

## The Choice

I ENTERED MRS. CLARK'S THIRD GRADE in the fall of 1971.

Mrs. Clark was a brand new teacher at McAlisterville Elementary, fresh out of college. She was young, maybe all of twenty-three years old, and pretty with long dark hair. Teaching wasn't the only new thing in her life. She and her newlywed husband had a bouncing baby boy.

Mrs. Clark didn't look anything like the other teachers, and she didn't act like them either. Most teachers at McAlisterville Elementary were much older and dressed very conservatively, but Mrs. Clark wore sleeveless dresses and showed leg. She was funny, entertaining, liked to tell jokes and would say silly things to make us laugh. But, in the blink of an eye, she could shed her good-natured demeanor. What made her laugh, smile and joke one minute could somehow make her explode in a blind fit of rage the next. Even the smallest things, like forgotten lunch money, tardiness, or a slight indiscretion on the playground might, or might not, send her into a screaming, face-scrunching tantrum. When she was angered, the tendons tightened in the front of her neck, her face grew red, and she lost all emotional control. Often, at the end of the episode, her anger would turn to sobbing. As a class, we all sat stiff in our chairs, like bug-eyed cartoon characters, afraid to make a move.

One day on the playground, a group of us kids were standing around

talking about why Mrs. Clark got so angry with us sometimes. One girl said, “Mrs. Clark has the same thing my mommy has. My dad says it’s the baby blues, and sometimes women go crazy after they have a baby.”

I found the girl’s explanation believable. Mrs. Clark was always talking about her new baby, and there was no doubt in my mind that she did seem crazy at times.

The other students were quick to forgive Mrs. Clark for her outbursts but were constantly on edge, knowing she could blow her stack at any time. I went along with the class and forgave her too, but deep down, I didn’t trust her. She frightened me.

I hoped things would go better for me this year than they had gone last year in the second grade, but as I quickly discovered, third grade reading and writing was extremely difficult for me. I tried desperately to get a grasp on it and catch up to the rest of my classmates, but to no avail. After about a month and a half of school I was scared and just barely treading water. It felt like I had concrete blocks attached to my legs. Not only was I fighting to keep my head above water, I was fighting to keep the other kids from noticing that I was about to drown.

As I sat in class each day, I felt more and more like an outsider. I wasn’t able to keep up, and the boredom was maddening. At the same time, I was constantly anxious and on the edge of my seat, hoping that I wouldn’t get called upon and be embarrassed in front of the class.

Being such a curious kid, I craved knowledge, and since I couldn’t find it at school with all the “normal kids,” I unwittingly created my own classroom outside of school with the unsuspecting characters of McAlisterville as my teachers.

On the days I walked home from school I often stopped and looked

through the big windows of Shirley’s Restaurant to see if my pal Walter was sitting at the counter. And if he was, I went in for a lesson.

Old Walter Dunn could be found most afternoons drinking coffee at Shirley’s. He was so lonely and bored that he hardly knew what to do with himself.

“I get up in the morning with nothing to do and go to bed half-finished,” he often joked.

Walter was the oldest person in McAlisterville. He was so old he remembered holding my grandfather on his lap when my grandfather was just a baby — and my grandfather was old!

On Walter’s ninetieth birthday, Shirley baked him a cake, and a newspaper man came out from Mifflintown and took his picture cutting the cake.

But what Walter wanted more than anything was just to tell stories. That’s why he went to Shirley’s Restaurant every day. He hoped to find someone who wanted to listen. Everyone liked Walter, but most folks just seemed too busy to sit and listen.

I, on the other hand, couldn’t get enough of what old Walter Dunn had to say.

Walter’s patchy white hair was never combed. He had quite a few fingers missing, and it took two trembling hands to hold his coffee cup. It wasn’t uncommon to see old guys minus a few fingers from farming or timbering accidents.

He’d see me coming and smile that big smile that was minus a few teeth. I’d sit down beside him and say, “C’mon Walter, say it. I want to hear ya say it!”

“Nelson, I’ve said it for ya every day this week. Ya ought to know it now by heart.”

“I do, Walter, but I like it best when I hear you say it.”

His face lit up as he said, “OK, I guess I can say it again.”

He’d take a big slug of coffee and a deep breath. “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”

I loved when Walter rattled that off.

Walter Dunn, with an immense sense of duty and a wagon hooked behind a team of mules, began making his appointed rounds in the year 1905.

For forty-five years, in the worst blizzards, in the most torrential rains, on days when the sun could blister a man’s skin, and often late into the night, the United States mail got through. Walter Dunn, United States mail carrier, at your service.

Old Walter told stories ‘til we were both worn out, and he seldom told the same one twice.

As I stood up to go home, Walter often slipped me a dollar bill.

“Nelson, give this dollar to your daddy and tell him to buy me a bottle of port wine when he gets to Mifflintown,” he’d say. “Have him hide it in the usual place in Jake Knouse’s shed, and for heaven’s sake, don’t let my wife find out.”

Dad always laughed as I handed him the dollar bill. The last time a bottle of port cost a dollar was probably back in the 1920s. But Dad didn’t mind, he enjoyed keeping Walter in wine.

It was common knowledge among townspeople that Walter

sneaked into Jake Knouse's old board-and-batten shed about 1 p.m. every afternoon to enjoy his glass of port. One hundred or so years earlier, sometime after the Civil War, the shed was built to house horses and a carriage. Back alleys in small towns like McAlisterville were full of them. One by one, the sheds fell down, burned down, or were torn down. But this particular one, just like Walter, had stood the test of time. Sure, it was rickety; it looked like a good windstorm could come along at any time and take it down. I suppose going in there, shutting the door, and enjoying a glass of port returned Walter to a place and time when the world made more sense to him.

Townsppeople peeked through their curtains and snickered as the daily drama between Walter and his wife unfolded.

Mrs. Dunn, a five-foot-tall, hundred-pound ball of fire, could see Jake's shed from her back porch. Day after day, she'd watch and wait for Walter to slink into the shed and latch the door behind him. Day after day, hell-bent on giving Walter a piece of her mind, she'd scamper up the alley at full tilt.

She'd stand outside, beating her cane on the locked wooden shed door, hollering, "Walter Dunn, I know you're in there!"

She'd furiously admonish him on the evils of drink — and yet somehow he must have been able to turn it all off as he sat there enjoying his port. He often referred to their marriage as "seventy years of wedded bliss."

My insatiable curiosity about everyday people, such as Walter, was fast becoming my education. They filled the void.

As fall turned to winter, third grade was becoming more difficult every day, and I was receiving failing marks across the board.

My classmates had mastered printing their name in the second grade, a task I was still struggling with. If someone asked me to spell my first name out loud, I could rattle off N-E-L-S-O-N. But getting that from my head and down onto paper was a struggle. And spelling or printing my middle and last name was extremely difficult. Every so often I got it right; most of the time I didn't. And even when it was correct, it was hard for me to tell the difference.

In third grade we had moved on to cursive, which to me looked mostly like scribble.

Mrs. Clark handed out worksheets every morning with the usual directive, "Write your name in cursive on the top of your paper."

It wasn't enough just to write our first and last name on the paper. She insisted we write our middle name too. I concentrated and really tried, but every day my name came out as a jumble of illegible chicken scratch.

Mrs. Clark came up with a plan that I guess she felt would encourage me to try harder.

I remember clearly the first morning she implemented her plan. We all arrived for school and were busy hanging up our hats, gloves, and coats as prescribed, while Mrs. Clark was busy writing something very big the whole way across the blackboard.

We took our seats and looked at the curious etchings on the chalkboard. Mrs. Clark tapped her pointer on her desk several times to get everyone's attention.

"Class, class," she said. "Does anyone know what I have written on the chalkboard?" Nobody seemed to know. "Well, let me inform you,"

she continued. “This is how Nelson Charles Lauver lazily scribbled his name on his paper yesterday.”

Classmates were called upon, one at a time, to try to pronounce the illegible writing.

“Nezon Chass Liver,” one girl thought out loud. The room erupted in laughter and chanted, “Nezon Chass Liver! Nezon Chass Liver! Nezon Chass Liver!”

Mrs. Clark instructed the class, “This is what you are to call Nelson for the rest of the day, until tomorrow, when I’m sure his name will be something different.”

I laughed along on the outside so as to seem unaffected, but on the inside, I was thinking, *I hate you, I hate you for this. Why are you doing this to me!*

It was a pivotal moment in my life. *Lazy?* I wasn’t lazy. I had been trying so hard to understand. I wanted to learn!

I realized I needed to do something. I said to myself, *Nelson, you have a choice. You can either look like the dumb kid who everyone makes fun of, or you can be the bad kid.* At that moment, I chose to be the “bad kid.” The thought of being the “dumb kid” — and how other kids teased and taunted them — made it feel like the only choice.

I didn’t want to be the “bad kid.” I wanted to be the good kid and get good grades! Throughout school, so far, I admit I had been a bit of a button-pusher at times, but I was never disrespectful to my teachers. Now I knew I had to pour it on.

I knew there would be ramifications. I was aware this new persona would invite unpleasant punishments like paddling, slaps, and ruler cracks from angry teachers. Life was so much better in the first grade,

and I wished Mrs. Parsons were still my teacher. I saw her in the hall every day, but couldn't bring myself to look at her. I wondered what she must think of me now. It was a very small school. Surely, she and Mrs. Clark would have talked. And surely, Mrs. Parsons must have felt she had wasted her time on me. The thought of letting Mrs. Parsons down saddened me.

In keeping with my new "bad kid" persona, I capitalized on Mrs. Clark's crazy-button and pushed it at opportune moments. Things like making a face at her, making an inappropriate remark, acting indifferent, or just ignoring her helped in that she'd choose not to call on me for the sake of her own personal sanity. I became very successful at making Mrs. Clark dislike me. She often sent me to the hallway with my desk and chair, so I would not disrupt the class. It was embarrassing because anyone who entered the school for any reason could see me sitting there alone. But, regardless of how embarrassing it was, it could never have compared with the embarrassment of being the dumb kid.

A remedial reading teacher came to the school several days a week to work one-on-one with kids who were having a hard time keeping up. As I was a student who was obviously not keeping up and had become a behavioral problem, Mrs. Clark arranged to have the remedial reading teacher see me for a session during late winter of my third-grade year. He knocked on the classroom door and called me out for our meeting. I knew that this teacher quietly helped kids get caught up. I was happy to get out of class and was secretly hopeful that this could be my opportunity to get help in making school work easier to understand.

The remedial reading teacher took me into a room, sat down next to me at a long library-style table, opened a book, put it in front of me and asked me to read. As I tried, I stammered and stuttered, and

struggled to pronounce the words. I had to keep going back to try again and again. It took what seemed forever, but I managed to hack through two sentences before he closed the book and pushed it away. He then pushed the table away and said, “Turn your chair and face me like a man,” as he turned his chair toward mine. “This is the result of not paying attention in class.” He sharply scolded. “You have no one but your lazy self to blame for your reading troubles.” He spent the rest of the session berating me for being a “goof-off.” I didn’t say a word for fear it would only make him nastier.

I knew I wasn’t lazy. I knew he was wrong, but he scared me. In my little boy mind, it became clear. I was on my own. There was nobody to help me. It solidified my resolve that the best option for getting through school was being the “bad kid.”

My number one goal as the “bad kid” in elementary school was to make sure no teacher wanted me back the next year, because the most embarrassing of all things would be to flunk. If, on occasion, Mrs. Clark did call on me, I would disrupt the class. The easiest option was to throw something — a book, a pencil, a tablet. Throwing things was completely against the rules and got the most effect. I got in trouble often, and I was frequently sent to see the senior teacher and disciplinarian, Miss Marybeth.

All of the other kids addressed her as Miss Stoner, but seeing as she was my dad’s first cousin I was permitted to call her Miss Marybeth.

Miss Marybeth was in her fifties. She was a solid woman with a sturdy center of gravity, strapping arms and shoulders, a ruddy complexion, and not a touch of make-up. She had never been married or had a man in her life. Her thick, blonde hair was neatly wrapped up in a bun, atop of which sat her ever-present prayer covering. She was a

pious woman, a member of Grandpa's flock, who could recite the Bible cover to cover. She strongly believed in every word, including "spare the rod and spoil the child."

Miss Marybeth's disciplinary "office" was a desk inside the janitorial storage room. Beside her desk was a chair where she counseled children right before the proverbial "rod" — or "big wooden paddle" in this case — was taken down from its hanging place. The construction of the paddle was well thought out and bore all the efficiency that could be crafted in a Pennsylvania Dutchman's woodworking shop. Miss Marybeth's paddle followed the age-old standard design. The handle accommodated a double-fisted swing. A dozen or so three-quarter-inch holes had been drilled through it to ensure it whistled through the air with maximum velocity. The whistling sound served another purpose, too — striking terror into the heart of the child who was about to be anointed with the sting of hellfire. Miss Marybeth's personal mission was to ensure no child would be spoiled under her watch.

I was sent to see Miss Marybeth for my first counseling session after I hurled a book at Mrs. Clark. Incidentally, that was the last time she wrote my name on the blackboard as a means of discouraging my "laziness."

I devised a plan as I sat in the chair of counsel, waiting for Miss Marybeth to arrive and warm my ass with religion. It was a brilliant plan, I might add, and one of which I'm still secretly proud. I decided to place the onus of my bad behavior on someone else. I would lay the blame squarely at the feet of another.

Finally, Miss Marybeth presented herself to deal with my book-hurling infraction. She took the paddle down from its hook on the wall and laid it on the desk as she prepared to counsel me. I handed her a

note from Mrs. Clark. She examined it, refolded it, and laid it on top of the paddle.

“Nelson,” she said, with a thick Pennsylvania Dutch accent. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

I looked down at my shoes and quietly said, “I didn’t do it.”

“Speak up! What did you say?!”

“I said I didn’t do it!”

“Oh, I see, Nelson, then perhaps you’d like to share with me who the actual culprit was who threw the textbook at Mrs. Clark? I suppose you are going to tell me it was Danny Aucker?”

“No, Ma’am, it wasn’t Danny.”

“I know it wasn’t Danny, he’s a good Christian boy! I think you threw the book, Nelson, didn’t you?”

“No, it wasn’t me.”

“Then do tell, Nelson, who was it? “

I swallowed hard for effect and kept my eyes focused on my shoes. After a dramatic pause, and one more coaxing from Miss Marybeth, I softly uttered “It was Satan.”

Miss Marybeth gasped and pushed back in her chair. She hurriedly recited a passage committed to memory for warding off the dark angel.

“Oh, dear heavens, Nelson!” She inquired, “Did you hear a voice in your head?”

“Uh ... uh ... yeah ... yes ...YES. I heard a voice, and it told me to throw the book at Mrs. Clark.”

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear,” she said, as she instinctively adjusted her prayer covering. “Did the voice say anything else?”

“Yes!” I told her, now confident that she was buying what I was selling. “Yes, yes, Satan said he wants you to paddle my backside until it turns purple.”

She sprung to her feet in defiance, uttering a passage that included something about “the protective blood of Jesus.” She hung the paddle back on the wall and boldly proclaimed, “I will not!”

She was still wringing her hands as she sent me back to Mrs. Clark, who was clearly disappointed she did not hear the crack of a paddle on the delicate flesh of my tender bottom echoing through the halls of the elementary school.

I was soon making regular visits to Miss Marybeth for various infractions. All that was necessary for me to do to avoid a serious ass-fanning was the utterance of one word: Satan. Miss Marybeth would nod in agreement and send me back to class.

It was clear, based upon everything I knew about Hell, poor behavior was guaranteed admission. Minding your teachers and never back-talking your parents were prerequisites for having St. Peter show you favor and swing open the Pearly Gates of Heaven. But Miss Marybeth’s big, wooden paddle was clearly in the here and now. I feared the near-term threat my actions bore far more than the eternal, unrelenting fires of Hell.

I tried really hard to keep Mom and Dad in the dark about my poor behavior at school, but being such a small town, word sometimes made it back home.

Mom was not pleased when she found out about my “shenanigans.” She said, “I swear to God, you’re going to Carson Long Military School if you don’t straighten up!”

The sheer mention of “Carson Long” struck terror into my heart.

Carson Long Military Institute in the little town of New Bloomfield was about twenty-five miles or so south of McAlisterville.

When Mom was near her breaking point she would repeat the name “Carson Long” over and over while nodding her head as if she had found a solution for out-of-control sons.

On occasion, she would throw the phone book open to the letter “C” and run her finger down the page, repeating “Carson Long, Carson Long, Carson Long,” as she searched.

If she really wanted to scare the living daylights out of my brother and me, she would pick up the phone and start dialing the number.

“NO MOM, NO MOM — DON’T CALL CARSON LONG, WE’LL BE GOOD, WE PROMISE!”

The thought of being “hailed away” to a military school was terrifying. My brother, Carl, didn’t help matters much with his stories of new recruits being hazed by the formerly delinquent and incorrigible older boys, who were now being “whipped into shape” as Carson Long Cadets.

With a solemn face and a trembling voice, Carl said, “They get new kids there and do terrible things to them! Mostly, though, they stick all kinds of things up the new kid’s ass! They stuck a stick of dynamite up one kid’s ass, lit it and blew him to kingdom come!”

Every time I brought my report card home covered with Fs, my mom would look at it and just keep repeating “Carson Long, Carson Long,” as she nodded her head. “Those kids don’t even get to come home for Christmas,” Carl told me.

According to my brother, we, like all other Carson Long Cadets,

could be sent to fight in the Vietnam War. Carl said, “Most end up as prisoners of war, and their families never see them again.”

Every time we went somewhere in the car I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe we were going to be dropped off at the gates of Carson Long.

Carl said doctors in white coats meet parents at the gates and jump in the car and give the new recruit a shot that “knocks them cold,” so they can be easily dragged into the compound.

I was sure I would eventually be “hailed away” to Carson Long. It seemed to me that it was only a matter of time.

I formulated a plan in my head for a Carson Long escape, just in case, and I was sure it would work.

I figured I’d have to wait a few years ‘til I was old enough to get on the Carson Long football team — and, hopefully, not be sent to fight in the war in the meantime. At an away game I’d sneak off when nobody was watching. I’d quickly make my way to the mountains and hide out there, living off the land for the rest of my life as an AWOL fugitive from justice.

My mother’s threat of Carson Long, combined with the threat of “If you get in trouble at school, you’re going to get it double when you get home,” kept me tight-lipped about everything that happened in the classroom.

There was no longer any enjoyment to be found in school, and home was a frantic, disorganized bundle of chaos with two very tired parents. Mom was still working shift work, and Dad’s oil business had continued to grow by leaps and bounds. He was now working six or seven days a week. He left the house early in the morning and didn’t arrive home until late in the evening.

My favorite escape from the stresses of being the “bad kid” was riding with Dad on the oil truck after school. There was nothing better than hanging out with Dad. He was my hero.

One afternoon, I was sitting across the desk from my Dad in his office, waiting to go along with him on the oil truck. The buzzer on the front door announced a visitor. Dad and I could hear the familiar voice of the Coca-Cola deliveryman saying hello to the bookkeeper at the front counter. Dad went out to exchange pleasantries and a few laughs, and, of course, I padded along. The gregarious Coca-Cola man wore spit-shined shoes, well-pressed blue pants and a snappy red-and-white striped shirt.

Dick Roush also came out of his office, smoking his pipe. Dick had an office in the oil company building to meet with customers for his insurance business. Dick was a tall, well-dressed man who drove a Lincoln Town Car and had all the airs of success. I had always admired him. He lived down the street from us with his lovely wife.

Dad and the Coke man were laughing and joking when my dad uttered his signature line, “If you have a minute, I’ve got a great story.” The Coke man replied “Sure, I always have time for a great story.” Dick Roush, standing off to the side, caught the Coke man’s eye and gave him a wink. It was one of those belittling winks, and it spoke volumes. In his wink to the Coke man, Dick was saying, “*This Clair Lauer sure is a pain in the ass with all his GREAT stories.*”

Dad told the story masterfully, and the Coke man burst out in side-splitting laughter.

Dick went back into his office without saying a word. I thought Dick was our friend, and I was puzzled by his attempt to belittle Dad. It hurt my feelings and made me angry.

I changed my mind about riding on the truck with Dad that day.

Instead, I got on my bike and rode downtown to Shirley's Restaurant. I sat at the counter and drowned my upset in an ice-cold Coke with two squirts of Cherry Smash.

Soon the bell on the restaurant door jingled, and in walked the funniest man in town, Dad's pal Peanut. Peanut sat down at the counter next to me and knew something was eating at me.

"Who rained on your parade?" he asked. I explained the whole Dick Roush winking thing.

"Oh, old winky Dick got to you, did he? Don't pay no nevermind to him. He's just jealous that your dad's a great storyteller."

The bell on the door jingled again, and in walked Doc and George the Banker. Peanut explained to them that I was having a bad day and why. "Yup," George said. "Winky Dick can't tell a good story to save his life."

Doc took a big gulp of coffee and nodded in agreement. George lit up one of his nickel cigars and, shaking the flame from the match, said, "Nelson, your dad's the best storyteller around, and anyone who says different is wrong, including Winky Dick." Doc took another gulp of coffee and again nodded in agreement as he swallowed.

The friendship between Dad, Doc, Peanut, and George was based on storytelling and making each other laugh. Their get-togethers were mostly impromptu. If not at Shirley's Restaurant, they often took place at my dad's oil company office.

After hours, at Dad's office, they gathered mismatched chairs from the secretary's desk, the bookkeeper's desk, and wherever else they could find them — and arranged them in a circle. They set out a few bottles, mixers, ice, and stir sticks. Dad kept glasses in his office, and in no time they had their makeshift bar fully stocked and operational.

Peanut preferred his whiskey straight up and said, “Mixing whiskey with soda was as senseless as putting milk in beer.”

If I happened to be with Dad at his office when one of these impromptu events occurred, I considered myself very lucky. I didn’t want to sit in the circle, nor would I have been allowed to. I sat back out of the way where I was soon the forgotten observer. Sometimes I’d even hide under Dad’s desk. The more they drank, the more outrageous the stories became. I sat quietly and listened, the proverbial fly on the wall.

They all told stories. Funny stories, traveling stories, hometown stories, and even gossip.

“Did you hear about Guy Schmidt?”

“No, what about Guy Schmidt?”

“Well, Guy Schmidt’s wife was getting all dressed up every night — putting on make-up, jewelry, perfume ... the works — just to go to the grocery store. Or so she said. So what do you think Guy Schmidt does after a couple weeks of this? He gets into the trunk of the car so he can figure out, once and for all, what the hell his wife is up to. So, sure enough, he’s in the trunk for about half an hour and starts to hear voices! The next thing you know the car is rocking and shaking — Guy Schmidt pops out of the trunk to find Butch Ward on top of his wife in the backseat!”

“No!”

“Yup!”

“Guy Schmidt says to Butch Ward, ‘Do you want to marry her?’ Butch says ‘Hell, no, I don’t want to marry her!’ And Guy tells him, ‘Well, then get the hell off of her, she’s *my* wife!’ Guy Schmidt gets

behind the wheel with his wife still naked in the back seat and drives off, leaving Butch Ward five miles from home with no clothes!”

“No!”

“Yup!”

Peanut howled and Doc laughed. George slapped his knee and my dad shook his head. Their favorite saying after each story was, “Somebody should write a book about this town!” And they laughed some more. 🌿