

**EXCERPT from
THE TEACHER'S FUNERAL
by Richard Peck
HC 0-8037-2736-4 / \$16.99
Available October 2004**

Chapter One

August

If your teacher has to die, August isn't a bad time of year for it. You know August. The corn is earring. The tomatoes are ripening on the vine. The clover's in full bloom. There's a little less evening now, and that's a warning. You want to live every day twice over because you'll be back in the jailhouse of school before the end of the month.

Then our teacher, Miss Myrt Arbuckle, hauled off and died. It was like a miracle, though she must have been forty. You should have seen my kid brother's face. It looked like Lloyd was hearing the music of the spheres. Being ten that summer, he was even more willing to believe in miracles than I was.

You couldn't deny Miss Myrt Arbuckle was past her prime. She was hard of hearing in one ear, no doubt deafened by her own screaming. And she couldn't whup us like she wanted to. She was a southpaw for whupping, and she had arthritis in that elbow, so while she could still whup, it didn't make much of an impression.

Back in the spring when she called up Lester Kriegbaum for some infraction, nothing serious, he brought a book to the front of the room and read it over her knee while she larruped away at his far end.

So when you get right down to it, if you can't hear and you can't whup, you're better off dead than teaching. That's how I looked at it.

There was always talk about shutting down Hominy Ridge School anyhow. Now that me and Lloyd saw its end might be nigh, hope broke over us. It was surely too late to find another teacher who'd teach in a place like that.

Hominy Ridge was nothing but an out-of-date, unimproved, one-room country schoolhouse in the backwoodsier corner of Indiana. They admitted it didn't pay to keep it just for us straggle of kids who went there.

Dad was on the school board. Me and Lloyd hoped to encourage him to close down the school and drive all formal education out of this part of Parke County. For one thing, I'd been fifteen since winter and still hadn't passed the eighth-grade graduation exam.

Besides, I had me a dream, and school only stood in my way.

"Russell, will they have a funeral for Miss Myrt?" Lloyd looked up at me, wondering.

"Of course they'll have a funeral for her," I said. "Did you think they'd just feed her to the hogs?"

But I know how Lloyd thought. Regular people have funerals, but Miss Myrt was a teacher. As for a funeral, it was hot weather and the crops were in the ground and the roads were dry and the fair was over. "What else do people have to do?" I said. "They'll turn out for Miss Myrt."

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“They better,” Lloyd said darkly. “She’s liable to set up in her coffin and take roll.”

Chapter Two

The Best Boys in the World

How we learned that Miss Myrt Arbuckle had turned up her toes gets ahead of the story. This news didn’t reach us till almost midnight, and then under dramatic circumstances.

But it had been a red-letter day anyhow, the main day of the year for me, better than the 4th of July. It was the day the J.I. Case Company of Racine, Wisconsin, sent their special train down through Indiana. We’d watched for the flyers announcing it all summer. My heart was in my mouth that Dad wouldn’t let us go.

The Case Special came through every August with flatcars of the latest in steam engines and threshing machines. It was better than a circus. Every man and boy from twenty miles around converged on Montezuma to see the Case Special. I walked the floor all night for fear Dad would keep us in the field. I hadn’t figured out he wouldn’t have missed the Case Special himself.

Me and Lloyd were up ahead of the chickens. We worked a seven-day week anyway, even in this quiet season. As Dad said, the only man who got his work done by Friday was Robinson Crusoe. And we were a corn, wheat, hay, and hogs farm in a never-ending round of chores, plus the milking. Today me and Lloyd were a pair of whirlwinds—two tornadoes back and forth to the barn a dozen times before breakfast. And it was already hot enough to fry your brains through your hat.

Then we pulled cockleburs out of the corn into the heat of the day. Cockleburs have two seeds that mature at different times, so you have to kill them twice. All the while, one cricket after another walked in under our hickory shirts on bobwire legs and made life a misery. Still, we worked ahead of Dad all morning, the best boys in the world, and Dad never let on that he knew why.

You talk about hot. They don’t make Augusts like that anymore. An old horsethief from just over in Putnam County died and went down to Hades. And he sent back for a blanket. That’s the kind of heat we were used to. At long last we heard the dinner bell sound from the house.

When we came to the end of the row, we saw Dad up in the lot, bent over the horse trough. He wasn’t just washing a little bit for the dinner table. He was washing his whole top half. That meant he was fixing to go to town. Lloyd was ready to rip out a whoop, but I put a lid on him. We weren’t there yet.

I thought if we had to take the time to sit down to dinner, we’d be too late to see the Case Special come in. But the hand that rang the dinner bell was our sister Tansy’s. And if she cooked, you sat and ate it.

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Tansy was named for a wildflower, which suited her because she was as countrified and rawboned as me and Lloyd, almost. She was our big sister—great big, and she loomed over our lives.

“Let’s see those hands.” Tansy gave the back of my head a painful thump. There was no arthritis in her elbows. She had a pancake turner in her other hand, so I showed her my palms.

“Well, I see where you’ve been,” she remarked, and she didn’t mean the trough. She passed along to Lloyd. “You should have left more of the field where it was,” said she after a look at his paws.

“We washed,” Lloyd whined. I had the sense to keep quiet. “We washed in the trough, same as Dad.”

Dad obliged by turning up his palms, but Tansy thought Lloyd deserved the same thump she’d given me. She was fair that way. “Ow!” Lloyd exclaimed.

“Do you have such a thing as a lump of soap down at the trough?” Tansy inquired.

“No,” said Lloyd, who never learned. “It’d gag the horses. They’d foam at the mouth.”

Dad gazed out the door and down the corn rows, trying not to smile.

“Now I see your neck and ears,” Tansy told Lloyd, “I’m gagging myself.”

“Let’em be so they can eat,” Aunt Maud called out from the stove. I was wolfing it down already, crazy to head for town. But we had a good big dinner to get through first: chicken-fried steak, boiled potatoes and cream gravy, a platter of dead-ripe, deep red beefsteak tomatoes, and a pyramid of pickled peaches in the cut-glass dish. We were being force-fed last year’s pickled peaches to make way for this year’s.

Aunt Maud pulled down the oven door and drew out a sheet of her drop biscuits. Dad’s thorny hand covered his eyes. Aunt Maud was the worst baker in the United States. You couldn’t use her dough balls for bait.

She was no better a cook. We lived for summer because Tansy was home to do most of the cooking for us. In the fall she went back to board in town, to go to the high school. Why Tansy needed to go to high school was another of life’s mysteries to me. “Pie’s pretty nearly baked!” she declared. “Who wants a slab?” But by then Lloyd was halfway to the back door, and Dad was right on his heels.

We hitched up Siren and Stentor to the spring wagon and off we went along the boiling roads. Somehow we made it to town with minutes to spare. It beat me why Tansy and Aunt Maud didn’t want to go.

“Gawk at a bunch of implements in the Montezuma railroad yard with all those cinders underfoot?” Tansy said. “I thank you, no.”

It occurred to me even that early in life that there’s not much romance in a woman’s soul. The very names of the big steam threshers turned my heart over: the Geiser Peerless, the Minnesota Little Giant, the Avery Yellow Fellow, the Pitts Challenger, the Frick Eclipse.

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Finally our wagon was in a row with others, down the hill into town. This was the biggest crowd we saw from one year to the next. An acre of wagons drew up by the depot. Two hundred straw hats bobbed against the punishing sun, and not a bonnet among us.

This is how I pictured Indianapolis, this crush of humankind with nary a familiar face. I looked for my best friend, Charlie Parr, but didn't see him. Of course he could have been an arm's length away, and I wouldn't know. You could scarcely draw breath, and not every farmer had stopped by the trough on the way here.

Then in the farthest distance we heard a trill. It was the steam calliope on the Case Special, flinging a tune to the four winds. The sound of music coming down the tracks made every hair on my head stand up. Though he was too big to hold my hand, Lloyd had me in a grip. It was the Case Special.

Smoke billowed, and the whistle screamed as the train roared in. The shrieking brakes set, and live steam singed our bare feet. On the car past the calliope a Farmer's Friend wind stacker blew out circulars and handbills instead of chaff. Paper and then tin buttons with the Case eagle on them rained over us.

Now we were waiting for Uncle Sam and the Gold Dust Twins because we wanted every year to be just like last year. As the calliope swung into "Marching Through Georgia," Uncle Sam unfolded himself out of the caboose. He stood over us, twelve feet tall in spangled top hat and stilts.

But we were lost to him. The Gold Dust Twins couldn't hold us either, even when they bucked-and-winged into "Under the Bamboo Tree" and threw soapy scouring pads for our womenfolk. A cloud passed, and the full glare of the sun fell on this year's 1904 models of the Case Agitator threshing machine.

They were steel.

Threshing machines had been wooden-sided from the beginning. But these monsters were sheet steel. We were blinded by their sheen. The twentieth century had found us at last, even here. We didn't know how to look at something so new. A lump formed in my throat.

Now Uncle Sam was calling somebody up out of the mob. An Agitator was fired up and steaming. Somebody was wanted to feed lumber into the rig to prove how rugged these new steel models were. If the Agitator could do this to hardwood, think what it could do to your wheat crop.

The face Uncle Sam lit upon was Charlie Parr's. He was older than me, though he hadn't passed the eighth-grade graduation examination either. He swung up on the flatcar and commenced feeding stove lengths into the Agitator. The sawdust blew a dry cloudburst over us.

My mind was miles away by then, up in the Dakotas. I caught a glimpse of me up there for the wheat harvest. I was working one of these all-steel Case Agitators across the thousand-mile fields, under endless sky. I saw me doing a man's work on a crew of men who'd logged all winter. I felt the chaff in my hair.

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All I wanted was to be on a threshing crew, to be in the stubble fields on crisp mornings like the dawn of creation. When I'd get back after the harvest I couldn't tell you. How cold it got up there I didn't know. But that was my dream, and school stood between me and it.

Lloyd tightened his grip on me. He knew I was fixing to go, that in my heart I was already gone.

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