all to go, I mighta goes 'long with it. But I gonna sleeps on it first." I looked over at Tater. He looked at me and shrugged. The air went right out of our enthusiasm like air out of a lead balloon.

Sleep was slow to come by...again. I was concerned that Rosie hadn't given Tater the okay to go. But my biggest concern was my conscience. It was doing a lot of talking to me, and what it was telling me wasn't good. We hadn't been completely upfront with our folks about our plans for the field trip. Sure, we were going to find a few insects and plants, and maybe a couple of rocks, but our real objective was to search for the moonshine still. I had the feeling both mothers suspected that something else was up. Mothers have a real feel for the truth.

At breakfast I didn't ask Rosie if she had made her decision. I didn't want to alert Daddy and Momma to the fact that Rosie hadn't decided if Tater could go on the field trip. Hearing her decision would have to wait until after school. The school day seemed to last three days. At last we were home, ready for Rosie's decision.

Tater and I found Rosie washing clothes. Our washing machine was a wringer type. Rosie washed the clothes in the tub part of the washer and then guided them through the wringer on top of the tub to squeeze out the water and soap. Then she would drain the wash water and replace it with fresh water to rinse the clothes. Once the clothes were rinsed, she ran them back through the wringer, to squeeze out the water. Rosie would then hang the clothes out to dry on a couple of long clothes lines located about twenty-five feet from the back porch on the north

side of the house.

"Hey, Mama, needs sum help?" Tater bellowed as the two of us entered the laundry room which extended off the kitchen.

"I knows wat y'all wants. What I wanta knows is how far up the crick y'all plans ta go, anyhow?" Rosie asked suspiciously. It appeared she knew something about that old moonshine still, too.

"Up around Turkey Hill," I said, with a straight face and an inner feeling of uneasiness.

"Thet be right, Mama," Tater replied, backing me up.

Y'all ain't fixin' ta go past Turkey Hill. Is thet what I heah y'all sayin'?"

"Yes, ma'am, that'll be the end of the line." I said with my fingers mentally crossed. "We're not planning to go past Turkey Hill, just change directions." I added. That much was right.

"Do thet means I kin go, Mama, if us stop up 'round Turkey Hill?" Tater begged.

"I still ain't feeling' none ta good 'bout it... but I guess ya kin go." Apprehension filled Rosie's voice as she gave Tater her blessings to make the trip.

Tater and I slapped each other on the back. "Thanks Mama. I jus' be knowin' ya be lettin' me go," Tater said, flashing a big smile. "Ya be th' best mama." He gently patted Rosie on the arm as he spoke.

"Y'all be goin' wen?" Rosie asked as if she had something else in the back of her mind.

"Next Satriday," Tater said joyfully.

Before we could hustle away, Rosie offered some parting words. "Thair be sumpin' I want ta warns y'all 'bout. Thair be talk 'bout an old moonshine still up on the crick 'round a deep ravine. Y'all stays 'way from thet ravine. Does y'all heah me?" Rosie was nearly out of breath by the time she finished and sweat was pouring off her brow. She was obviously very nervous about this field trip Tater and I were planning.

My thoughts shifted to the clue that Rosie had just given us. We now had a pretty good idea the still was somewhere around a ravine. "What's a ravine?" I asked myself. For the first time, I felt apprehensive about the safety of the trip. We weren't headed for trouble, were we?

I was in the kitchen on Wednesday afternoon when both Momma and Rosie cornered me. "What do you boys plan on wearing Saturday?" Momma inquired.

"Don't guess we'd thought much 'bout it," I answered casually. Suddenly, it occurred to me Momma's tone of voice indicated that our clothing was going to be an issue.

"It's going to be a bit chilly in the morning, so you boys will definitely need a jacket and shoes." Momma instructed.

"Y'all needs ta be wearin' sumpin' on y'all's legs, too," Rosie said with a nod. "Thair be lots of sticker bushes and briar patches up 'long thet crick." she continued.

"Ah, come on, you two, you're not dealing with little children heah." That's what I wanted to say, but I said, "Some long pants, pullover shirt, light jacket, and shoes. Is that what me and Tater need to be wearin'?"

"Yes, that's about right, Momma affirmed. "And Victor, you still need to work on how you use the English language. I just nodded in agreement.

"Ah says thet be 'bout right withs me, too," Rosie echoed.

The last thing I wanted us to do was mess things up over a few pieces of clothing. But I knew I was going to have to put the hard sell on Tater to wear shoes. He hated wearing them more than I did. Shoes were unfamiliar to us boys, especially from April to October. The other months of the year, we would only wear them on extremely cold days.

The first time I remember wearing a pair of shoes for a full day was Easter Sunday 1951. Momma had bought me a new pair of lace-up dress shoes and was determined to get her money's worth that single day. She didn't let me take my shoes off once. By the time we got home from the all-day church activities, my feet were blistered.

There was a freedom about running through the soft grass and walking through mud puddles with bare feet. But stepping on a nail, large stone or broken glass was not fun. Will once had a nail go all the way through his foot. He had to get a tetanus shot and hobbled around for a couple weeks, complaining the whole time about his inactivity.

I was right. Tater was anything but excited about wearing shoes. "Well, if ya tellin' me I has to wear'em then I be wearin' 'em old Keds Buck give me."

Deciding what else to wear was reasonably easy. We would both wear cotton pullover shirts, and Tater would wear his overalls and I would wear a pair of loose-fitting blue jeans. The choice of outerwear was even easier. I had only one jacket, Tater had none. He would wear a tee shirt and his classic long-sleeved red flannel shirt over his overalls. It wouldn't matter anyway. He would shed it as soon as the sun got high in the sky. As it turned out, the choice of clothing became increasing more important as our field trip unfolded. And not in a positive way, either.

Saturday morning arrived. We took care of our regular morning chores, ate a hearty breakfast of biscuits, sausage and sugar cane syrup, then readied ourselves for the field trip. We made a final check on the gear we were taking with us. Our gear included a canteen of water, a small burlap sack to tote nature items we found, a knife, a compass, and a slingshot that my second cousin Wilford Taylor had made for us. Tater usually kept the slingshot in his possession.

There was an art to making a good slingshot. Wilford would cut a sturdy limb from an oak tree about six inches below where two branches forked off in different directions. Wilford cut the branches another four to six inches above the fork. He would then cut a foot-long strip of rubber from an old tire tube and attached it with leather strips to the two branch posts. He sold his slingshots for a quarter.

He also carved slingshots out of a piece of wood, but it wasn't as hardy as the oak tree variety. He sold those for a dime. Tater and I bought one of the twenty-five cents slingshots to share. We couldn't afford for each to buy one.

Will didn't have his own slingshot, he was always wanting to borrow ours. When Tater and I were reluctant to let him use ours, Will decided to make his own. The second time he used his homemade variety, the strap broke when he pulled it back. It just missed doing some serious damage to his right eye. He had a big bruise on the side of his face. It took every ounce of willpower for Tater and me not to laugh at him. Will never attempted to shoot a slingshot again.

Tater was a better shot than me, even though neither one of us had ever killed any kind of small animal with the slingshot. Our slingshot proficiency was gauged by the number of syrup cans knocked off a fence post.

Tater put the slingshot in his bag. Our final preparations were made. "Tis jus' be ta day, I end of killin' me a squirrel," Tater said with that broad grin spread across his face.

The thought kept running through my mind that there was going to be something about this trip that would be both exciting and frightening. Secretly, I had hoped our adventures would include locating the moonshine still, but now that the possibility was upon us I was extremely nervous about it. I wasn't sure how Tater felt, but if he was nervous he didn't show it.

Will was so upset about being excluded from our trip that Momma decided to let him spend the Friday night before our trip over at his friend, Billy Odom's, home. That way he wouldn't be home when we departed on Saturday morning. She also promised he could go to the picture show on Saturday afternoon.

My conscience worked on me all through the night. I rolled and tumbled, getting little sleep. I kept thinking about the fact that our main goal was finding that old moonshine still, not searching for items for my science class.

Saturday morning arrived much too soon. Rupert, the rooster, let me know that with his wake up call. As Tater and I did our chores, I wanted to tell him that I was having second thoughts about finding the still. That would be the wise move, but I couldn't back out now. Tater was ready and anxious to get started.

"Y'all takes care of yo 'selves, y'all heah," Rosie said uneasily, as she handed Tater a brown grocery bag with grease stains on the bottom. That was the fried chicken for us to snack on. As we loaded the rest of our gear on our backs and in our arms, Rosie added emphatically, "Now, y'all member what I say 'bout 'em moonshiners. Y'all stays ' way from thet ravine."

"Yes, ma'am, us gonna be safe, Mama. Ya kin bet on thet." With those words Tater rushed out the screen door with me right behind him.

"Y'all better be back heah by dark," Momma shouted behind us. She had almost missed our leaving, and her parting words were fading in the distance as we raced toward the woods on the west side of the pond.

We took the shortcut through the woods down the hill toward the bridge over Bush Creek. We crossed the highway over to the north side of creek. From there we turned west along the creek bank. We were on our way! And we were both a mixture of excitement and curiosity about where our journey would take us.

Not far up the creek, we turned north onto an old logger's trail and made our way deeper into the woods, but within earshot of the creek. The woods were surprisingly quiet. The leaves on the hardwood trees had begun to change color. The colors of autumn, red, orange, brown, and yellow, were popping up everywhere.

Tater and I had been walking and talking for several minutes, not paying much attention to where we were going. Suddenly the rustling of leaves captured our attention. "Sumpin' comin'," Tater said slightly above a whisper.

I felt a surge of fright. We both stood in complete silence for what seemed like an eternity. After a bit, the sound faded away. "I'm not feelin' just right 'bout this place," I said faintly.

Before Tater could speak, "Ya think that was a squirrel?" I queried.

"Ain't no doubt in my mind," Tater replied confidently, not knowing any more than me.

The sun was beginning to climb high over the trees and was spreading its bright rays through the branches. The wind had picked up and was whistling through the pines as we sat down on some pine needles for a brief rest and a drink of water.

We had barely sat down when the hooves of an animal on the run filled the air. Before we had a chance to get scared, a long-legged whitetail buck raced out of the underbrush from an area near the creek and streaked across in front of us some thirty yards away. It was gone just as quickly as it appeared.

"Thet deer sho' kin run," Tater observed. "And didcha see 'em antlers? Th'y be big as me." He separated his hands high above his head to demonstrate the size of the antlers. I smiled and nodded in agreement.

Out of the blue, Tater told me that he had written a song and wanted my opinion. "Okay, let me heah it," I spoke, with a touch of sarcasm in my voice.

"Heah goes." With that Tater sprang into, what turned out to be, a little jingle: "Cum let's me show, th' Frymanville I know, whair th' Bob Whites sing, and Tater be th' king."

"Tater, why are ya always tootin' yore own horn?" I asked, with an element of disgust clinging to my every word.

"Caused when I toots my own horn, the sounds be travelin' a lot further," Tater laughed through that teeth-

filled grin of his that on many occasions looked like a “old mule eating briars,” as Daddy would describe it.

I simply shook my head, as I got up and began to walk away. Going forward, he would sing his little jingle when he wanted to get under my skin. It worked every time.

We moved on. The unfamiliar landscape made me feel even more uneasy. At first the uneasiness caused me to walk haltingly. "Cum on, Victor, ya jus' holdin' us up," Tater stated impatiently on more than one occasion.

"Nah, I'm ... not," I said, remembering Momma's words not to use the word ain't. "You do 'member we're out here ta find some things for my science class, don'tcha?" I picked up my pace somewhat, but I found myself turning around to check behind us several times as we moved further away from civilization.

At the edge of a big clump of trees we stopped to rest again. We began to wrestle, rolling and tumbling in the warm pine needles. After a few minutes of tussling, we rolled onto our backs and gazed at the bright sky overhead. "Ya knows, Victor, I is glad ya be my friend." Tater words caught me by surprise.

I reached my left hand over and squeezed his right shoulder. "I'm glad you're my best friend too, Tater."

"I be hongry for sum of Mama's fried chicken," Tater said, changing the mood of the moment.

"You wanta piece of chick..." I stopped in midsentence to offer Tater something to eat from Mother Nature instead. "Hey, Tater, help me pick up a few of these pine cones."

"Is ya gonna take 'em back foh yo' science class?"

"Nah, you'll see." I dug a pine nut hidden out of the fins of a large cone and cracked it open with my teeth. "Yum-m-m," I said, licking my chops as I tasted it.

"Thet be good?" Tater questioned, a frown stretched across his brow.

I handed him a pine nut. He took a tiny bite. "Ain't bad," he said, smacking his lips.

After we ate our fill of some pine nuts, I tossed the largest pine cone I could find into the burlap sack for my science project. Just then, a young gray squirrel dashed past us and scurried about ten feet up a big oak tree, where it stopped. By coincidence, Tater was checking the slingshot. As if by reflex, he grabbed a rock, inserted it into the leather pouch, took aim, and stretched the rubber to its limit. He released the rock. It zinged toward the unsuspecting squirrel and to our surprise, found its mark. The squirrel fell from the tree, dead before it hit the ground.

Tater looked at me with a "Whadda I do next look?" After a brief pause, he said, "I sho' is a good shot, ain't I? I be tellin' ya 'fore I wuz gonna kill me a squirrel up heah." His patented smile again stretched across his face from ear to ear.

I didn't know whether to congratulate him or scold him. "Yeah, you're a good shot, but whaddaya plan to do with that dead squirrel?"

"I fixin' ta takes it home with me and let Mama makes sum stew," Tater said proudly.

"Where're ya plannin' to put it? It's bleedin' out of its mouth." The sight of blood was making me a little woozy. "Don't ya reckon we oughta just give it a proper burial and be on our way," I added firmly, shaking my head from side-to-side.

"Nah, I wants to tote..." I interrupted Tater before he could finish his sentence. "Okay! Okay!" I said, "Put it in the sack and let's go." Just get it out of my sight was all I was thinking. Tater quickly placed the squirrel in the sack he was carrying.

We got underway again. The sun now was a high overhead. It was getting on toward midday, and in my estimation we were behind schedule. We moved a bit further away from the creek bank as we continued westward. We thought we were near the place where the course of the creek turned almost ninety degrees. This was the point

Daddy warned us not to go beyond. If we changed our course away from the creek, then we wouldn't see the turn, would we? And I wouldn't feel so guilty, either. As we moved north away from the creek, we noticed that the trees and underbrush thinned out considerably. Some small oaks and scrub brush were all that grew in the sandy gravel.

With our vision less impaired by the trees, we could see a high hill in the distance. "That must be Turkey Hill up thair, Tater," I announced. Turkey Hill was the highest point in our part of the country. An old Indian legend told of how the Indians had tried unsuccessfully to kill a great turkey that lived up on top of the hill.

We slowly climbed to the top of the hill. At the top we were able to survey the woods in all directions. The air was fresh and fragrant. We sat on a downed tree and enjoyed nature's scent for a moment. But it didn't take long for the smell of fried chicken to displace the flavor of nature in our nostrils. I was so hungry that I forgot my chicken phobia. I reached into the bag first and found a big pulleybone. Tater grabbed a drumstick. In no time, we ate our way through a sack full of Rosie's fried chicken.

As we started down the hill, storm clouds were visible to the west. Distant thunder and flashes of lightning got our attention. Heavy rain was likely sometime during the afternoon. "We'd best be gittin' on, if us plans on findin' thet still," Tater reminded me.

We figured we had traveled about three miles or so up the creek bank, so we couldn't be far from the still. "I believe that still is over thair in that direction," I pointed toward the northwest.

Suddenly, I remembered that we had been so intent on finding the moonshine still that we hadn't collected enough items for my project. "Tater, if I don't find somethin' else for my science project, Momma's gonna be big time upset with me."

"Well, I just guess we best git on with findin' sumpin'," Tater said as he searched the area around the bottom of the hill. Soon he sang out. "Hey, Victor look at dis!"

We knelt down to take a closer look at a flat rock about two inches long that looked like a four-leaf clover. "I be dagburn, I wish you'd look at that. Miss Williams is gonna really like thet rock." Miss Mary Williams was my fifth grade teacher. It was her first year at the Mayfield School. She was young and pretty, and engaged to be married. I liked her and wanted to bring something back that hopefully would impress her.

"Yeah, it sho' be lookin' good to me, ta," Tater said as he took the knife from his pocket and dug the rock out of the ground. He started to put the rock into the burlap sack, but I quickly grabbed it from him. "Naw, Tater, don't put it in there with thet dead squirrel. Let me tote it in my pocket." I said, opening my hand for the rock. Tater handed it to me, shaking his head disgustedly. "Victor, ya gots th' weakest stomach I knows of."

We also found an octagonal-shaped leaf at the bottom of the hill. I put it inside my shirt for safekeeping rather than in the sack. I couldn't bear the thought of either the rock or the leaf being in the bag with that dead squirrel.

The sun was now soaring above us, and it had warmed considerably. The air was still, with not a whisper of a breeze. I had removed the light jacket an hour earlier and tied it around my waist. Tater had taken off the red flannel shirt long before that and had tucked a portion of it into the left back pocket of his overalls.

We moved on in a westerly direction back toward the creek. We felt almost certain that this was the way to the moonshine still. We had just gotten underway again when a brisk breeze picked up, chasing some dead leaves across the ground. The wind signaled the approach of rain and the faint soft light of the sun that filtered through the clouds confirmed that rain was on the horizon. "We gotta be gettin' home, Tater, 'fore it rains," I said, fear getting an even tighter grip on my stomach.

Daddy's comments about 'common sense,' kept replaying in my head. Searching for that still now seemed like anything but common sense. But I knew Tater was sold on finding the moonshine still, so we plunged further into the woods.

Before long we happened upon a deep, dry gully. It looked like a gully to me, but this must be the ravine Rosie had warned us about. We later learned that the ravine had once been a side loop of the creek. The loop probably had closed back on itself at the west end, causing the creek to change its course. Without a source of water, the ravine had dried up.

I hesitated at the sight of the ravine, but Tater forged ahead through the underbrush and kudzu on the rugged bank of the ravine. Suddenly Tater stopped. His ears perked up and his eyes became intense. I stopped, too.

"Whatzamatter?" I asked fearfully.

"Sh-h-h," Tater whispered. We both stood still for a few seconds, listening intently.

"I think I heah someone talkin'," I said in a tone slightly louder than a whisper. Fear was starting to take up residence in my throat. "What's that smell?" I added, sniffing the air. It was a light, sweet smell of something cooking.

"Betcha it be 'em moonshiners cookin' thair likker," Tater remarked softly, his wide eyes open with alarm. Preacher had once told us that moonshine was made from corn and sugar and had to be cooked. He always added that those who were cooking up the moonshine were members of the devil's workshop... or something like that.

I wanted to suggest that we run away as fast as we could, but I didn't want Tater to think I was "chicken." I began to consider all the possible things that could happen. While I stood there, my mind on some other place, Tater moved on toward a thicket of bushes on top of a little sand knoll by the ravine.

"C'mon," Tater snapped in a lowered voice, when he realized I wasn't following.

"Okay," I answered quietly as sweat popped out on my brow and palms of my hands. "But let's don't go too fast, okay?" I pleaded.

From our vantage point on the knoll, we saw several men loading boxes on what looked like a small barge located on the creek bank. We couldn't see the moonshine still itself because it was surrounded by bush, but we knew it was there. You could tell it had been built inside the loop created by the ravine.

"Can ya believe thet, Tater?" I asked loud enough for him to hear me above the roar of an engine that began clanking away.

"It sho' is sumpin!" Tater said excitedly.

"Let's move on down yonder toward th' creek, Tater. Maybe we can get a peep at the old still." My fear was now covered over by curiosity.

We "duckwalked" along the ravine bank toward the creek. We had moved no more than twenty feet when the sound of crackling leaves and twigs under heavy footsteps stopped us cold. Simultaneously, we swung around to see who was following us. There in the filtered sunlight stood a husky, broad-shoulder man, resting a shotgun across his right shoulder and staring straight through at us. We froze in shock.

"Whaddaya boys doin' out heah?" The big man drawled in a chilly tone.

Our shock left us temporarily speechless. While we struggled to regain our voices, the big man turned slightly and yelled out, "I got'em in my sights, George."

"I better come heps ya brin' em on in, Jenkins," a voice high up on a wood platform in a big oak tree hollered back.

"Dagburn, shoulda figered thair be a lookout," Tater said resignedly.

"Now y'all jus' hold yore horses right thair," the big man ordered as he turned back toward us. He sat the gun down against a small tree, reached into the top pocket of his overalls and took out his tin of Prince Albert tobacco. Taking a piece of paper that came with it, he gingerly poured the tobacco on the paper and rolled the paper around

the tobacco. After giving the paper a good licking, he put the cigarette in his mouth. Tater and I stood there quietly, not moving a muscle.

"Hurry up, George, ain't much daylight left ta take care of these heah younguns," the big man yelled. I felt sick to my stomach as the words "take care of," rattled around in my head. There was no doubt about it, we had trouble brewing here, and the sinking afternoon sun meant that if we didn't get home soon we were going to have real trouble there, too. And home was an hour away. "Home is the last thing you need to be worrying about right now," a little inner voice told me. It was right.

The bearded man lit his cigarette and took a puff. He glared at us, saying nothing. "I'll be thair directly, Jenkins," a voice from the area of the lookout tree filled the air. As Jenkins turned toward the direction of the voice, Tater suddenly bolted for a thicket of bushes behind him, throwing the burlap sack aside as he ran. Jenkins swung his body around in Tater's direction. When he did, I shot past him, brushing his body enough to knock him slightly off balance. I smashed full force through the foliage right in behind Tater.

I had only run a few steps into the underbrush when I tripped on a tree root. As I scrambled to reclaim my balance, the sound of BOOM ripped through the air. The shotgun blast shredded the leaves above my head. My mind was shocked loose of everything but the need to run as hard as I possibly could. All I cared about now was putting some serious distance between myself and Jenkins with that shotgun.

Scrambling even harder into the woods, low pine branches whipped in my face while briar patch thorns grabbed at my trousers. I was really glad now Momma had made me wear long pants. Then it hit me "Where's Tater?"

Just then, Tater's voice echoed through the trees, "Com' on Victor, thisaway ta th' crick!"

Distant voices could be heard behind me now, bouncing off the trees. Jenkins and George were in hot pursuit. "Y'all best stop if ya knowed what's good fer ya," came a shout from behind me. Stopping was the last thing on my mind.

I almost got tangled up in some kudzu as I moved in the direction of Tater's voice. "O'er heah," he said, peering above a strand of waist-high bitterweeds. "The crick's over yonder. Let's go," Tater added emphatically, as I raced to catch up with him.

The jacket, which had been tied around my waist, caught the branch of a bush and almost knocked me off balance again. I pulled the jacket loose and accidentally dropped it behind me. My mind said go back and get it, but my instincts said to keep going wide open. Instincts won.

I put on a burst of frantic speed in the direction of Tater and caught up with him at the creek bank. In a flash, we dove into the creek. As we hit the cold water, Tater's fabled red flannel shirt jarred loose from his overalls and floated away in the current. The swiftness of the current carried us quickly away from the voices behind us. But then my stomach started doing flip-flops and I yelled out in desperation, "Tater I don't know how to swim!" What we did down at the swimming hole was a lot of splashing around, not swimming.

"Jus' stays in the flow...jus' stays in the flow." Tater advised between strokes. I tried to follow Tater's lead. What he did, I did.

Tater began to experience a problem with the weights of his clothing. His denim overalls were becoming extremely heavy with water, making it difficult for him to keep his head above the water line. Fortunately, for both of us, luck was on our side. Just ahead was a steel wire extending from bank to bank across the creek.

We later figured out that it was there to keep the barges loaded with moonshine from going past the loading dock on the opposite bank. The moonshiners loaded their liquor on one side of the creek and barged it downstream where it was loaded onto trucks on the other side of the creek, making it difficult for the law enforcement people

to determine how it worked.

We grabbed the wire and worked our way about twenty-five feet across the creek to the opposite bank without incident. We were fortunate that there was no one on the loading dock. But we could hear the clanging and clattering of an idling truck engine not far away. As we raised our heads above the creek bank, we saw a logging truck no more than twenty yards in front of us with one man on the outside talking with the driver. "Reckon 'em are some of 'em moonshiners?" I whispered to Tater as I leaned in toward his ear.

"They sho' liable ta be." Tater answered cautiously. He and I were thinking alike. We had to assume they were moonshiners, even though they appeared to be loggers.

We worked our way onto the bank behind a clump of bushes. "Which way, Tater?" I said as quietly as I could, my teeth clicking from the chilly wind on my soaking wet clothes. We hadn't consciously thought about how cold the water was until we reached the bank.

"Let's stays low in th' bush," Tater answered, barely above a whisper, teeth chattering.

"Why hadn't we listened to our mothers? And how were we going to explain these wet clothes if we ever got back home... and the clothes we had lost?" I asked myself. We were going to be in a heap of trouble.

These thoughts evaporated quickly when I saw George and Jenkins briskly moving on the opposite shore, no more than fifty yards away. The sound of the truck's motor drowned out the gunfire. But the sounds of the bullets hitting the limbs of the trees above us was real enough. My heartbeat quickened, so much so that I thought my heart was going to burst out of my chest.

The gunshots definitely quickened our pace. We immediately left the covering of the soggy creek bank and moved onto a dirt lane. Once in the open, we raced as fast as we could down the old logger's road.

Our wet clothes were heavy, making it difficult for us to run very fast. But it was the chill reaching all the way to our bones that bothered us the most. We sped on in the face of a stiff breeze. Rain was imminent. That was the last thing we needed.

We had run about one hundred yards on the road when the sound of the logging truck's engine thickened the air behind us. "It couldn't be the moonshiners, could it?" I asked Tater through chattering teeth.

"Hit th' bushes! Tater answered my question by pushing me toward a clump of bushes alongside the road. As the battered old truck sputtered past our hiding place, Tater whispered, "I knows the driver. He be the diddy of Buck's girlfriend, Charliemae. His name is... Charles."

Without hesitating, Tater started running after the log truck, hollering to the top of his lungs, "Mister Charles! Mister Charles!" I fell right behind him. Fortunately, the truck wasn't going fast and Tater was able to catch up and race along beside it. Our attention had moved from the two men across the creek, to Mister Charles on this side.

Slowly the old truck came to a stop, brakes squeaking. In an instant we were both standing on the truck's running board, staring at a big, burly black man with dark recessed eyes. "Whatazyaboys doin' out heah?" Charles asked, as he surveyed us.

"I be Buck's friend, Tater. Tis heah's Victor. Us been on a field trip...and we be runnin' late... and we sho' does need a ride hom'." Tater was spurting words out between gasps for breath. A flash of heat lightening rippled across the sky and it started to sprinkle rain.

"Ah, gonna ast ya 'gin, Whatazyaboys doin' out heah?"

"I tells ya all 'bout it directly, Mister Charles, while us be ridin' on toward the highway. You be givin' us a lift, won'tju? We just' 'bout let time git away from us, and we sho' is cold. Sides my Mama's bound ta be sum mad," Tater said, speaking as fast as his breath would let him.

And my Momma's gonna be doubly mad at me," I added with emphasis.

"Let go! Let's go!" I wanted to scream out, but I didn't. The moonshiners had surely crossed the creek by now.

"Okay, it looks like it's fixin' ta rain, so y'all com'on and git in now." Charles said.

Tater slid in by Charles and I rode shotgun. The springs on the passenger side were sticking out through the seat covering, making it uncomfortable to sit on. On the floorboard was a toolbox and a set of jumper cables, indicating this old truck was subject to breaking down at any time. "Please, not now, Lord." I prayed silently.

It began to rain harder. I tried to roll the passenger window up. It wouldn't budge. The rain was cold. I was cold and getting colder by the moment, as the rain came through the open window. My teeth were chattering at a rapid pace and my body was shaking all over. Tater sitting between Charles and me, wasn't as cold as me.

"I reckon ya see that window o'er yonder don't work ner atall," Charles said through a big grin. Despite being pelted by the cold rain, I was soon glad the window didn't roll up. The interior smelled like sweat and whiskey. I was wondering how in the world Tater kept from throwing up. At least I could hang my head out the window when I needed a breath of fresh air.

Tater talked non-stop, relating details of our field trip. He explained our wet clothes by saying we had been frightened by something on the other side of the creek and had jumped in the creek to make our escape. He didn't say anything about the moonshiners.

The log truck bounced violently with each bump and moaned with fatigue each time Charles pressed the gas pedal to get over the bumps and dips in the dirt road. Tater kept his conversation with Charles going wide open, even over the awful noise created by the windshield wipers flapping back and forth and the grind of the old truck engine.

I was totally oblivious to the conversation. My mind was occupied with the thoughts of "How'd we get into this mess in the first place?" We hadn't considered the possibility of being caught by the moonshiners. And that possibility was still hanging in the balance.

What if the moonshiners were waiting for us at the highway? What if they found out who we are? What if...? The more 'what-ifs' that raced through my head, the more tense I became.

Charles appeared to be listening attentively to Tater, although his eyes were glued to the winding dirt road. He didn't say a word until Tater took a rare breath. "Y'all boys ain't tellin' me th' hole truths, now is ya?" Charles muttered.

Suddenly I was warm all over. Several questions begin to race through my mind at a rapid pace: "Was Charles one of them? Would he turn us over to the others? Maybe he planned to deal with us himself? "Whatzamean?" I asked nervously, when Tater failed to respond after a few seconds of silence.

"Ah knows whaddaya boys been up ta... Ah seen y'all up 'round tat 'shine still?"

"We jus'...happen up on...it, Mister Charles," Tater said, stumbling on his words.

"Tat don't makes no difference ta 'em. They ain't likely ta takes kindly none atall ta y'all seein' 'em." What Charles was saying did nothing to slow the panic racing full force through me. I even think the panic button had also hit Tater.

But then he gave us a bit of hope that we might be able to survive to see another day. "I know all 'em moonshine folks, workin' out heah in th' woods 'round 'em like I is." He hesitated for a moment, then added: "Now if y'all tells me y'all ain't guine say nuthin' ta a soul 'bout what y'all done seen t'day, ahs tell 'em moonshiners... and ahs believes they'll leaves y'all 'lone."

"I swear thet to ya," I jumped in without hesitation.

"Does ya swear ta tat, little man?" Charles asked, putting his hand on Tater's shoulder.

"Oh yessuh, I ain't 'bout ta tells a soul," Tater stated, after struggling a moment with his thoughts. Knowing Tater the way I did, he would want to tell everyone about our adventure. But here he was promising to keep his mouth shut, as hard as that would be.

"Ya boys let tis be a learnin' ta ya, don't be goin' whair ya don'ts b'long...and if ya does, tell folks th' truth," Charles scolded us as he stopped the truck before turning onto the highway just south of the Bush Creek bridge. There was no one in sight, thank goodness. I realized now that the moonshiners couldn't have beaten us to the paved road. But I still closed my eyes and prayed. "Thank you Lord, for gettin' Tater and me out of this big mess, and please don't let our folks be mad at us."

The rain shower had moved on eastward and the sun had just about disappeared over the horizon when Charles dropped us off about a quarter of mile from the big house. We thought it would arouse suspicion if he let us out at the front gate. "We sho' 'preciate the lift, Mister Charles." Tater said as we prepared to exit the truck. "And ya kin be sho' us ain't 'bout ta tell no ones 'bout what we seen up by th' crick."

"Yes, sir, ya can count on thet." I agreed, with as much sincerity as I could muster.

"Ya boys don't forgits whatahssay." Charles said with a small smile curled up around his lips.

We said nothing as we slid out of the seat onto the running board, then down to the ground. "Us be seein' ya, Mister Charles," Tater said as he closed the truck door. We gave Charles a half-hearted wave as he gunned the old truck to try to get it moving up the hill.

The gusting wind whipped through my half-dried clothing, causing chill bumps to break out all over me again. I didn't ask, but I knew Tater was also feeling the effects of the cooler weather.

"We'd better get out fannies on home before we get 'em tanned," I mumbled. I had no desire to meet up with Daddy's "righten strap," but that was a strong possibility. And while Tater might not end up with a strap on his behind, Rosie would see to it that he was grounded. It was definitely time for us to be home.

The wind aided us as we ran hard as we could up the hill. But the hill was too steep for us to keep up a fast pace. We slowed to a trot. This gave us a chance to catch our breath, and between gasps of air, and talk about what we would say to our parents. We decided to bite the bullet and answer our parents' questions truthfully. Whatever punishment they would dish out would be better than the guilt feelings we would have by telling a lie or half-truth.

With that decision behind us, we picked up our pace again, racing the last fifty yards or so to the front gate. We were breathing heavily as we walked around toward the back porch. "I don't see a car or truck...do ya? I asked through short gasps for breath. Daddy's old pickup that was normally parked down by the barn, was gone. Momma's car was nowhere in sight, either.

"I don't thinks... n'er soul be...home." Tater said sucking wind tryi ng to get his breath, too. What luck! Nobody was at the big house. "But where could they be?" I asked myself. It was getting on toward dark and no one was home. "I hope nothin's wrong," I said in a barely audible voice, finding it easier to breathe now.

This would give us a chance to get cleaned up before someone arrived. We couldn't run the risk of Tater going home to change clothes. If Rosie was at home and saw him like this, she would definitely be suspicious. Tater waited on the back porch while I raced up stairs to get a dry pair of blue jeans and shirts for both of us. Hopefully, our mothers wouldn't recognize my clothes on Tater, even though he didn't have blue jeans. He only wore overalls.

We both changed on the screened-in back porch. As I removed my shirt, a wet crumbled leaf fell to the floor. "Doggone, I'd forgotten 'bout the leaf. Don't look like it's liable to do me any good." I said, disappointingly. Then I remembered the rock in my pocket. At least I had salvaged something from the field trip.

Thinking about clothing reminded me that both Tater and I had lost some on the trip. Rosie and Momma would eventually find out. "Tater, have ya thought about that we've gotta tell our mama's that we lost some clothes?"

"Let's tell 'em thet sumpin' scaired the dickens outta us, causin' us ta jump in th' crick ta gits away. Then 'em clothes jus' floats on off. Thet be 'bout whazhappen, ain't it, Victor?" Tater slowly motioned with his right arm away from his body as he finished the sentence, illustrating how the clothes floated away with the current. It was beginning to appear that our earlier decision to tell the whole truth had been short-lived.

Before I could respond to Tater's theory about how our clothes got lost, we saw Buck approaching the house from the barn area. At first he didn't appear to see us on the porch, but when Tater hollered out, "Hey Buck, whatzadoin'?" He sped up toward the house.

"Whair y'all been?" A look of concern covered Buck's face as he stood in the backyard. It was unusual seeing him in the backyard. The only time he ever came near the big house was when Daddy needed him to help move furniture or assist with repairs.

"Ya knows whair us been." Tater responded with a slight smile in his voice.

"Does y'all knows tat yo 'mama and Mr. Bud be out lookin' foh y'all?"

"You kiddin' now, ain't ya Buck? I asked hopefully.

"Theys tols me ta blows th' big horn if y'all cum homes 'fore they gits back," Buck said, as he turned toward the tool shed. That is where Daddy kept a big horn to call in the cows when the fog rolled in. Tater and I followed.

As we strolled toward the tool shed located under a "lean-to" to the barn, I remarked under my breath, "Our folks are out lookin' for us and when they get home we gonna catch it."

It was virtually dark when Buck let out a blast on the big horn. He followed it shortly with another blast. No one knew for sure how far the sound traveled, but it had been heard over at the general store, a couple of miles or so away.

"Mr. Bud says ta blows th' horn two times wen y'all's geits ta th' howse. The look on Buck's face wasn't as intense now as it was a few moments earlier. "Ahs believes y'all oughta tells me whataza' y'all been doin' 'fore they gits heah."

"Ain't much ta tell ya," Tater said, without looking at Buck.

"Y'all folks guine be plenty mad wen theys gits heah. Ah reckons ah could hep y'all's com' up with a good story." Buck's offer of help was puzzling. He sounded as if he knew where we had been and what we had done.

"Okay... Tater why don'tcha...tell Buck... 'bout our trip." I said hesitantly, my teeth chattering again." Then I added, "Let's go back up on the porch. That'll give us some relief from his cold." I was really shivering as I started for the porch with Tater right behind me.

Buck was very reluctant to join us on the porch. "It's okay, Buck. C'mon on up heah with us." After a brief pause, he moved to join us. "Wells, ahs reckon it bes okay." His hesitation about setting foot on our back porch was outweighed by his curiosity about our field trip.

Tater and I took seats in the two rocking chairs on the porch, leaving the swing to Buck. Tater began to tell Buck about our trip, skipping over the early part and dwelling on the moonshiners and Mister Charles. Tater was talking ninety to nothing.

When he finished, Buck stared at both of us. "Is y'all sayin' ta me thet Mr. Charles dun give y'all a ride with 'em moonshiners on yo' tail?" Is tat whatazheahya sayin'?" That was as many words as I had ever heard Buck speak at one time. He was extremely interested in what happened between Mister Charles and us.

Buck surveyed us with a poker face. Then just as quickly, his face split into a big grin, followed by a hearty

laugh. "Y'all don't know's tat Mister Charles bes one of 'em moonshiners, does ya?"

"He's one of what?" I asked dumbfounded.

"Is ya sayin' he's one of 'em moonshiners?" Tater's voice was filled with amazement.

"Yeah, he sho' is. All 'em logs on tat truck ain't all logs, none atall," Buck chuckled.

"Whaddaya mean?" I interrupted, my curiosity piqued.

"Mister Charles, he runs tat 'shine whiskey in a big openin' right dab in th' middle of th' truck bed. All 'em logs be a decoy."

Neither Tater nor I said a word. We were in shock. We sat in silence until it finally hit me that it was well after dark and our folks were not home. "Reckon Momma and 'em heard that horn, Buck?" I asked, concern filling my voice.

"Theys be long directly. Theys likely wuz way back up in 'em woods lookin' foh y'all wen th' horn goed off." The look on Buck's face told me something fishy was up, but I didn't know what. "Y'all wuz lucky thet Mister Charles be th' one who be 'long," Buck said, bringing up our trip again. "Reckon y'all won't be making' no mo' trips up th' crick no time soon?" He laughed again.

The sight of headlights shining as a car turned into the lane caused us to exit the porch. I wanted Momma to know we were home as soon as possible. Tension gripped me and I could sense Tater was nervous, too. The time of reckoning was upon us.

"What're you boys doing standin' out in the cool air with just 'em little shirts on?" Momma asked as she stepped out of the car. Behind her came Will, Sissy, Rosie, Betty Ann, and Mary Jane.

"We been out heah worried 'bout y'all." Where've y'all been?" I asked, feeling that asking a question about now was better than providing an answer.

"We all been to the picture show. Buck didn't tell y'all?" Tater and I turned toward Buck and in the car headlights the smirk look on his face was shining through. We could have broken his neck! He had made a fools of us, and we knew we deserved it.

Momma didn't ask me about our field trip that night. All the talk was about a curse word that some fellow had used in a picture show called "Gone With The Wind." Sunday also passed and nothing from Momma or Rosie about our field trip. Then after school on Monday they summoned both Tater and me to ask us how our clothes had gotten so damp and dirty on our field trip. "Gosh, I whispered to Tater, "how'd they know 'bout our clothes?" Then I remembered hastily throwing them into the laundry area on Saturday. The possibility that it might raise questions didn't occur to me. Now what?

"Tater, you tell 'em how we got our clothes messed up." Tater was a little better than me in dancing around these kinds of situations.

Tater looked at me in surprise, but he obviously knew what I was thinking. He quickly launched into a description of the sights and the sounds of our field trip: killing a squirrel, searching for science project items, and swimming across the creek. He didn't lie, but then, he didn't tell the whole truth, either. We had planned to tell our mothers the whole story, but when it came crunch time, we chickened out. I was certainly glad Tater didn't mention that we had been the target of a shotgun blast (Buck later told us that the shots were fired over our heads on purpose). That would have been just a little too much for our mothers to understand and handle.

I was particularly impressed by how Tater described the reason we crossed the creek. "Us was just' mess' round up by the crick when we heard sum shootin'. It scared the dickens outta of us, so we headed for the safest place us could find...thet be the crick."

"Gracious, you boys seem to have had quite a time, I would say." I believe Momma was buying into the story.

"I thinks y'all needs ta knows that me and Victor lose sum clothes up at th' crick." Tater continued, no doubt feeling he needed to cover all the bases.

"Yeah, it was warm and Tater had his shirt tucked into his overalls and I had my jacket tucked in my britches. As soon as he hit that water, his shirt was gone with the current. And mine flew off, too," I said bravely, jumping in at this point.

"Lardy, Tater, us can'ts 'ford foh ya losin' yo' clothes," Rosie said worriedly.

"I ain't gonna ta need the old shirt none Mama 'cause I be ta big foh it anyways nex' year." Tater had come through with a solid answer again. Both of our mothers nodded signifying their agreement with this viewpoint. Thankfully, Momma didn't say anything right then about my losing the jacket that was to be handed down to Will. That was the advantage – and disadvantage -- I had being the oldest. I got the new stuff. Will got the hand-me-downs, unless I lost them.

The next morning, I learned that Momma had a little something in mind for me regarding that lost jacket. Much to my chagrin, she told me that she would be docking my chore money until she had enough to purchase a new jacket for me and one for Will, too. It would take me until the fall at a dime per week. That's a lot of foul balls to retrieve at Daddy's baseball games and a lot of cotton to pick. "Doggone if this field trip hadn't turned out to be educational in a way I didn't plan," I later told Tater. It was costly learning.

"Did y'all learn anything from this field trip, other than when to move away from danger?" Momma inquired. I had carried the rock we had found with me to school and still had it in my pocket. I took it out and showed it to her. "Whadda think, Momma?"

"It's an unusual formation, I'd say. Wouldn't you, Rosie?" Momma asked Rosie as she entered the kitchen.

Rosie examined the four-leaf clover design. "Yesmuh," Rosie seemed distant. Then she added, "Ya younguns is lucky y'all didn't git hurt none atall."

I don't think Rosie ever completely bought our story. But neither she nor Momma ever probed Tater or me about our field trip again. And Buck didn't tell Rosie the whole story until a couple years later.

Rosie was right. We were fortunate to have gotten off as easily as we did, but not in the way she meant. As Tater and I pushed open the back screen door and headed out to do our morning chores, we knew that luck and circumstances had been on our side...this time. We could have gotten ourselves killed. That realization was humbling. We had one thing on our minds after that experience... staying out of trouble. And that's what we did - for a little while anyway.

