

CHAPTER 14

WHEN WE GOT into the restaurant I could see that it was someone's living room that they'd set about ten card tables and some folding chairs in. Every table but one was filled and there were five or six people standing in the doorway waiting to sit down. We said, "Excuse us," and walked right past. Then the smell of the place got into my nose and I could tell why folks were lining up to get in.

I closed my eyes and took in a big snort of air. It was like someone took a old pot and poured about a hundred

gallons of hot apple cider and a hundred gallons of hot coffee into it, then stirred eight or nine sweet potato pies, crusts and all, into that, then let six big steamy meat loafs float on top of all that, then threw in a couple of handfuls of smashed potatoes, then boiled the whole thing on high. This must be exactly how heaven smells!

I could tell by the smell that Mr. Jimmy was telling the truth when he said this was the best restaurant in Grand Rapids. Shucks, I've never eaten in one before but I'd say this was the best restaurant in the world! I opened my eyes 'cause the smell was starting to get me dizzy.

On the other side of the room Herman E. Calloway was sitting at a table with Mr. Jimmy and a woman.

Steady Eddie pointed at the only empty table, one that had a sign saying RESERVED NBC on top of it, and said, "That's where we're at, over there, Bud. NBC stands for 'Nobody but Calloway,' Mr. C. changes the name of the band so much that no one can keep up with the new names so they call us NBC so's they don't have to change the sign."

Before I could sit down with them Mr. Jimmy saw us and said, "Here they are," and pointed at me and waved for me to come over to their table. Shucks, I'd rather sit with the band than with Herman E. Calloway, it would be hard to have a good time eating if you looked up and saw him every time you took a bite.

The Thug said, "Remember what I said," pointed at

the top of his head and acted like he was smacking some kisses.

I walked to the other table.

Mr. Jimmy said, "Bud, this here's Miss Thomas, she's our vocal stylist."

She could tell I didn't know what that meant so she said, "I'm the singer, honey."

I said, "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

She laughed and stuck her hand out for me to shake. There were about nine diamond rings on just her right hand!

She said, "Oh, my, a gentleman. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance as well."

Then she took all those ringed-up fingers and rubbed them across my cheek, held my chin and said, "Come here, child," and pulled my face up close to hers.

Uh-oh, I twisted up my face to get ready for a kiss but instead she looked real close at me and said, "What's this, baby?" She rubbed her fingers over a couple of sting spots that I'd been scratching.

For a second I was going to tell her they were vampire bites, but something told me to tell the truth this time. I said, "That's just some hornet stings, ma'am, I got bit up when the Amoses locked me in their shed."

It was her turn to twist her face up. "When *who* locked you up in *what* shed?"

"They were the people the Home was paying to look after me. I got bit by their fish-head guards." I showed

the woman the bite on my hand. I was surprised to see it was puffing out from pus.

“My Lord!” she said. “Herman, this child’s hand is infected. None of you men noticed how he looks?”

Herman E. Calloway said, “Talk to James, far as I know he’s the only one who looked at the kid.”

Mr. Jimmy said, “Well, Grace, to be truthful I did think the boy’s face was a little swole up, but you know how dark it is in the Cabin, and, by God, there are some folks who just naturally have lopsided heads.”

She said, “Dark or not, even Blind Lemon Jefferson could see something’s wrong with this baby’s eye. What happened here, Bud?” She touched underneath my eye as light as a feather.

I said, “Well, ma’am, Todd Amos woke me up by shoving a pencil up my nose all the way to the *R* and when I went to punch him I slapped him instead and it left a big welt on his cheek so we put up our dukes and went at it and it didn’t take long before I knew I couldn’t whip him so I just curled up and fell down.”

I looked at Herman E. Calloway to make sure he was listening to the next part. I wanted to let him know that even though he was real mean our minds thought about things in the exact same way.

I said, “I fell down, ma’am, ’cause the Lord give me the good sense to know when enough is enough.”

He acted like he didn’t hear. So I kept talking to Miss

Thomas. "Then Mrs. Amos came and I could tell they'd gone through my suitcase even though they promised they wouldn't and she locked me up in the shed where those hornets and fish-head guards got a holt of me."

Miss Thomas looked like this was some real amazing news.

Herman E. Calloway said, "Sounds like a case of diarrhea of the mouth and constipation of the brain."

Miss Thomas gave him a dirty look and said, "You said 'the Home,' Bud, what kind of a home? Where's your mamma?"

I said, "She died four years ago, ma'am."

She put her hand on my shoulder and said, "I'm sorry, sweetheart. How 'bout your daddy? Do you know where he's at?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am."

She said, "Where is he, honey?"

I pointed dead at Herman E. Calloway's big belly again and said, "That's him right there."

Miss Thomas looked like she wanted to smile but she said, "Now, Bud, I've only known you for a couple of minutes but I can tell your mamma did a fine job of raising you, I can see you've had a good, proper upbringing, so I'm kind of surprised that you're pointing like that."

She was right. I brought my finger down. I said, "I'm sorry, ma'am."

She said, "That's fine, but it wasn't me who got pointed at."

I told Herman E. Calloway, "I'm sorry, sir." But I didn't mean it.

She smiled and said, "That's better, we all make mistakes. You know what, Bud, you look like you could use a good meal, so why don't you sit right there and join us?" She pointed a ring-covered finger at the empty chair direct across from him.

Shucks, how could anyone enjoy their food with Herman E. Calloway staring back at you?

But maybe my luck was starting to change. As soon as I sat down, Herman E. Calloway picked up his coffee cup and said, "If you'll excuse me, this is about where I came in," and walked over to where the band was sitting.

He told them, "All right. Someone's got to give me their seat and go sit with James and Miss Grace—oh, and my son."

For a second it looked like a stampede of Dusky Devastators of the Depression, they all jumped up at once and started heading for our table.

They saw what they'd done, laughed, and Steady Eddie said, "Take my seat, Mr. C., I wanna talk to that kid, he's got the look of a future sax man about him."

He came over to our table.

Miss Thomas asked me, "Do you mind if I order your supper, Bud?"

I said, "No, ma'am." I couldn't believe you got to or-

der what you wanted, I thought you just sat down and they'd bring you whatever was on the stove.

A woman came up to the table. She said, "Y'all ready, Miss Thomas?"

Miss Thomas said, "We sure are, Tyla."

Tyla said, "Who's the little fella, did y'all pick up someone new for the band?"

Miss Thomas laughed. "They're getting younger all the time, aren't they? This here's Bud and he's going to be our guest for a while, so I want to impress him with something special."

Tyla said, "Well, you know you brought him to the right place. It's nice to meet you, Bud."

I said, "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

She said, "Ma'am? Mercy, Miss Thomas, your guest has some real fine manners. I can tell that he isn't one of those rude, crude folks Mr. Calloway usually scours up."

Steady Eddie said, "Tyla, I am crushed."

She said, "Bud, I apologize for mistaking you for a musician."

I told her, "That's OK, ma'am, no offense taken."

Miss Thomas said, "Is there any more of that meat loaf left?"

"Yes, ma'am, sure is."

"How about some okra and mashed potatoes too, Bud?"

"Thank you, ma'am."

"And does a glass of apple cider sound good?"

"Yes, ma'am, thank you, ma'am."

“OK,” she said, “I’ll have the same.”

Mr. Jimmy ordered a supper that was all the way different from mine and Steady Eddie ordered one that was all the way different from his! No wonder you hear about rich folks going to restaurants once a week, this was great!

Miss Tyla went away and Miss Thomas started back on me.

“Bud, I’ve got to let you know that I’m pretty sure that there’s just no way that Mr. C. is your father. Tell me what gave you the idea he was.”

“My mother did, ma’am.”

Miss Thomas looked over at Mr. Jimmy real quick, then said, “Sweetheart, did you know a whole lot of people all over the state know Mr. C., did you know he’s pretty famous?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Ah, well. You know what I think? I think maybe your mother heard him on the radio or heard somebody talking about him or saw the band somewhere and told you that Mr. C. reminded her of your father and you misunderstood what she meant, isn’t that possible?”

“I don’t think so, ma’am.”

She looked at me for a second, then said, “Did she come right out and say, ‘Your daddy is Herman E. Calloway,’ Bud?”

“Well, almost. But not in words just like that.”

“Then tell me what the words were like, honey.”

Uh-oh. It was going to be hard to explain to Miss Thomas about mighty maples and hints from flyers. As long as I kept Herman E. Calloway being my father to myself the whole thing made real good sense, but as soon as I tried to tell other folks about it, it seemed like maybe it was something some stupid kid had dreamed up, like it was wishing and hoping instead of something true and real.

I looked down at my suitcase and said, “Well . . .”

And I could tell my luck *was* changing, before I could say anything else Miss Tyla was at our table with a tray.

Miss Thomas reached across the table, patted my hand and said, “We’ll talk tomorrow, Bud, I bet you’re sick and tired of answering people’s questions, aren’t you?”

I said, “Yes, ma’am, I am.” But I did notice that she’d said “tomorrow.” That might mean they weren’t going to try to send me back to Flint right away!

Miss Tyla said, “Miss Thomas,” and set a plate in front of her, then said, “Mr. Jimmy,” and gave him some food too, then said, “Steady,” and put his plate down so that it rattled a little, then said, “And finally, the young gentleman,” and put a plate crammed with food in front of me!

It was the best meal I’d ever had, and when it was done Miss Tyla brought me a dessert she called “On the

House.” It was a piece of warm sweet potato pie with some white fluffy stuff called whipped cream swopped all over the top of it.

After I shoved the last crumbs of pie in my mouth and scraped up the last little dribbles of whipped cream, I looked around at the people at my table and I couldn’t help breaking out in a big smile.

I didn’t see it before, but now that I looked I could tell that Miss Thomas must be the most beautiful woman in the world. When she talked she moved her hands and fingers around and the lights from the ceiling and from the little candle on the table would bounce off all them diamonds and spark up in your eye and make you feel like you’d been hit with some kind of magic fairy dust, then you couldn’t help but smile.

All the while she’d hum too, but *hum* doesn’t seem like it’s the right word for what she was doing. Most times I’d heard humming before it was just a excuse for not being able to sing or something people’d do if they didn’t know the words to a song. Uh-uh, that doesn’t fit the sounds Miss Thomas was making, you couldn’t help but look up and wonder if this was a real human bean that was making these sounds.

What her humming reminded me most of was that feeling you get when you walk barefoot on a railroad track and, for a long time before you can see it, you can feel the train coming right through the bottoms of your feet. Her humming started slow and easy at first, but

then, just like you could feel that train shake-a-shake-a-shaking from somewhere far off, after while Miss Thomas's humming made you feel like something big and strong was passing right by you and everything on you was getting rattly and shaky and about to get shook loose. It made you want to drop your fork and grab holt of something solid.

From hearing just this little bit of humming I could understand why Mr. Jimmy didn't call her a singer, *singer* wasn't a big enough word to take in the kind of music that was jumping out of Miss Thomas's chest.

And I didn't notice before how funny Mr. Jimmy was. The stories he was telling about traveling around the country with Herman E. Calloway had us all laughing so much that even the nosy people at all the tables near ours quit eating and were busting their guts and throwing their two cents into the stories.

The only table that was quiet was where the Dusky Devastators were sitting. It seemed like Herman E. Calloway could make it so you just wanted to sit and watch your hands with a sad look on your face.

And I hadn't noticed before how nice Steady Eddie was either. He talked out of the side of his mouth and kept his eyes kind of blinked halfway down, especially when Miss Tyla would come to our table to see if we were all right, which she did a lot. And he was the first person I'd ever seen who could eat and talk and laugh and drink and sneeze whilst keeping a toothpick dangling

out of his mouth, no matter what he'd do that toothpick always stayed dancing just below his mustache. And Steady Eddie took his time to show me how to hold my lips and how to put my fingers like I was really playing a pretend saxophone.

I'm not sure exactly when it happened, if it was when I was scraping up the last little drops of melted whipped cream or if it was when Miss Thomas's fingers got to flinging all that magic fairy dust, but sometime whilst I was sitting in the Sweet Pea another seed got to sprouting, sometime in that smells-like-heaven place another mighty maple started digging down its roots and grabbing hold.

One second I was laughing my head off and the next second I was feeling very surprised 'cause something hit me just as hard as Snaggletooth MacNevin had smacked Herman E. Calloway. All of a sudden I knew that of all the places in the world that I'd ever been in this was the one. That of all the people I'd ever met these were the ones. This was where I was supposed to be.

And Herman E. Calloway could kiss my wrist if he thought he was gonna scare me out of this. It was gonna take more than a grouchy old bald-headed guy with a tremendous belly to run me out of here.

I was smiling and laughing and busting my gut so much that I got carried away and some rusty old valve squeaked open in me then . . . woop, zoop, sloop . . . tears started jumping out of my eyes so hard that I had to

cover my face with the big red and white napkin that was on the table.

I hadn't been this embarrassed since I woke up and found Mrs. Sleet looking at my legs. I could tell that everyone in the Sweet Pea had stopped laughing and talking and had started looking at me, but I still couldn't quit bawling. Momma used to tell me I'd only get one chance to make a first impression and it looked like I was blowing it with the Dusky Devastators of the Depression.

Shucks. Finally I had to put my face in my arms on top of the table and put the napkin over my head like it was a little blanket 'cause, try as hard as I wanted, it didn't look like I was gonna get this doggone valve closed any time soon.

I felt Miss Thomas's hand come up under the napkin and rub real soft and slow back and forth over my head. She pulled me out of my chair into her lap and wrapped her arms around me and bounced me up and down on her knee. Dangee, I'd never have any kind of reputation with the band now, the only thing I could do was hang on to the napkin and try to make it so folks wouldn't notice how wet my face was.

She said, so quiet that I was the only one who could hear it, "OK, baby, OK. I know, sweetheart, I know." Then she started humming again and with my ear mashed up against her chest it felt like all my bones and muscles quit doing their jobs, it felt like something as

big as a steam locomotive engine was chug-chug-chugging right past my ear.

I wasn't sure if it was her lips or her hand, but something whispered to me in a language that I didn't have any trouble understanding, it said, "Go ahead and cry, Bud, you're home."

CHAPTER 15

“*Now, BUD,*” Miss Thomas said, “this is what we call Grand Calloway Station.” She parked the car in front of a big house and got out so I grabbed my suitcase from the backseat and jumped out too.

Even though I was still real embarrassed and quiet about all the crying I’d just been doing at the Sweet Pea I knew I was going to have to start talking sooner or later so I asked her, “How come this house has got a name, ma’am?”

She said, “Mr. Calloway said a long time ago that

there were so many different people in and out of here at so many different hours of the day and night that it reminded him of that train station in New York City, Grand Central Station. The name kind of stuck.”

As soon as we got inside Miss Thomas said, “I’ll show you around the place tomorrow, tonight it’s late and we’re all pretty tired, so I’ll take you right up to where you’re going to be sleeping.”

I followed her up a staircase and we walked down a hall. Miss Thomas opened a door and we went in. On one side there was a bed and a window with some curtains, and on the other side were two little doors. Sitting in the space between the two doors was a chair and a little table like the kind you see in the moving pictures that women use to put lipstick on, it had a long skinny drawer that went across the bottom and a big round mirror stuck right on top. Next to the bed there was a little table with a lamp that had a picture of a skinny little black horse right in the lampshade.

Miss Thomas turned on the lamp and the horse got all bright, now I could see he was brown. Miss Thomas said, “We’re going to have to talk to Mr. Calloway about where you can put your things, Bud, I don’t think you’ll be able to fit anything in those closets.” She pointed at the two little doors. “There’re a lot of old things in there that he really needs to clear out. For now just put your suitcase there.” She pointed at the table with the mirror on it.

I said, "Yes, ma'am, thank you, ma'am."

She smiled and said, "OK, I guess that's it. The first door in the hall on the left is my room, the second door is Mr. Calloway's, and the door on the right is the bathroom. Do you think you'll be all right?"

I would, except that those two little doors were starting to make me nervous. They looked like they were just the right size for a young Frankenstein or wolfman to come busting out of once all the grown folks left the room, and since there was only one chair in the room I wouldn't be able to block both of the doors off.

I said, "I'll probably be OK, ma'am, but there's one thing I'm wondering about."

"What's that, sweetheart?"

I pointed at the doors and said, "Are those locked?"

I was going to have to try to make a better first impression on Miss Thomas, she had to think I was pretty babyish what with me crying my eyes out before and now being scared of some little monster-size doors.

She laughed and said, "I don't think they're locked, Bud, there's nothing in there but girl's clothes and toys."

I said, "Won't the girl get mad if she comes back in here and I'm sleeping in her bed?"

Miss Thomas waited a second like she had to think. She finally said, "No, Bud, I don't think you have to worry about that, she's gone."

Uh-oh! That was two things to get nervous about in

one sentence! The first thing to worry about was Rules and Things number 547, or something, that was the one about when a adult tells you, "Don't worry." The second bad thing was Bud Caldwell's Rules and Things to Have a Funner Life and Make a Better Liar Out of Yourself Number 28, that was a real short one:

RULES AND THINGS NUMBER 28

Gone = dead!

I don't know why grown folks can't say someone is dead, they think it's a lot easier to say "gone."

That meant I was going to have to spend the night in the room of a little dead girl, that meant I wasn't going to be getting much sleep at all. I could jam the chair up against the one door's knob, and I'd have to scooch the table with the mirror over up against the other one. I don't buy it when people tell you that closets are the only way a ghost or monster can get into your room. Shucks, I bet you they got ways to come up from under your bed, or if they want to get at you real bad, I bet they can even slide out of a drawer that you think is shut good and tight.

Miss Thomas said, "I'll see you in the morning, you get a good night's sleep." She closed the door and was gone just like that.

Before you could say Jack Robinson I had the chair jammed up underneath the one doorknob and was trying to figure out the best way to push the dresser thing when I heard some loud voices coming from out in the hall. It was Herman E. Calloway and Miss Thomas going at each other pretty good.

They argued back and forth so I sat on the bed and put my suitcase in my lap hoping that Mr. Calloway would win the argument and they'd give me some other place to sleep. I can never get why grown folks will put a kid all alone in a bedroom at night. It's just like they give the ghosts a treasure map and instead of there being a big pot of gold where X marks the spot, there's some poor kid that's sound asleep.

The door banged open and Herman E. Calloway stood there huffing and puffing like the big bad wolf, only with his belly it looked like he'd already eaten the three little pigs. I wasn't too worried because I could see the toes of Miss Thomas's shoes in the doorway.

Herman E. Calloway looked at me sitting on the bed and rushed over to the first little closet door. With one mighty huff he swiped the ghost-blocking chair away and stuck a key in the lock. Then he stomped over to the other closet door and locked it too.

He kind of whispered so Miss Thomas couldn't hear. "You've got the rest of them fooled, but not me. There's something about you that I don't like. I'm going to find

out what your game is and believe you me, scamp, you're going back where you belong."

He stuck the key back in his pants pocket, walked out of the room and slammed the door.

The door wasn't even done shaking from being slammed so hard when it jumped open again. Herman E. Calloway pointed a finger at me and said, "And you better not do any snooping around this room or anywhere else in this house, I know where every single thing belongs and I can tell right away when something's missing. I've got little secret bells all over everything and when something's stolen the bell goes off and only I can hear it, so watch your step."

The poor door got slammed again.

Miss Thomas said, "You know, Herman, half the time I don't know if I should laugh at you or just feel sorry for you."

What Herman E. Calloway said reminded me of what they used to tell us when they'd take us kids from the Home to the YMCA to go swimming.

Before we'd start swimming the white lifeguard made us sit on the edge of the pool with just our feet in the water. He'd say, "We've had problems with you children urinating in the pool in the past, we've begged you and pleaded with you to stop but you don't seem to get the message. This has forced the Y to spend a great deal of money to put a special new kind of magic chemical in the water.

“This chemical reacts to turn water contaminated with urine a bright red. Therefore, if you urinate in the pool a bright red cloud will surround you and we will be able to tell who has relieved themselves. The chemical also causes severe burns to the skin of the urinator.

“So if a red cloud appears around any of you people you will be arrested by the Flint police, you will go to the hospital to fix your burns, you will go to jail and then your name will go on the list that says you can’t swim in any pool in any building anywhere in the world.

“If a red cloud appears around any of you people you will from that moment on be swimming nowhere but in the Flint River.”

Shucks, nothing makes you want to pee in a pool more than someone who thinks you’re stupid telling you not to do it, and nothing makes you want to steal something more than having somebody who doesn’t even know you’re honest telling you not to steal.

Herman E. Calloway didn’t have to worry, I was a liar, not a thief. The only thing I’d ever stole was food out of someone’s garbage can.

He was so doggone mean and hard to get along with it just didn’t seem like it was true that he could be anyone’s daddy. The way he was so worried about me stealing stuff from him before he even knew if I was honest or not made me wonder if someone who was so suspicious could ever be kin to me.

I looked around the little dead girl’s room and could

see that even a hard-up thief wouldn't find nothing much worth stealing in here.

The best thing in the whole room was one wall that was covered with pictures of some horses cut out of a bunch of magazines and stuck on the wall with thumb-tacks. It looked like someone went through a lot of trouble to do it, each picture was held up with four thumbtacks and there were so many of them that they were like wallpaper from the floor to the ceiling.

There might've been something good in the closets, but even before Herman E. Calloway'd locked them shut I sure wasn't about to peek in them.

I set my suitcase on the dressing table and looked at the first drawer. Like I said, someone telling you not to do something will sure make you want to do it. I listened real careful to make sure Herman E. Calloway wasn't sneaking up on me, then I pulled the drawer open.

There were three boxes of thumbtacks, and one of those doggone Ticonderoga pencils. Looking at it made me smell rubber all over again.

I walked over to the bed and sat on the edge and flopped back into the mattress.

Man! It was the softest thing I'd ever felt in my life, I rubbed my arms up and down on the blanket and pulled the pillow out and put it underneath my head. The bed had two sheets on it, just like Toddy boy's!

It was strange, even though this was the bedroom of some little girl who'd kicked the bucket, I wasn't feeling

scared or nervous at all. I took in a deep, deep breath and it felt like I was sleeping with my own blanket wrapped around my head. I took in a couple more deep breaths and I could hear Momma starting to read another story to me.

I wanted to climb under the covers to see what it felt like to sleep with two sheets, but before I could even move . . . woop, zoop, sloop . . . I was sleeping like a dead man. The last thing I remember hearing was, "Not me," said the horse.

"Not me," said the sheep.

"Not me," said the werewolf.

I knew I was going to have a great sleep 'cause even though a monster had gone and snucked hisself into the story, I didn't care, nothing could hurt me now.

CHAPTER 16

I HAD TO FIGHT like a tiger to wake up the next morning. The first thing I saw was those horses thumbtacked all over the wall. I stretched and noticed my shirt was off. I kicked my legs and could tell I was under the covers with one sheet underneath me and one sheet on top of me and my pants were off too.

Boy, I must've really been tired last night. I couldn't even remember getting undressed and getting between the sheets. But that explained why I was sleeping so

hard, I found out one of rich people's secrets: Sleeping with two sheets puts you out like a baby that's been rode around in a automobile.

I looked over and thought I was dreaming. My clothes were all folded up in a neat pile the same way Momma used to fold them when she'd go to work before I got up. I blinked my eyes a couple of times 'cause it looked like there was a note on my clothes. Momma would always leave me a note that said something like, "Dear Bud, Please be neater, see you tonight, I love you."

My eyes started getting all sting-y but I blinked them a bunch more times and the note disappeared. I kept blinking but the pile of clothes stayed right where it was.

Aw, shucks, Miss Thomas must've come in at night and undressed me and put me in bed. I bet she got a real good look at my legs.

I got up as quiet as I could and put my clothes back on. I could hear laughing and talking coming from downstairs.

Right when I got near the kitchen door I could hear Herman E. Calloway saying, ". . . so that's how that cookie's going to crumble."

Miss Thomas said, "You have no idea how bad those orphanages can be, it's no place to be raised. I can't believe you, you'll take care of any stray dog wandering through this neighborhood, but when it comes to a child all of a sudden you have no sympathy. You might not

have been paying attention, but we agreed last night what we were going to do about that boy, and that's what we're sticking to."

Uh-oh. I was glad I didn't take anything out of my suitcase, 'cause it looked like I might be making a break for the street again.

Herman E. Calloway said, "Like I said, I'ma find out what the real story is in Flint, and then we'll see."

Miss Thomas said, "That's fine, I believe the child. You, above all people, should know that I've got a sense about when someone is lying."

Uh-oh, I'd have to remember that.

She kept talking. "Until we've heard otherwise from Flint, he's staying right here."

A fourth voice said, "Well, I'm glad to hear it, that means I didn't go digging around in the basement for nothing. I think he's going to really like this."

It was Steady Eddie and it sounded like he had something for me!

I ran back up the steps on my tiptoes and down the hall to the little dead girl's room. I stood outside the room and closed the door loud enough that they could hear it downstairs. I *clump-clump-clumped* down the hall to the door that Miss Thomas said was the bathroom.

When I was done I pulled on a chain that made the water come down. The loud noise made me jump back.

Man, these inside-the-house outhouses were hard to

get used to. I washed my hands with running hot water and closed the bathroom door kind of loud.

I *clump-clump-clumped* down the steps, stopping a couple of times to yawn real loud.

When I walked into the kitchen they all had looks on their faces like they hadn't been talking about me at all.

I said, "Good morning, Mr. Calloway," but I didn't really mean it, then said, "Good morning, Miss Thomas, good morning, Mr. Jimmy, good morning, Steady Eddie."

I noticed right away that Miss Thomas didn't have all her diamond rings on, I guess it would've been hard sleeping with them flashing lights up at you, she must have to keep them closed up in a box that the sparkles can't get out of. I noticed too that even without the rings Miss Thomas still had to be the most beautiful woman in the world.

They smiled and said, "Good morning, Bud." All except Herman E. Calloway. He got up from the table and said, "I don't like the way Loudean is sounding, I'ma have a look at her plugs."

He went outside through a door at the back of the kitchen.

Miss Thomas said, "Bud, we'd just about given up on you. Do you usually sleep until after noon?"

After noon? Man, I couldn't believe it, I'd slept as long as those rich folks in the moving pictures!

“No, ma’am, that’s the first time I ever did that.”

She said, “I know you must be starving, but if you can hold out for another half hour or so Mr. Jimmy’s going to make everyone’s lunch. Think you can wait?”

“Yes, ma’am.” A half hour wasn’t nothing to wait, no matter how hungry you were.

Mr. Jimmy said, “So what’s the scoop, little man?”

I didn’t know what that meant so I said, “Nothing, sir.”

Steady Eddie said, “How’d you sleep, kiddo?”

“Great, sir.” Oops, I forgot I wasn’t supposed to call the band men *sir*.

He said, “Cop a squat.” He pointed at a chair. I guessed that meant “sit down,” so I did.

Miss Thomas said, “Were your ears burning last night, Bud?”

Man, all these Grand Rapids people really do talk funny. I only came from the other side of the state and it was like they talked some strange language out here.

I said, “What, ma’am?”

She said, “There’s an old saying that when people talk about you behind your back your ears start to get real warm, kind of like they were burning.”

I said, “No, ma’am, my ears felt just fine.”

She said, “Well, they should’ve been burning, you were the subject of a very long conversation last night. But as sound asleep as you were, I’m really not all that

surprised you didn't notice. I had to check your pulse to make sure you were still alive!"

Shucks! I knew it. She did come in when I was conked out and took my doggone pants and shirt off and put me there. Man, this was real embarrassing.

Miss Thomas said, "Mr. Calloway and the band and I talked about you for a long time. We've come up with something we want to discuss with you, but we need your help in deciding what to do."

Uh-oh. That was Rules and Things Number 36, or something, that meant I was going to have to get ready to go fetch something for her.

I said, "Yes, ma'am?"

She said, "We've got to talk to some people in Flint first, but if they say it's all right, we were hoping that you'd stay here at Grand Calloway Station for a while."

A gigantic smile split my face in half.

Miss Thomas said, "I'm going to assume that that smile means yes."

I said, "Yes, ma'am! Thank you, ma'am!"

Miss Thomas said, "Before that grin gets stuck on your face, let me tell you you're going to have lots of chores and things to take care of around here, Bud, you'll be expected to pull your own weight the best you can. We all like a very clean house and none of us are too used to having children around, so we're all

going to have to learn to be patient with each other. There's one person in particular that you're going to have to be very patient with. Do you know who I mean?"

I sure did. "Yes, ma'am, it's Mr. Calloway."

She said, "Good boy, give him some time. He really needs help with a lot of different things, he swears someone's adding weight onto that bass fiddle of his every year, but he's just getting older. He can use some young, wiry hands to help him around. Think you can handle that?"

Now I knew for sure she'd looked at my legs, she must've thought I was a real weakling.

I said, "Yes, ma'am, my legs are a lot stronger than they look, most folks are surprised by that."

Miss Thomas said, "I don't doubt that at all, Bud. I'm not worried about your body being strong, I'm more concerned about your spirit. Lord knows Mr. Calloway is going to give it a test."

I said, "Yes, ma'am, my spirit's a lot stronger than it looks too, most folks are really surprised by that."

She smiled and said, "Very good, but you know what, Bud?"

"What, ma'am?"

"I knew you were an old toughie the minute I saw you."

I smiled again.

She said, "Our schedule's pretty heavy for the next

couple of months, and then come September we'll have to see about school for you, but we'll be doing a lot of traveling right around Michigan, so I hope you don't mind long car trips."

"No, ma'am."

She said, "That's great, Bud. Something tells me you were a godsend to us, you keep that in mind all of the time, OK?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Then she did something that made me feel strange. She stood up, grabbed both my arms and looked right hard in my face, just like Momma used to, she said, "Really, Bud, I want you to always keep that in mind, this might get hard for you some of the time and I don't always travel with the band, so I don't want you to forget what I'm telling you."

I said, "No, ma'am, I won't."

Steady Eddie said, "Since you're going to be part of the family there're some things we've got to talk about. Now I've noticed the tight grip you keep on that old suitcase of your'n. I need to know how attached to it you are."

"I carry it with me everywhere I go 'cause all my things are in there." I wasn't sure if I liked the way this talk was going.

Steady Eddie said, "That's what I need to know, are you attached to the suitcase, or is it the things inside that are important?"

I'd never thought about that before, I'd always thought of the suitcase and the things inside together.

I said, "The things I got from my mother are the most important."

He said, "Good, 'cause if you're going to be traveling with us it just wouldn't look too copacetic for you to be carrying that ratty old bag."

He reached under the kitchen table and pulled out one of those funny-looking suitcases that the band kept all their instruments in. This one looked like a baby one to his.

He put it on the table, opened it and said, "Since you're going to be traveling with Herman E. Calloway and the Worthy Swarthys, which is known far and wide as a very classy band, it's only fitting that you quit carrying your things in that cardboard suitcase.

"This is my old alto saxophone case, I've been hanging on to it for three years now, ever since the horn got stole right off the stage in Saginaw, but it doesn't look like I'm ever gonna get it back, so I figured you might as well keep your momma's things in it."

Wow! "Thank you, Steady Eddie!"

I pulled my new case over to me. The inside of it had a great big dent where Steady Eddie's saxophone used to go, now there wasn't anything in it but a little raggedy pink towel. The case had some soft smooth black stuff all over the inside of it, it covered everything, even the

dent. There was a real old smell that came out of it too, like dried-up slobber and something dead. It smelled great!

The back kitchen door opened and I thought Herman E. Calloway was coming back in to ruin everybody's fun, but it was the rest of the band.

Everybody said hello, poured themselves some coffee, then sat down at the table.

Doo-Doo Bug said, "I see Mr. C.'s got Loudean's carburetor tore down again, anything wrong?"

Miss Thomas said, "There's lots wrong, but not with that car."

They all laughed so I joined in too.

I patted my new case and said, "This here's my case now, I'm going to be going around with you."

They smiled and Dirty Deed said, "So we hear. Glad to have you on board, partner."

Steady Eddie said, "I was just about to tell him some of the things Herman E. Calloway requires of anybody in his band."

The Thug said, "Otherwise known as Herman E. Calloway's Rules to Guarantee You Have No Female Companionship, No Alcohol and No Fun at All."

"Rule number one, practice two hours a day."

Mr. Jimmy said, "That's a good one."

Steady Eddie said, "So I got you this, Bud."

Steady Eddie had another present for me! This was a

long, brown, skinny wooden flute. I was going to have to learn music!

He said, "It's called a recorder. Once you've developed a little wind, and some tone and a embouchure we'll move on to something a little more complicated."

These must've been more of those Grand Rapids words 'cause they sure weren't like any American talk I ever heard before.

I said, "Thank you!"

Steady Eddie said, "Don't thank me until you've been through a couple of hours of blowing scales. We'll see if you're still grateful then."

The Thug said, "Now all that's left is to give little stuff here a name."

Miss Thomas said, "You know, I don't like the way Loudean's been sounding, I think I'm gonna go check the air in the trunk." She picked her coffee up and started to leave the kitchen.

Doo-Doo Bug said, "You don't have to leave, Miss Thomas."

"Darling, I know that, it's just that this is one of those man things that you all think is so mysterious and special that I have absolutely no interest in. The only thing I can hope is that the process has improved since you four were given your names." Then she left the room.

As soon as she was gone Steady Eddie told me, "Hand me your ax and stand up, Bud." I was starting to catch on to this Grand Rapids talk, I remembered that a ax was a instrument. I handed Steady my recorder and stood up in front of him.

He said, "Uh-uh, she was right, this is mysterious and special, so that grin's got to go, brother."

I tried to tie down my smile.

Steady said, "Mr. Jimmy, you're the senior musician here, would you proceed?"

Mr. Jimmy said, "Gentlemen, the floor's open for names for the newest member of the band, Bud-not-Buddy."

They started acting like they were in school. The Thug raised his hand and Mr. Jimmy pointed at him.

Thug said, "Mr. Chairman, in light of the boy's performance last night at the Sweet Pea, I nominate the name Waterworks Willie."

Shucks, I was hoping they'd forgot about that.

Mr. Jimmy said, "You're out of order, Douglas."

Steady raised his hand. "Mr. Chairman, this boy's obviously going to be a musician, he slept until twelve-thirty today, so I propose that we call him Sleepy."

Mr. Jimmy said, "The name Sleepy is before the board, any comments?"

Dirty Deed said, "Too simple. I think we need something that lets folks know about how slim the boy is."

Doo-Doo Bug said, "How about the Bone?"

Steady said, "Not enough class, he needs something so people will know right off that the boy's got class."

Mr. Jimmy said, "How do you say *bone* in French? French always makes things sound a lot classier."

The Thug said, "That's easy, *bone* in French is *la bone*."

Doo-Doo Bug said, "*La bone*, nah, it don't have a ring to it."

Steady Eddie said, "I got it, we'll compromise. How about Sleepy LaBone?"

I couldn't tie the smile down anymore, that was about the best name I'd ever heard in my life!

Mr. Jimmy said, "Let me try it out. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for coming out on this cold November night, this night that will live in history, this night that for the first time on any stage anywhere, you have listened to the smooth saxophonical musings of that prodigy of the reed, Mr. Sleepy LaBone!"

The whole crowd broke out clapping.

The Thug said, "What can I say but *bang!*"

Dirty Deed said, "You nailed him!"

Doo-Doo Bug said, "That is definitely smooth."

Steady said, "My man!"

Mr. Jimmy said, "Kneel down, young man."

I got down on one knee.

Mr. Jimmy tapped me on the head three times with

my recorder and said, "Arise and welcome to the band, Mr. Sleepy LaBone."

I got off my knee and looked at my bandmates.

Sleepy LaBone. Shucks, that was the kind of name that was enough to make you forget folks had ever called you Buddy, or even Clarence. That was the kind of name that was enough to make you practice *four* hours every day, just so you could live up to it!

CHAPTER 17

I HELD THE MOP so that it was floating on the top of the water in the bucket. I was pretending it was that underwater boat in the book Momma read to me, *Twenty Thousand Leaks Under the Sea*.

“Captain Nemo,” I whispered, pretending I was a sailor.

“Aye, matey?”

“The squabs were only able to plug ten thousand of the leaks we have, that means we have ten thousand left,

and dag-gum-it, I think we're going down with all hands on board!"

I looked up to make sure no one was watching me too close. The Dusky Devastators of the Depression were still putting their instruments on the stage, waiting for Miss Thomas and Mr. Jimmy and Herman E. Calloway.

I whispered, "Heavenly Father, all is lost!" Then I made the mop sink into the water, drowning Captain Nemo, matey, and all the poor squabs. They went down with a bunch of bubbles and soap suds and dirt.

I know Herman E. Calloway was trying to work me like a dog, but he was doing a real bad job at it. I'd already wiped all the tables and chairs down in the Log Cabin and now I was going back to clear-mop the floor for the second time. It was a piece of cake! The bucket even had a thing on top of it that you could use to wring the mop out, and Herman E. Calloway didn't even know how much fun I was having. Making somebody work hard isn't as easy as it looks, some folks are good at it and some folks aren't.

Some folks can look at you and tell if you're even thinking about slacking off, they'll add some work to you faster than you can say Jack Robinson. Some folks will find a excuse to strap you even if you're working as hard as you ever did in your life.

I stuck the mop head into the wringer. I pretended it

was somebody at a washing machine not paying attention to what he was doing and getting his whole body pulled through and wrunged out.

I let the handle up to see what was left of this poor soul but before I could check, someone yelled out, "One, two, one two three!"

I looked up.

The Thug was brushing his sticks across the round gold metal thing next to his drums and making it sound like a soft rain was commencing to fall on someone's tin roof. Only instead of sounding like rain splashing anytime it wanted to, the Thug had it sounding like it was coming down in a steady, bouncing way.

Then Dirty Deed started making the piano sound like it was a kind of drum, for a second it fell right in with the rain pats that the Thug was making, then it took off and made you think of what Niagara Falls must sound like, it sounded like big, bright drops of water splashing up and over, over and up. The drops would fall loud and clear as anything, then before you knew it they were right back into the Thug's steady, bouncy beat.

Steady Eddie started snapping his fingers real soft, in time with the piano and the drum, his toothpick jumping right along with his fingers. He put his ax in his mouth and blew, but instead of the horn making music it seemed like Steady made it talk. He blew one long, low, rumbly sound and I knew right then, with that one deep, sad moan, what the most beautiful sound in the world

was. Steady held the note for a long time, then made the sax drift away from the rest of the storm of music. It swirled and floated back and joined the rain sound that the Thug and Dirty Deed kept going.

I just stood there. I didn't even hear Miss Thomas and Mr. Jimmy and Herman E. Calloway come up from behind me.

Miss Thomas rubbed her hand across my head and said, "Bud, you've done a great job, the place is sparkling."

I was going to say, "Thank you, ma'am," but it seemed like talking was wrong what with all these wonderful sounds were coming from the people on the stage.

Mr. Jimmy said, "LaBone, looking good, son."

Herman E. Calloway grunted and the three of them walked up on the stage.

Mr. Jimmy picked up his horn and joined in the storm. Miss Thomas sat on a stool, closed her eyes and ducked her head up and down, up and down. Herman E. Calloway stood next to his giant fiddle and started bobbing his head too. He put one of his hands near the top of the fiddle and began pulling at the strings with his other hand.

Every time he patted the strings it seemed like something wide and heavy was walking by slow and easy. Or it seemed like he was the thunder, soft and far away but getting closer all the time.

All of the instruments blended up together and, just like that smell in the library, you couldn't tell which one

was your favorite. First you'd say it was Mr. Jimmy on the trumpet, then Doo-Doo Bug's trombone would make you think it was the best, then Dirty Deed would make the piano sound like water hitting big rocks and you'd know there wasn't anything that sounded that good until Steady Eddie would make the saxophone sing and talk and dance around everyone else and you'd swear that was the only sound you'd ever want to hear again. All the while Herman E. Calloway and the Thug kept everything moving by making the drums and the giant fiddle pound out a soft steady beat, like someone's heart turned way up loud.

You'd have a real hard time trying to figure out which instrument was your favorite. Until Miss Thomas opened her mouth. While the rest of the band was being a storm, she was the sun busting through thick, gray clouds. With the first thing she sang, you had to wonder why this band was called Herman E. Calloway and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression, or Herman E. Calloway and the Nubian Knights, it should be called Miss Thomas and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression and a Mean Old Guy on the Giant Fiddle.

She was so good she didn't even have to sing real words, mostly she was saying things like "La da de da de da da, ha whee a ho, ha whee a ho, ha whee a day," then Steady Eddie would answer on the saxophone and before you knew it, the two of them were having a regular conversation.

Every once in a while Mr. Jimmy's trumpet would come in and put his two cents' worth in, then it would fade away. All the other instruments took turns trying to interrupt the conversation, but in the end it was Miss Thomas's voice and Steady's saxophone doing the talking that you really wanted to listen to.

Finally Miss Thomas did a bunch more "Doe de doe de doe de bahs" and Steady answered, then, just when you thought you could understand this language they were talking, Miss Thomas broke out in American, she sang,

"We haven't met since then, gee, but it's nice to see you again," she said, "nice to see you, to see you again," and the storm was over. The last thing you could hear was the rain from the Thug and the thunder from Herman E. Calloway getting farther and farther away, like the storm had gone and blowed itself over into the next county.

Then it was dead quiet. I let the mop fall over and clapped as loud as I could and said, "Wow!"

Miss Thomas stood up and did one of those curtsy bows.

I clapped louder. I could see now why this band got to have six exclamation points behind their name!

CHAPTER 18

WE GOT IN TWO CARS to drive for a hour and a half north of Grand Rapids. We were headed to a dinky town called Mecosta. I got to ride with the band while Mr. Jimmy and Herman E. Calloway and the instruments were riding in the Packard. Miss Thomas stayed back at Grand Calloway Station. I'd been living with Miss Thomas and the band for about seven days and this was already my third trip on the road.

The band was doing their next favorite thing to playing

music, they were teasing each other and talking about Herman E. Calloway behind his back.

The Thug said to Dirty Deed, "I'd be offended, man, and I ain't trying to say that you ain't good on the eighty-eights, but you know the only reason you got this gig is 'cause you're Dutch, you're white and you don't have the strongest personality in the world."

Deed said, "Yeah, well, such is life. You think I'm going to give up the best gig in the state just 'cause you'd be offended? Take a look out the window, baby, there's a depression going on. How many folks you see living like us, Negro or white? Not many. That man may have his faults but he's a struggler, I'm putting my hat in with him."

Eddie looked at me and said, "Bud, Mr. C. has always got a white fella in the band, for practical reasons. But we don't hold his skin color against him, he can't help that he was born that way."

Deed said, "You're just too kind, Edward."

Eddie kept talking, "We do that 'cause the boy can play, Mr. C. won't compromise on his music."

I said, "Why does he always keep one white guy in the band?"

Deed said, "It's the way of the world, Sleepy. It's against the law for a Negro to own any property out where the Log Cabin is so Mr. C. put it in my name."

Eddie said, "That, and a lot of times we get gigs playing

polkas and waltzes and a lot of these white folks wouldn't hire us if they knew we were a Negro band so Deed goes out and sets up everything."

"But what do they say when the Dusky Devastators show up?"

Deed said, "Well, it's too late for them to say anything then, it's us or no music."

Eddie said, "And Mr. C. tells them if we aren't the best band they'd ever had then they don't have to pay. We haven't been stiffed yet."

With all the arguing and jokes about Mr. C., the trip seemed real short. We unloaded all of the instruments and waited for nighttime to come.

I'd heard the band play and practice a thousand times and still had to just about sit on my hands when they were finished so I wouldn't bust out clapping.

We finished our set at a little place called the Laughing Jackass and I got to sleep right onstage to guard the instruments. The next morning I was packing everything into the cases when I got some real bad news.

Herman E. Calloway told Mr. Jimmy, "I'ma stay and catch up with Eugene, you head back with the boys." The man who owned the club, Mr. Eugene Miller, used to be in one of Mr. C.'s bands.

Mr. Jimmy said, "Bud, take your time loading everything into the Packard and you can ride back with Herman."

Uh-oh. Me and Mr. C. looked at each other like this wasn't a good idea. He said, "Whatever," and walked back to the club's office.

Shucks, a whole hour and a half trapped in a car with him.

I loaded all of the instruments into the Packard, sat on a big rock and took out my recorder to practice. I could hear Mr. C. and Mr. Miller talking and laughing for the longest time.

At last Herman E. Calloway came out and walked over to the side of the building and started nudging things around with the toe of his shoe. I walked over to watch what he was doing.

When I got next to him I could see that it was just rocks he was pushing around. Finally he grunted a couple of times and started to bend over but his big belly got in the way and wouldn't let his arms reach to the ground. After a bunch more grunts he said, "Make yourself useful, boy, and hand me this one."

"This what, sir?"

"This stone, this one."

Right at the end of Mr. C.'s shiny brown shoe was a little roundish rock. I bent over to pick it up, blew some dirt off of it and turned it over a couple of times in my hand to try and see why Mr. C. thought it was so special. The only thing that I could tell was that he'd picked a perfect throwing rock, the exact same kind of rock I'd

use if I was about to chunk someone in the head. I dropped it into his hand.

He didn't look at it or nothing, he just stuck it in his pocket and I heard it bang up against some silver dollars.

I kept my nose out of his business for as long as I could then had to say, "Mr. C., wasn't that just a rock?"

"Sure was." He started walking back to the Packard. I followed.

There were a million ways to ask what I wanted to know and I chose the worst one when I said, "What in Sam Hill are you going to do with a doggone rock?" It sounded a lot meaner than I wanted it to but I was really surprised that Mr. C. would want a old rock.

He climbed in on one side of the Packard and I climbed in on the other. After he stuck the key in the dashboard he said, "Bad habit."

Then he leaned over toward me and opened the glove box of the car. There weren't any gloves or maps or papers in the box, just a bunch of perfect throwing rocks. They all looked like they had writing on them.

I reached in and took one of the rocks out. Written on the back of it was "idlewild m. 5.2.36." I took another one and it said "preston in. 6.4.36." These were just like my rocks! I took one more and it said, "chicago il. 3.19.32."

I looked over to Mr. C. and said, "I've got some of these, sir."

He said, "Hmmm."

“Really, I’ve got some too.”

He looked at me, shifted his pipe away from the talking side of his mouth and said, “Bud, I know you’re not the sharpest knife in the drawer, and I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, but those are found all over the world. In fact, they’re about as common as rocks.”

I almost didn’t answer him but since I didn’t want to look so stupid I said, “Yes, sir, but mine have writing and numbers on them too.”

He said, “Hmmm.”

We kept driving. Finally I said to him, “You don’t believe me, I’ll show you.”

I dropped his three rocks back into the glove box and closed it, then climbed over the front seat to get at my sax case. I found it and set it on the backseat and unlocked it. As soon as I opened the top that smell of old spit and crumbling-up velvet and mildew came rushing out, it was still great. I lifted the little door that covered my rocks and took two of them out. I climbed back over the front seat but kept the rocks covered in my hand—if he was going to see these he was going to have to ask first. I crossed my arms across my chest and waited.

It’s a good thing I’ve got lots of patience ’cause I waited a long, long time.

When we finally got back to Grand Calloway Station Mr. Jimmy helped us unload the car.

Finally I decided that Mr. C. had waited long enough. I stuck my rocks in his face and said, “See, I told you I

had some rocks like those, the only difference is mine say, 'flint m dot eight dot eleven dot eleven' and 'gary in dot six dot thirteen dot twelve.' ”

He said, “Where did you find these? Didn't I tell you not to do any rummaging around in that room you been sleeping in?”

He reached for the rocks. I don't know why, but I let him take them. He was the first person other than Bugs that I'd ever let touch the rocks that my momma had give to me.

Mr. C. turned the rocks over and over in his hands and said, “Well? Where'd you get these?”

Uh-oh, I could tell by the way Herman E. Calloway was holding my rocks that he didn't plan on giving them back to me anytime soon. I kept watching his hand, waiting for a chance to snatch my rocks and get out of there.

If I could get my hands back on my rocks I knew I could outrun Mr. C. even though he was a lot stronger and his legs were a lot longer than mine.

Herman E. Calloway said, “Answer me, where'd you take these from?”

Mr. C. sounded meaner than he ever had before. Mr. Jimmy heard him and put down the box he was carrying and walked over to us real quick.

Herman E. Calloway had the rocks squeezed tight in his right-hand fist and had his left-hand fist balled up like he was ready to fight.

Mr. Jimmy said, "Herman? What's this? What's wrong?" He stood between me and Mr. C.

Herman E. Calloway said, "I told you about this boy from the word go. He's been snooping through things in the house that he's got no business being in, he stole these."

I said, "No, sir, I did not."

Mr. C. said, "Then where'd you get them? I'm not going to ask you again." He unsqueezed the rocks in his hand. I was surprised they hadn't turned into diamonds or dust the way he'd been holding them so tight.

Mr. Jimmy took my two rocks from him. He looked at the writing and said, "Flint, Michigan, August eighth, 1911, and Gary, Indiana, July thirteenth, 1912? That's more than twenty-five years ago."

He squatted down and looked right at me and said, "Son, where'd you find these? Just tell the truth."

I kept one eye on Mr. C., he still looked like he was getting ready to jump funny on me.

I said, "Mr. Jimmy, I didn't find them or steal them from nowhere, these've always been mine. I got them from my momma and that's the swear-'fore-God truth. Now could I please have my rocks back, sir?" I stuck my hand out.

Both Mr. Jimmy and Herman E. Calloway said, "Your momma?"

"Yes, sir." I kept my hand out.

Mr. Jimmy said, "Bud, where did your mother get these?"

I said, "I don't know, sir. She always had them."

Mr. Jimmy and Herman E. Calloway were looking at me with that can't-decide-which-hand-to-smack-you-with-look when Mr. Jimmy said, "Bud, what did you say your mamma's name was?"

"No one ever asked me, sir."

Herman E. Calloway was still hot. "You throw a lot of 'sirs' around but you've still got a real strong, real smart-mouthed, disrespectful streak in you, boy. Now you answer the question or I'll—"

I screamed at him, "Angela, sir." I was so mad that I hadn't meant to say "sir" but it came out anyway. "Her name is Angela Janet Caldwell."

Mr. Jimmy said, "Lord have mercy. . . ."

Herman E. Calloway's pipe dropped out of his mouth and he stumbled and fumbled into Grand Calloway Station, feeling his way like he'd been struck blind.

Then I knew! Herman E. Calloway *was* the best liar in the world, he'd been lying to me and everybody else all along! Now that there was some good proof against him he was all shook up.

I said to Mr. Jimmy, "I knew it! I knew he was my father!"

Mr. Jimmy was still crouched down right in front of me. He said, "Bud, he's not your father."

“Yes, sir, he is. That’s why he run off like that, he got caught lying after all these years!”

Mr. Jimmy said, “Bud, that’s enough. Herman is *not* your father. But Angela Janet is his daughter’s name. If what you’re saying is true, Lord help us all, it looks like Herman might be your grandfather.”

This was real surprising, but the thing I felt most was glad that Herman E. Calloway wasn’t my dad. Shucks, who’d want a daddy that on top of being so old and so doggone mean had such a big belly? Not me.

CHAPTER 19

MAN! Ever since he heard me call my momma's name Herman E. Calloway had locked himself up in his room and wouldn't come out.

Mr. Jimmy and Miss Thomas made me sit at the kitchen table whilst they knocked on his door and tried to talk him into opening it up, but the way they kept saying "Herman" soft at first, then louder and louder, it sounded like he wasn't talking back. After the longest while they decided to let the big baby have his own way and came back downstairs. They sat at the kitchen table with me.

Miss Thomas looked at me and said, "My, my, my."

Mr. Jimmy said, "Now look here, Bud." He wiped his hand over his face. "You're sure your momma's name was Angela Janet?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

"And the two of you both had the same last name, her last name was Caldwell too, she never said nothing about being no Calloway?"

I spelt it out for him. "No, sir, her name was Caldwell, C-A-L-D-W-E-L-L."

It seemed like he finally believed me, he said, "OK, OK, I hope you don't mind me asking, Bud, but it's pretty important that we know, how'd your momma pass? And how long ago was it?"

Pass was just like *gone*, it was another one of those words grown folks use instead of *dead*.

I said, "I was six years old when it happened, sir. I don't know why, she was too sick to go to work for six days in a row, then one morning I went into her room and she was dead. But she didn't suffer or nothing, it happened real quick, she didn't even have time to close her eyes, she didn't look like it hurt or nothing."

Miss Thomas reached across the table and touched my arm, she said, "I'm sure it didn't, Bud, I'm sure it was very peaceful for her."

Mr. Jimmy said, "When she was living, Bud, God rest her soul, what'd your momma look like?"

This was another strange question, but before I could

answer, Miss Thomas said, "James, what are you insinuating? I knew there was something familiar about this boy, I don't know how I missed it before but look at Bud's eyes, you have to ask if this is Herman's grandchild?"

Mr. Jimmy said, "Now hold on, Grace, I'm just trying to ask the questions I know Herman'd ask if he could. Ain't a thing wrong with being certain before we jump to any conclusions. Now what'd she look like, son?"

I said, "She was real pretty, sir."

Mr. Jimmy said, "I bet she was, Bud, but that ain't what I meant. Was she short or tall, was she slim or big-boned?"

I said, "I don't know, sir, she was real pretty and real tall and kind of skinny like me, I guess."

Miss Thomas said, "James, Bud was six years old, everyone on earth was real tall to him. I don't see the point in all this."

I said, "Pardon me, ma'am, I know how I can show you what she looks like, I still got her picture."

They just stared at me.

I said, "Can I be excused?"

Miss Thomas said, "Yes, son, hurry up and go get that picture."

I busted up the stairs but stopped like I hit a brick wall. I remembered how mad and crazy Herman E. Cal-

loway looked when he yelled at me. I tippytoed up the rest of the steps.

Uh-oh! Herman E. Calloway's door was opened up a crack!

I held my breath and tiptoed extra quiet and extra fast right into the little dead girl's room and as soon as I did . . . woop, zoop, sloop . . . my heart jumped down into my stomach.

Herman E. Calloway was sitting on the little chair in front of the little mirror on the dressing table. His elbows were on the table and his face was covered by his hands. It sounded like he was having trouble breathing 'cause every time he sucked in a bunch of air he made a sound like "Mu-u-u-u-h . . ." and every time he blew air out he made a sound like, "H-u-u-u-h . . ."

I didn't know what to do. I could tell Mr. C. didn't know I was in the room with him so I could probably just backward tiptoe and get out of there without anything happening.

I rose up on my toes, took two baby steps back and stopped. Shucks, I'd come up here to show Miss Thomas and Mr. Jimmy what my mamma looked like, there wasn't nothing wrong with that, I wasn't doing nothing that meant I had to sneak out of this room on my tiptoes going backwards.

I sucked in a mouthful of air and walked over to my bed. I picked up my sax case and set it on top of the bed.

I pushed the two silver buttons to the side and the two silver tongues jumped open and made those loud *click-click* sounds. Herman E. Calloway still didn't take his face out of his hands. He kept going, "Muh . . . huh . . . muh . . . huh . . . muh . . . huh . . . muh . . . huh . . ."

I reached inside my sax case and took out the envelope with Momma's picture in it. I closed the two silver tongues again and could tell that Mr. C. wasn't paying me no mind at all, he kept his face in his hands, his head was rocking up and down real slow, sort of like he was checking to see how much it weighed.

I put my sax case back next to the bed and was about to leave the room when I looked over at Herman E. Calloway's back.

He still didn't know I was in the room with him. I looked in the little round mirror and still couldn't see his face, but I could see his hands a lot better. I could see six little trails of water coming out from where his fingers joined up with his hands, the three trails from each hand joined up together on his wrists and ran down his arms puddling up on top of the dressing table.

Shucks, Herman E. Calloway was bawling his eyes out. He was acting like me being his grandson was the worst news anyone could ever give you in your life.

This was Number 39 of Bud Caldwell's Rules and Things to Have a Funner Life and Make a Better Liar Out of Yourself.

RULES AND THINGS NUMBER 39

The Older You Get, the Worse Something Has to Be to Make You Cry.

With babies it's easy not to pay them no mind 'cause crying's just like talking for a baby. A baby's tears might mean, "Hey! You just stuck a pin in my behind when you changed my diapers," or their crying might be the way they picked out to say, "Good morning, Momma, what're we gonna do today?" That makes it easy not to care too much about a baby's tears.

When you got a old person crying you got a whole 'nother story. When you got someone as old as Herman E. Calloway crying you better look around, 'cause you know you're square in the middle of one of those boiling tragedies. You can't help but feel sorry for him, even if he's been mean to you from the minute he first laid eyes on you, even if he's crying 'cause he found out the two of you were kin.

I walked over to Herman E. Calloway and before I could think my hand moved out toward his back. I waited for one of those spaces between the *muhs* and the *huhs*, then I touched him. His skin under his shirt was very, very warm.

It took a second for Herman E. Calloway to know someone was touching him. When he knew, I felt his

skin jerk and twitch the same way a horse's does when a fly lands on it. He whipped his head around.

When he saw it was me he jerked away, took one more giant *huh*, then stared. His mouth started moving like he was talking in a secret language that only dogs could hear.

At last real American words started coming out of his mouth.

He said, "I . . . I . . . how'd . . . I'm, I'm so . . . look, Buddy . . . I . . . I just . . ."

"It's Bud, sir, not Buddy."

He put his face back in his hands and broke down all over again.

Man, it's a good thing the Thug wasn't around, 'cause if he'd've heard the way Mr. C. was weeping, no one would've wondered who the real Waterworks Willie was.

I put my hand back on Mr. C.'s shoulder and patted him and rubbed him a couple of times, then left the room. It felt a lot better going out frontwards instead of sneaking out backwards.

I ran down the steps back into the kitchen. Miss Thomas's and Mr. Jimmy's eyes jumped right onto my envelope. I set it in the middle of the table.

Both of them just looked at it before Miss Thomas reached out and picked it up. She went into the pocket of her dress and took some funny little glasses that only

had a bottom half to them, then put them on her nose. She pulled Momma's picture out and held it as far away from her eyes as her arms would stretch.

She looked at the picture, looked over her glasses at me, then looked right at Mr. Jimmy and said, "Any more questions for this young man?" She slid the picture over to him.

Mr. Jimmy picked it up and said, "Well, I'll be, remember that old con man who used to drag that ruint horse through town, now what was his name? Help me out here, Grace, didn't he call his act Joey Pegus and his Broke-Back Broncking Bucko?"

Miss Thomas said, "It was Joey Pegus and his Broke-Back Bucking Bronco, James. What else do you see in the picture?"

Mr. Jimmy said, "Uh, uh, uh, that definitely is Angela Janet Calloway!"

He looked at me and said, "You sure this is your mother?"

I said, "Yes, sir. But her name's Caldwell, not Calloway."

He said, "Well, I'll just be—"

Miss Thomas butted in on him. "There's little doubt about that, James, but what we've got to do . . ."

She kept on talking but I quit listening 'cause something just came out of the blue and give me a good whop right on my forehead. Without even thinking about what

I was doing, I butted in on Miss Thomas and said, "That means that's not some little dead girl's room I'm sleeping in, that's my mamma's room!"

She looked at me kind of surprised, like this was the first time she'd had that thought too, she said, "That's right, Bud, you're back in your mamma's room."

I said, "How come Herman E. Calloway never called on me and my mother? All he'd've had to do was call on us one time and I know she wouldn't have been so sad."

Miss Thomas and Mr. Jimmy took turns shooting quick looks at each other, then she said, "Bud, give me your hand."

Uh-oh, pretty soon I'd have to come up with a Rules and Things about when Miss Thomas holds your hand.

She stretched her arm across the table and I held on to her fingers.

"Bud," she said, "Mr. C. — excuse me, your granddad didn't know anything about you. No one knew where your mother had gone."

Mr. Jimmy said, "That's right, son, she just up and run off one day. I mean we all knew Herman was hard on her, but it wasn't like it was nothing personal, he was hard on everybody. I used to tell him all the time to slack off some on the girl, to go easy, but I can remember his exact words, he said, 'Easy-go don't make the mare run. This is a hard world, especially for a Negro woman, there's a hundred million folks out there of every shade

and hue, both male and female, who are just dying to be harder on her than I ever could be. She's got to be ready.' Shoot, I could see that the girl wasn't the type to —"

Miss Thomas said, "James, why don't you go up and check on Herman." She said "why don't you," but it wasn't a question.

Mr. Jimmy said, "Oh. Oh, maybe I should," and left the kitchen.

Miss Thomas told me, "Bud, I know you can see your granddad has troubles getting along with most folks, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I think it's because he expects so much out of everybody, himself included. And when you set your standards so high, you get let down a lot."

I shook my head up and down, acting like I understood.

She said, "Now take your mother, for instance. He was so, so proud of that young woman, and he loved her very, very much. He was determined that she was going to be the first Calloway to get schooling all the way through college so he thought he had to be strict on her, but he went overboard, Bud, simple as that. He used to crow about how his mother and father had been born slaves and how now it was only two generations later and the Calloways had come so far and worked so hard that one of them was actually going to be a teacher.

"It was his dream, not hers—not yet, anyway—and

he never gave her time to pick it for herself. The more he pushed her, the more she fought him. Finally it got to be too much and she left. We think she ran off with one of Herman's drummers.

"We've been hoping for eleven years that she'd send word or come home, and she finally has. Looks to me like she sent us the best word we've had in years."

Miss Thomas smiled at me and I knew she was trying to say I was the word that my momma had sent to them.

She said, "Wait here for one second, precious. I've got to go to my room for something."

Miss Thomas was probably saying that as a excuse so she could blow her nose and cry, but she came back in a flash. She was holding a iron picture frame and handed it to me.

"This has been on my dressing table for thirteen years, Bud, ever since your mother was sixteen years old. Now it belongs to you."

I wanted to say thank you, but I just stared at the picture in the heavy iron frame. It was Momma.

The picture only showed her head, all around the edges it was smoky or foggy so's that it looked like Momma'd poked her head out of a cloud. And Momma was smiling. The same soft smile she'd give me when she got home from work. It'd been so long since I'd seen Momma smile that I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

Miss Thomas said, "Let me show you something, Bud."

She took the frame out of my hands and said, "Watch this."

She moved the picture up and down, right and left, then around in circles.

"Do you see how her eyes are on you all the time? No matter which way you look at the picture, she's watching."

It seemed like Momma was looking direct at me no matter where Miss Thomas put the picture.

"I can keep this?"

"I feel like I've been holding on to it until the rightful owner came along, and it looks to me like he's finally shown up. What took you so long, child?"

Miss Thomas patted me underneath my chin.

She said, "But Bud, we've got a problem I'm going to need your help with."

Uh-oh.

"You said you were six years old when your mother died?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"OK, so that was four years ago."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You can remember how bad you felt when you first knew she was gone, can't you?"

"Yes, ma'am." 'Cause it still feels the same.

“Well, you’ve had four years to try to heal that scar, but it still hurts some of the time, doesn’t it?”

“Sometimes a lot.”

“I know, Bud. But remember, your grandfather and I just found out that she passed. The hurt is brand-new for us.” Miss Thomas started swallowing.

“And even though he hasn’t seen her in eleven years, I know there isn’t a day that goes by that he doesn’t think about her. He’d never admit it, but there isn’t one show that we give that he doesn’t first look out into the audience, not to see how big the crowd is, but hoping that she’ll be out there. Hoping that she’d’ve seen a flyer tacked to a telephone pole somewhere and would stop by to see him. He loved her so much, Bud. Sorry, sweetheart.” She took the hand she wasn’t squeezing my fingers with and took out a handkerchief and blew her nose.

“Those stones that he picks up everywhere he performs are for her. She must’ve been four or five years old, the band was getting ready to travel to Chicago for a week and before we left he asked her what she wanted him to bring back for her. He was thinking a doll or a dress or something, but she told him, ‘A wock, Daddy, bring me back a wock from Chicago.’ So everywhere we went after that he’d have to get her a ‘wock,’ he’d write the city and the day we were there on them for her. He’s got boxes of them upstairs, eleven years’ worth.

“So, Bud, I don’t know how Herman is going to be

feeling after this, that's where I need your help. You've got to remember that both Herman and I love your mother just as much as you do."

This didn't seem like it could be true, not just because it didn't seem like anyone could love my mother as much as I do, but because it didn't seem like Herman E. Calloway could love anyone at all.

Miss Thomas said, "So if you can remember, Bud, be patient with him. That ornery old man upstairs is very, very hurt right now and I just can't say where he's going to land after this news gets through blowing him around." Miss Thomas was starting to do that stingy-eyed blinking.

"So we're going to have to give him some time, we're going to have to let him find out how he feels before—"

Mr. Jimmy came into the kitchen. "Grace," he said, "he wants you." Herman E. Calloway was making everybody feel like they had the blues, it looked like Mr. Jimmy'd just wiped some tears from his eyes too.

Miss Thomas came around to my side of the table and gave me a hug. She said, "You OK?"

I said, "Yes, ma'am."

She said, "Should I go see how he's doing?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She left the kitchen and Mr. Jimmy went into the living room.

I picked Momma's picture up and put it back in the envelope. Mr. C. chose a good name for his house

'cause not a second went by before the back door came open and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression walked in, talking like it was going out of style. As soon as they saw me they all got quiet.

Doo-Doo Bug said, "Hey, Sleepy LaBone, where's everyone at?"

I didn't want to embarrass anyone by saying that all the grown folks were sitting all over the house sobbing their eyes out, so I said, "They're around." I remembered not to call the band "sir."

Steady said, "Well, it's you we wanted anyway." He put a old cardboard suitcase on the table and said, "I told the fellas how hard you've been hitting that recorder and how proud I was of you, so we put a couple of nickels together"—he acted like he was yelling into the other room—"and Lord knows on the peanuts we get it was a real sacrifice." He slapped some skin with Dirty Deed, then started talking regular again. "Anyway, the Thug saw something at the pawnshop and we picked it up for you."

"Can I open it?"

The Thug said, "Well, if you don't, I don't know who will."

Eddie slid the cardboard suitcase over to in front of me. It looked worse than the one I used to carry around, one of the snaps on it was busted clean off and the other one was stuck.

Steady Eddie said, "It's what's inside that's interesting. Just pull on that snap real hard."

I pulled on the snap and it came off right in my hand.

The Thug said, "I knew it, the boy's just too country, he ain't used to handling fine merchandise. We should've give it to him in a paper bag."

I opened the suitcase. Whatever it was was wrapped up in crinkly, wrinkly newspapers.

I started pulling newspapers off and could tell that their gift was real heavy. All of a sudden a shiny piece of gold showed through. I snatched more paper off and couldn't believe my eyes! The Dusky Devastators of the Depression had put their money together and had bought me a baby-size horn like Steady Eddie's saxophone!

Steady Eddie could see I was stuck so he lifted it out of the suitcase and fished around in the bag for the mouthpiece, the neck and the reed holder. He sucked the reed for a minute, put the horn together, then played it.

Man! My horn sounded great!

Eddie said, "It's an alto, Bud, there's a little rust in some of the seams, but that's to be expected with a horn this old. It's still got a good tone to it, this dent didn't throw her off too much." He showed me a big dent on the bottom part of my saxophone. "I repadded, refelted and resprung it. The rest is up to you." He reached in his

pocket and took out a can that said BRASSO on the side. "Get you a rag and shine her up. A man should polish his own horn."

I looked at my bandmates and said, "Thank you, thank you very, very much. I'll practice on this so much that I'll be just as good as you guys are in about three weeks!"

Doo-Doo Bug said, "Ohhh, now that's cold."

I said, "Really! I will."

The band laughed so I did too.

Eddie said, "Well, Mr. LaBone, I'll tell you what, since you're so hot to get in this band, I'd better get you started on your lessons right away." He pulled a big silver watch that was tied up to a long chain out of his pocket and said, "I'm going by Tyla's for a while now, but I'll be back around seven. If you've got your ax polished up by then, I'll bring some sheet music along and we can get started, sound good?" His toothpick jumped with each word.

"Sounds great, Steady!"

Eddie took the strap off his neck and handed it to me. I put it on and Eddie handed me my saxophone for the very first time. It was the perfect weight!

I said, "Can I be excused?"

Dirty Deed said, "What, you ain't gonna blow us some notes? We want to hear what you got, Mr. Three-Weeks-from-Now."

I said, "I'll let you hear me in three weeks when we're all on the stage together."

They laughed again and the Thug said, "I'ma let you in on something, Sleepy LaBone, there's certain members of this band that you *will* be outplaying in three weeks, but it's gonna take you a whole lot longer to top me. On the real tip, it's gonna take you at least ten years before you'll be able to even hold my drumsticks."

Steady Eddie said, "Yeah, and that's about nine years and ten months longer than you'll be with the band, Thug."

The Thug said, "Awww, man, you ain't gonna start that up again, you gotta let me know what you heard."

I said, "Can I be excused?"

Eddie said, "Go 'head on, Sleepy LaBone, I'll be back."

I told my bandmates, "Thank you again, thank you very much."

The Thug said, "Nothing to it, little man."

Dirty Deed said, "Now don't let that horn whip you, son."

Doo-Doo Bug said, "Our pleasure, Sleepy."

Steady Eddie said, "Man, get outta here."

I picked up both of Momma's pictures, my horn and the can of Brasso and ran up the stairs.

When I got upstairs I saw that Herman E. Calloway's

door was still open a crack. Miss Thomas's door was closed now and I could hear the two of them in her room talking real soft to each other. I could've stood outside the door and listened if I wanted to but that would've been rude, besides I didn't know for sure how long it would take me to polish up my new horn!

I went into my mother's room and put my sax on the bed that Momma used to sleep in when she was a little girl. I put her smiling picture on the dressing table, then reached under her bed and pulled my sax case out again. I snapped the two silver snaps and started taking out all of my things.

I took my old blanket out and remade my bed with it. I wasn't going to need to carry it around with me anymore. I opened the tobacco pouch and took out the rock that said Flint on it and set it on the bed. I took the pouch and the flyers and walked down the hall to Herman E. Calloway's room. Even though I could still hear him and Miss Thomas talking and boo-hooing in her room, I knocked on his door anyway. When no one answered I opened it.

He had one of those dressing tables with a mirror stuck on the back of it too, so I walked real quick over to it and set the flyers and the bag of four rocks down. I got out of his room as fast as I could.

Whew! Even though it was me who'd carried them around for all these years, you'd have to be a pretty big liar if you'd say those rocks and flyers really belonged

to me. Herman E. Calloway's name was all over the flyers and his writing was all over the rocks.

Besides, the way he'd looked so shook up when he saw those rocks for the first time I figure they meant more to him than they did to me anyway.

I went back over to Momma's dressing table and opened the little drawer. I took one of the thumbtacks out and went back to Momma's bed. Next I took out the envelope that had her picture in it. I took out the picture of her riding the sad, saggy pony.

I still couldn't see what she was so unhappy about, the Miss B. Gotten Moon Park looked like somewhere you could have a lot of fun.

I poked the thumbtack into the top of Momma's picture and walked to the wall that she'd stuck all the pictures of horses on. I put Momma right amongst all those ponies and horses she liked so much.

I didn't need to carry that doggone picture around, this wasn't how I remembered Momma anyway, Momma was always excited and jumpy, not sad and poky like this little girl. Momma was kind of old when I met her too, she wasn't young like this picture at all.

The picture looked like it belonged. It's strange the way things turn out, here I'd been carrying Momma around for all this time and I'd finally put her somewhere where she wanted to be, back in her own bedroom, back amongst all her horses.

I went back to the bed and picked the Flint rock up. It

was going to be enough. I didn't need those other things with me all of time. I didn't need them to remind me of Momma, I couldn't think about her any more if there were a hundred hours in every day and a thousand days in every week. I couldn't think of my momma any better than I already do. All I have to do is remember her hand on my forehead when she'd ask me something like, "Baby, are you sick? Have you got a temperature?" All I have to do is remember Momma letting me dry the dishes after she'd wash them, how she used to say no one in the world could dry a plate the way I could. All I have to do is take two or three deep breaths and think of all the books she'd read to me at night, and remember that no matter how long it took she'd read until I went to sleep.

Deza Malone was right, I was carrying Momma inside me and there wasn't anyone or anything that could take away from that or add to it either.

The one rock from Flint would be enough. I set it in my sax case.

I picked up my saxophone. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen!

I wet the reed the same way I'd seen Steady Eddie do, then clamped it on the mouthpiece. I closed my eyes and counted to ten. If after I got to ten I blew the horn and it sounded pretty good I knew I'd be playing along with the Dusky Devastators of the Depression in a week or two. If I didn't sound so good it meant I'd

have to practice for a couple of months before I'd be good enough to get onstage with them.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten!

I puffed my cheeks and blew as hard as I could. The saxophone only squeaked, squawked and groaned, then sounded like it was making up words like *ahwronk* and *roozahga* and *balooa*.

Shucks, maybe I didn't puff my cheeks out right, maybe I was blowing too hard. I counted again.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten!

This time the horn only squeaked, squawked and groaned, it didn't sound like it was trying to make up any words. It sounded great! It wasn't perfect, like when Steady blew it, but I could tell that one day it was going to be. Something told me I could learn how to play this. Something told me that those sounds were more than just bad notes.

If you didn't have a real good imagination you'd probably think those noises were the sounds of some kid blowing a horn for the first time, but I knew better than that. I could tell those were the squeaks and squawks of one door closing and another one opening.

I looked at the picture of Momma that Miss Thomas gave me. Momma was looking right at me with that same soft smile. I know it's stupid to smile back at a picture but I couldn't help myself. I know it's even stupider to talk to a picture, especially when it hadn't said anything to start a conversation, but I had to

say, "Here we go again, Momma, only this time I can't wait!"

I closed my eyes and began practicing.

Shucks, as good as things were going for me now I'd bet you dollars to doughnuts that Steady Eddie was going to get here early.

Afterword

ALTHOUGH BUD, NOT BUDDY is fictional, many of the situations Bud encounters are based on events that occurred in the 1930s, during a time known as the Great Depression. And although the characters in *Bud, Not Buddy* are fictional as well, some of them too are based on real people. One of the most enjoyable parts of writing is that an author can combine his or her imagination with the traits of real people to build new characters. That is what I did to create the characters

of Lefty Lewis and Herman E. Calloway, both of whom are based loosely on my grandfathers.

My mother's father, Earl "Lefty" Lewis, was one of six or seven redcaps who worked at the train station in Grand Rapids, Michigan, during much of the depression. The jobs of Pullman porter and redcap were among the few open to African American men at that time and carried a certain prestige in the black community. Nonetheless, they were extremely difficult jobs, often marked by eighty-hour workweeks, low salary and virtually no job security. These men could be fired for simply not looking happy enough.

Grandpa Lewis did exceptionally well during the depression, supporting his family on the tips he received as a redcap. My mother remembers that my grandmother used to have to sew reinforced linings into the pockets of all Grandpa's pants because the weight of the pennies, nickels, dimes and occasional quarters that he was given as tips would eventually rip the seams out. She also remembers the leathery texture Grandpa's hands took on from carrying so much baggage at the station.

As the depression deepened, the Grand Rapids train station cut back to two redcaps, and Grandpa was let go. He briefly opened a small restaurant and finally became the first African American cabdriver in Grand Rapids, a job he held until his retirement in 1972 at seventy-four years old.

Earl "Lefty" Lewis also pitched for many years in the

minors of the Negro Baseball Leagues. His fondest memory of that time was pitching twice against Satchel Paige. As he did with most opposing pitchers, Satch hung Grandpa with two losses.

My father's father, Herman E. Curtis, was indeed a big bandleader for most of his adult life. He headed many different musical groups, my favorite being Herman E. Curtis and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression!!!!!!—a name that by itself deserves all six of those exclamation points! Grandpa attended the Indiana Conservatory of Music and was a classically trained violinist. He also played the bass fiddle, the accordion and the piano.

Entertainment was an important part of life during the depression, for people wanted to forget their troubles by going to the movies, sitting around the radio, and listening and dancing to live music. Grandpa and his bands were well known throughout Michigan during this time.

Being an orchestra leader was Grandpa Curtis's night job. By day he wore many different hats, among them those of a chauffeur, boat captain, and truck painter. He owned several businesses in Grand Rapids and Wyoming, Michigan, at a time when laws prohibited African Americans from renting or holding title to land in these two cities. Grandpa did this by having a white friend put his name on all records.

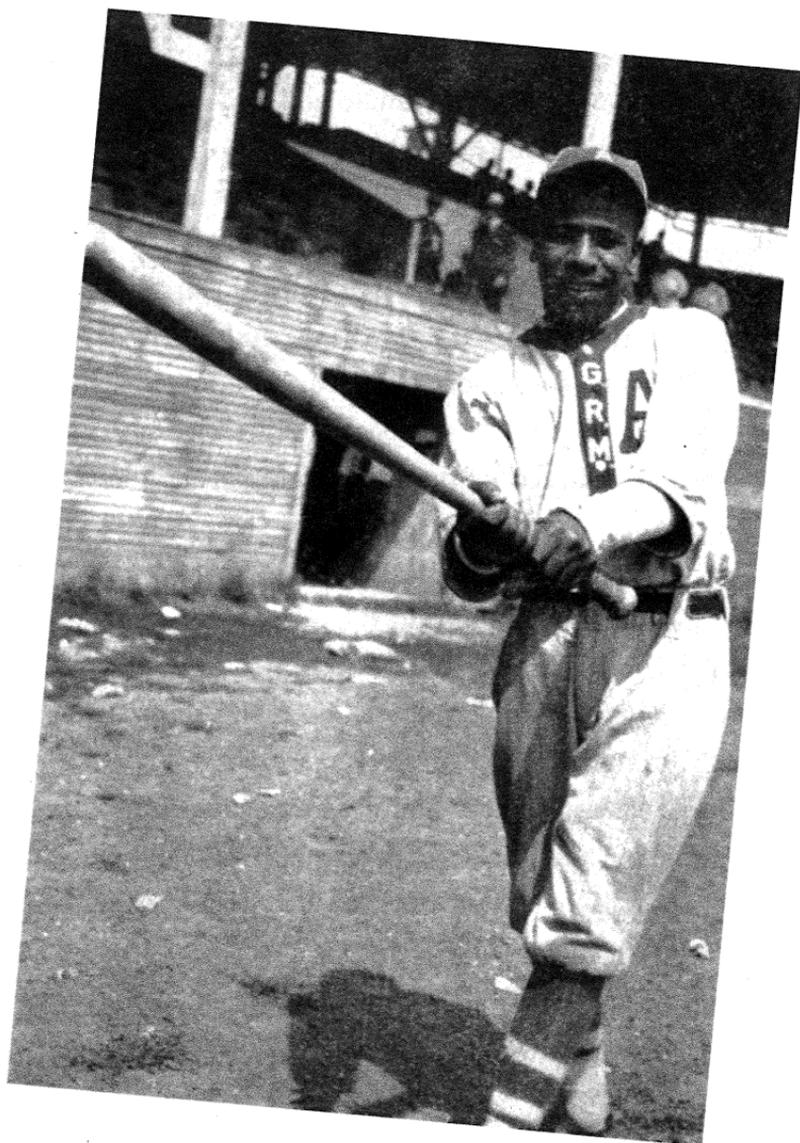
The flexibility, people skills, hustle and willingness to work around unfair laws and situations that both of my



Above:

*Herman E. Curtis and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression !!!!!
Herman is at left, with the bow.*

Opposite: Earl "Lefty" Lewis, pitcher for the Grand Rapids, Michigan, Elsterites, taken May 30, 1918



grandfathers used allowed them to keep their families together during one of America's bleakest periods, a time that was especially hard on African Americans. Both of these men were fortunate and skilled enough to avoid the brunt of the Great Depression.

The lives of Earl "Lefty" Lewis and Herman E. Curtis and the situations described in *Bud, Not Buddy* are the exception, for the great majority of people suffered horribly during the period between 1929 and 1941. Parents often could not feed their children, so countless thousands of young people, some as young as eight years old, were abandoned or had to set out on their own in search of a meal and a warm place to sleep. These children survived the brutal life on the road by riding the rails, picking fruit, doing odd jobs, begging, stealing or whatever was necessary to get food.

Much of what I discovered about the depression I learned through research in books, which is a shame—I didn't take advantage of the family history that surrounded me for many years. I'm afraid that when I was younger and my grandparents and parents would start to talk about their lives during the depression, my eyes would glaze over and I'd think, "Oh, no, not those boring tall tales again!" and I'd find the most convenient excuse I could to get away from them. Now I feel a real sorrow when I think of all the knowledge, wisdom and stories that have been forever lost with the deaths of my grandparents.

Be smarter than I was: Go talk to Grandma and Grandpa, Mom and Dad and other relatives and friends. Discover and remember what they have to say about what they learned growing up. By keeping their stories alive you make them, and yourself, immortal.