

Chapter One

IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF AUGUST 1966, and me and Wayne and Dad and about two hundred people were sweating and stinking in the auditorium of the Sand Mountain High School, home of the Mighty Mighty Miners. We were there for the Rotary Club Minstrel Show, but Wayne fell asleep after fifteen minutes. When he did that in church, Mom always said it was because of his hay fever and let him alone. That night of the minstrel show, I stayed awake with Dad, who was the treasurer of the Rotary Club, although as it turned out, he fell asleep, too. I sometimes wished I had hay fever like them so I could fall asleep anywhere. I also wished I had a bag of marbles with me, since the auditorium floor was slanted and if you dropped them on the hardwood floor, they would probably roll all the way down to the stage. Not that I wouldn't about die if I ever did that and got caught.

Dad couldn't carry a tune—that's what my mom said. I remember the day she said it, I asked her, "Carry it where?" and she said, "Oh boy, here we go again." Anyway, that's why he wasn't in the minstrel show but down in the audience with us. They started up with a prayer, "Lord bless us and keep us," then the Pledge of Allegiance, then the Rotary Club song—"R-O-T-A-R-Y, that spells Rotary. R-O-T-A-R-Y is known on land and sea. From north to south, and east to west, He profits most who serves the best." After that a guy sang "Old Man River," then a kid I knew shuffled onto the stage and it was Boopie Larent, who was twelve, the same as me, and used to be a friend of mine. We were in the same kid choir at the Methodist Church. He wore a white bow tie, which I bet somebody tied for him, and white gloves, and big white lips, and his face was shoe-polish black, not like real colored people. He sang "Chattanooga Shoe-Shine Boy," which was about a very happy colored boy who shined people's shoes and made them happy, too.

Boopie carried a shoe-shine kit and danced soft-shoe. That's what my dad told me it was. It just looked like sliding around to me, then some leaning way forward, and some running in place to keep from pitching over on his face while he windmilled his arms. The only other kids I ever saw dance before that were the twins Darla and Darwin Turkel, who always tap-danced at County Fair, where my dad worked in the Rotary Club corn-dog booth. Darla and Darwin were all dressed up with their mom a couple of

rows in front of us that night at the minstrel show. Their mom used to wear a mermaid costume and do underwater ballets and stuff over at Weeki Wachee Springs by the Gulf of Mexico. Now she taught dancing lessons sometimes. Darla had fifty-two ringlets in her hair, just like Shirley Temple, or that was the story, anyway. Everybody said to stay away from Darwin—he was worse than a girl.

I realized something about halfway through Boopie doing the “Chattanooga Shoe-Shine Boy.” “Is that my shoe-shine kit?” I asked my dad. I was holding his hand, feeling his calluses. I was too old to be holding his hand—when you get to be twelve, you’re too old for a lot of things—but I did it anyway and he let me when it was dark like that in the auditorium and nobody could see. I liked how it felt from him working at the phosphate mine where he was an engineer, only not the kind that drove a train.

I thought maybe my dad was listening to the show and that’s why he didn’t answer, so I asked him again. “Is that the shoe-shine kit you bought me, Dad?” I don’t know why it made me mad. But if it was my shoe-shine kit, I thought I ought to get to be the Chattanooga Shoe-Shine Boy. Everybody was laughing at old Boopie up there, and the harder they laughed, the more I wished it was me. I wanted to be funny like that, and dance, and sing, and wear a white tie and white gloves and white lips and shoe-shine face darker than the colored people.

“Dad!” I said again. He was asleep like Wayne, like it was

Sunday and we were in church. He opened his eyes and I asked him once more.

“Hush, Dewey,” he said. “I let them borrow it. They needed it for Boopie’s routine.” Boopie dropped down on one knee about then. A fat man came onstage and stepped his shoe on the slanted footrest on top of the kit so Boopie could buff it with a shine rag. That was my job on Sunday mornings, shining my dad’s shoes and then my own shoes before we went to Sunday school. Wayne had to do his own.

Boopie finally quit singing and buffing. It was the end of the “Chattanooga Shoe-Shine Boy,” and him and the fat guy danced off the stage. Only as soon as they disappeared, they ran back with all the other men in their minstrel show costumes, more fat men in black suits and black painted faces, until they stopped and spread their arms out and sang really fast out of their big white lips:

*Swanee, how I love you, how I love you, my dear old Swanee.
I'd give the world to be among the folks in D-I-X-I-E-ven now.*

After that it was Mister Bones and Mister Interloculator, with colored faces like the rest of the others. Mister Bones looked like the choir director at our church. Mister Interloculator looked like Boopie’s dad.

“Mister Bones?”

“Why, yes, Mister Interloculator.”

“Did I hear correctly that you asked your wife if she believed in the Hereafter?”

“’Deed I did, Mister Interloculator. ’Deed I did.”

“And why come you did such a thing as that, Mister Bones?”

“Well, you see, Mister Interloculator, it happened thisaway. I comes home and I says to my wife, ‘Wife, does you believe in the Hereafter?’ and she says, ‘What you talking? You knows I do.’ So I says to her, ‘That’s good, honey, that’s mighty good, on account of I is *here*, and you knows what I is *after*.’”

I didn’t get it, exactly, and asked Dad what the heck that was all about. He said he’d explain later, but he never did.

On the way out after the minstrel show, we saw a real colored man, Chollie the janitor, pushing his mop and bucket in to clean up. My dad said, “Good evening, Chollie,” and Chollie said, “How are you, Mr. Turner?” Somebody else walking out behind us said really loud, “Mistuh Chollie!” It was Mr. Hollis Wratchford, who ran the produce market downtown, under the Skeleton Hotel. He said Chollie’s name a couple of more times, like he enjoyed the sound of it. Then he said, “You’re the expert, Chollie. What is your assessment on the minstrels this year?”

Chollie nodded and nodded and worked his mop handle back and forth as if the answer might come out of the soapy water in his pail, but also as if he’d rather not answer at all. My dad had told me Chollie lost his job at the mine after the strike last year and Dad helped him to get on at the high school. Chollie looked at Mr. Wratchford’s feet. “Yes, sir,” he finally said, still nodding. “I

believe the jury coming in with a guilty verdict on that one, Mr. Wratchford. The gentlemen of the Rotary Club might of out-colored the colored folk tonight.”

Mr. Wratchford laughed and slapped Chollie on the shoulder and gave him a dollar, then he repeated what Chollie said to everybody else all the way down the stairs, laughing every time, and I heard him until we got outside, where there was a bunch of people looking up at something on the roof and laughing, too. Me and Dad and Wayne stepped farther away toward First Street and then we saw it—an old, wood outhouse with a crescent moon somebody must have hauled up on top of the high school. There was a sign on the door, but the words were too small to read from where we were. The high-school boys were always doing funny stuff like that. Wayne told me that the seniors caught every seventh-grader during the first month of school, all the boys, and held them down, pulled up their shirts, and gave them red bellies, which I was very nervous about and which was why I didn't want to start the seventh grade. I wished we had a junior high at Sand Mountain, but I guess the town was too small for something like that.

After a while we went home and told my mom. She said, “Oh, for goodness sake, what's wrong with these people?” The way she said it made me think she didn't just mean why would they haul an outhouse on top of the high school. They had a picture of the outhouse in the *Sand Mountain Citizen* a couple of days later, which was the only newspaper we got except for the Sunday

Tampa Tribune my dad bought so he could sleep with it over his face while he watched football on TV after church. The sign wasn't in the picture, though. Wayne, who was going into eighth grade that year, told me it had said COLORED PEOPLE GO TO THE BATHROOM HERE, only the newspaper got rid of it before they took the picture, and it didn't say COLORED PEOPLE, and it didn't say GO TO THE BATHROOM, either. I don't know how Wayne knew that stuff. I guess when you're older like him you just do.

I asked him why anybody wanted the colored people to use an outhouse on the roof, and he said, "They don't want them to go to school there." I said, "But the colored people *don't* go to school there, just white people," and he said, "Well, they don't want the government to make them let them go to school there." I still didn't get it. But that's the way things always were in my family, and in the whole town as far as I could tell. You asked a million questions but you never knew what was really going on.

Chapter Two

I WENT OVER TO BOOPIE LARENT'S HOUSE the next day, which was Saturday, to get my shoe-shine kit back. He was in his garage, bouncing on his pogo stick, trying to set a new world record. His sister, Dottie, was counting, but really she was watching to make sure he didn't have another accident. When Boopie first got his pogo stick, he was bouncing in the garage at their house and chewing a big wad of bubble gum and he slipped off and hit his chin on the pogo stick handle and bit all the way through his bottom lip. The blood splattered all over his face and his shirt and the floor of the garage, and when Dottie heard him and came running outside, the first thing she saw was him spitting out this big bloody thing that she thought was his tongue he must have bit off and she screamed and screamed but it turned

out it was only his bubble gum. He got stitches in his lip and Dr. Rexroat had to give Dottie nerve medicine to calm her down.

So now whenever Boopie got on the pogo stick or rode his unicycle or did about anything, Dottie watched him just so she'd always know what was what.

I picked up my shoe-shine kit, which was just sitting there in the garage like nobody even cared whose it was, and said, "If you borrow something from somebody, you're supposed to ask them first."

Boopie kept bouncing, and said, "My dad got it from your dad."

I said everybody knew it belonged to me, so he should have asked me.

He said, "Sorry, Your Highness."

I wanted to ask him how he got to be the Chattanooga Shoe-Shine Boy, and how he learned soft-shoe, and how he got his face painted black with the big white lips, and where he got the suit and the top hat and the gloves he wore in the minstrel show. But I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of thinking he had anything I wanted. Dottie was on three hundred and twenty-nine then, and I started counting with her: "Three hundred and thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three, twenty-two, twenty-three, two hundred and eleven, twelve—"

She tried to count louder, but I just counted louder, too: "One hundred and one, one hundred and two, three thousand and nine," until she finally yelled at me to shut up and go home and leave them alone, but when she did, Boopie yelled at her, "Don't

listen to him; don't stop counting," but it was too late, she had already lost the count, and I yelled back at both of them why didn't they just start over since they didn't know what number they were on, then I pushed Boopie off the pogo stick and ran home.

The next night, I asked Dad if I could be the Chattanooga Shoe-Shine Boy in next year's minstrel show. Me and Wayne and our little sister, Tink, were lying on the floor in the living room after Sunday night church, watching the Disney show *Wonderful World of Color*; only it wasn't color because we only had our black-and-white. Dad didn't believe in color TV, plus he said we couldn't afford it.

I said, "Can I, Dad?" but he wasn't in the mood to talk about it, because he said what grown-ups always say when they're not in the mood to talk about it: "We'll see." That meant I was supposed to be quiet, but he had only said it once, so I tried again. "When will you see, Dad?" I said. "Does that mean you have to ask somebody? Who do you have to ask? When can you ask them?"

He said, "I said we'll see, and we'll see. A year is a long time. You could be too big by then. They only want small boys." A commercial came on and he went into the kitchen to eat his cold consommé out of a can.

What he said just about made me happy, though. I was the third smallest boy in my class and had been since second grade, and I was pretty sure I wasn't going to grow anytime soon. There

was Ronnie Lott, who was always spitting, and picking his underwear out of his butt. Then there was Richard Speight, who everybody said was a dwarf but I think there was just something wrong about his back. Then there was me. I had a twenty-five-dollar bet with Dad about whether I would still be shorter than Wayne when I turned eighteen. I know he only made the bet because he felt sorry for me. I probably shouldn't have bet against myself, because it might jinx me from growing, but twenty-five dollars was a lot of money, especially when your allowance was only a quarter a week.

I gave up on the *Wonderful World of Color* and went into mine and Wayne's bedroom and got out my shoe-shine kit and looked through it until I found the flat round can of Kiwi black. I twisted the top off and rubbed some on my arm to see how it looked. We had brown, too, which looked like it might be more the color of real colored people, but from what I'd seen at the minstrel show, I thought maybe I ought to go with the black.

It took me about half an hour to get my whole face painted with the shoe polish. The smell of it made me dizzy even though I didn't do any right around the edge of my nostrils or right around my eyes, which left little pink rings there, like a pig snout, and like I-don't-know-what eyes. My ears were a problem, too, because I didn't want to get the polish up inside where it might be too near to my brain, so it was just black around the big part of the ear. Some got up in my hair where my crew cut stuck up in

front, and when it dried, it was harder than Brylcreem. My lips looked stupid because they were pink but they were supposed to be white, only we didn't have any white Kiwi since who wore white shoes except a nurse?

I thought I looked good enough, though, better than Boopie Larent, anyway, and I stood up and waved my arms around like Boopie did, like windmills, and I did my legs and my hips like Elvis. That stuff, that Kiwi, I don't know what was in it but the next thing I knew I was singing pretty loud and it sounded good to me, too—also better than Boopie—and I must have got louder and louder the more I sang of those songs from the minstrel show.

My arms, I was cranking them faster and faster like I could just about take off at any minute, and I believe if Elvis had seen me, he would have been proud to call me son, and I could have danced and sang like that all night, probably, except I heard something at the door and it was Wayne, standing with his mouth open and full of a bite of one of his usual peanut-butter-and-banana sandwiches. I could see the mash of it in his mouth all the way from where I was in the middle of the room and it was disgusting, also like usual. Next to him was Tink, looking scared about something, so I turned around to look behind me to see if there was something by the window, because you never know, there could have been.

I stopped singing by then, of course, and I also wasn't dancing like the King anymore, or like anybody, but I was still dizzy and my head felt like it was still dancing, only I couldn't breathe

too well. Also I didn't feel my legs too well, either, so I decided to sit down and so I dropped from standing up directly to my butt on the floor. I heard Wayne tell Tink, "Go get Mom," but I don't remember between that and Mom holding my face in her hands and saying, "Dewey? Dewey? Answer me."

From a long ways away I said, "Yes, ma'am." I didn't know why I was so dizzy then, or why my tailbone hurt. I must have already forgotten about the shoe polish and sitting down from standing up. I heard her say, "Go get your father and tell him to bring some turpentine and a rag," and Wayne said, "He's not going to like this," and Tink said, "He thinks he's the Chattanooga Shoe-Shine Boy but he's not," and Mom said, "Go watch TV," and Tink said, "I don't have to," and Mom said, "Excuse me, Young Lady?" Tink ran back to the living room and I must have been laughing at something because Mom said, "I don't see what's so funny, Mister." When she started calling us Young Lady and Mister, it meant we were in a lot of trouble but I couldn't stop laughing and she said, "You better stop laughing, this is serious. Do you have any idea what you did to yourself?" only something didn't sound the way it was supposed to and I realized it was because she was laughing, too, and I thought everything was going to be all right even though I still couldn't feel my legs. I hadn't heard my mom laugh in so long, probably since before President Kennedy died, that I'd forgotten how happy it made me, but that was just until my dad came in and he started cussing, which my mom always called Mine Talk, which he wasn't supposed to do

around us kids. Mom always told him if he was mad to just say “Good garden peas!” instead, and he said that now, too, which just made me laugh more, and I think made Mom laugh, too. I slapped my hands down on the floor over and over like a seal at a zoo until Dad grabbed me by the back of the neck and lit into my face with a rag soaked in turpentine that felt like a Brillo pad. Then I really couldn’t breathe and I wasn’t laughing and slapping the floor like a seal anymore, I was bawling like a calf like they had out at Mr. Juddy’s farm, who was a dragline operator from the mines. Dad scrubbed and scrubbed the skin off my face with that rag and I tried to tell him I couldn’t breathe but he wasn’t listening, and I don’t think Mom was laughing anymore by that time, either; she was saying, “You don’t have to do it so hard,” and he said, “If I don’t do it hard, it won’t come off. Look, look, it’s not coming off. There’s going to be a stain that won’t come off, and how in tarnation is he going to go to school like this? Oh, good garden peas.”