

Dancer

September 5, 1953

Dancer Stonemason drove through Maple Springs headed for Rolla. His left hand rested gentle on the steering wheel, and in his pitching hand he held a baseball – loose and easy – like he was shooting craps. The ball took the edge off the queasy feeling he got on game days. His son, Clayton, sat beside him and made sputtering engine noises as he gripped an imaginary steering wheel, while Dede, Dancer’s wife, stared out the window with other things on her mind.

They cruised down Main Street, past the Tastee-Freeze and Dabney’s Esso Station and the Post Office and the First National Bank of Maple Springs and Crutchfield’s General Store. At the town’s only traffic light, he turned left toward the highway. At the edge of town they passed the colored Baptist Church with its neatly-tended grid of white crosses and gravestones under a gnarled willow. The graveyard reminded him of the cemetery up north, near Festus, where his mother was buried with the rest of the Dancer family. She’d been gone fifteen years now and some days Dancer had trouble remembering what she looked like.

Across from the Baptists, A-1 Auto Parts blanketed the landscape with acres of junked automobiles. His father’s Buick was out there somewhere. Walt Stonemason had been a whisky-runner for Cecil Danforth. He knew every back road and trail in southern Missouri and there wasn’t a revenue agent in the state who could catch him.

At his father’s funeral Cecil told Dancer that Walt was the best damn whiskey runner he ever had. Dancer wanted to ask Cecil if his dad was so damn good how'd he manage to run that Roadmaster smack into a walnut tree with no one chasing him. But Dancer knew better than to ask Cecil those kinds of questions.

They turned north onto Highway 60, and the '39 Chevy coughed and bucked as he shifted into third. As he cruised north, Dancer’s fingers glided over the smooth cowhide of the baseball as he read the seams and adjusted his grip from fastball, to curveball, to changeup. He had a hand built for pitching – a pancake-sized palm and long, tapered fingers that hid the ball from the batter for that extra heartbeat.

It was the Saturday before Labor Day, and Dancer’s team, the Rolla Rebels, was hosting the Joplin Miners. Rolla was only an hour’s drive from Maple Springs, but

Dancer had his family on the road early. This was going to be a special game. Not for his team – the Rebels were in third place going nowhere – but because today would be Clayton’s first baseball game. The first time he’d see his dad pitch. Dancer was eight when his mom got sick. He went to live with Cecil’s brother Clem and his wife Ruthie. They had nine kids so one more didn’t matter much. One day in late May his dad showed up at the schoolhouse and told Dancer they were going up to St. Louis to see the Cardinals play.

The Cardinals’ stadium was packed with more people than Dancer had seen in his whole life. They sat in the upper deck behind home plate. Dizzy Dean pitched for the Cardinals and the crowd cheered madly every time he took the mound. In his last at bat he hit a foul ball that was headed straight for Dancer. He stood and cupped his hands to catch it, but at the last moment the man in front of him leaped up to catch the ball. It splatted against his palms and the man yelped as the baseball rolled into the aisle. The usher retrieved the ball and handed it to Dancer.

Dancer fell asleep on the ride home. He woke up when his father stopped the car in front of Grandpa Dancer’s house. His father told him that his mom had passed, but Dancer already knew.

The hot-towel Missouri heat, which had suffocated them through July and August, had finally retreated to Arkansas. A few wispy clouds hung on the horizon, and the air was light and fresh. Dede’s head lolled backwards, her eyes closed as she let the cool wind from the open window billow her white cotton dress. She only wore that dress to church and on special occasions. It didn’t get much use.

Her short blonde hair, which wrapped around her ears and curled down the nape of her neck, was still damp from her morning shower. As Dancer had attempted to shave, she flung open the shower curtain and wiggled her ass, letting the hot water pelt her breasts. “Soap me, honey. Do my back,” she said.

“You’re getting water on the floor,” Dancer said.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “If I squint really hard, you look just like Gary Cooper.”

“He’s taller. Close the curtain.”

Water was pooling on the floor. Dancer took the washcloth and soaped her back and her little butt. As he brought his hand up between her legs, she reached around and slipped her hand into his boxer shorts.

“Come on in, the water’s fine,” she said.

Dede knew he couldn't fool around on game day, but she didn't care. She could never get enough, and now they had a problem.

Traffic was light, and Dancer had the Chevy cruising along at close to sixty. Beside him, Clayton pressed his foot down on a phantom gas pedal, and his sputtering engine revved into a high-pitched whine. He drove hard, just like his whiskey-running grandfather. He reminded Dancer of his father. The wheat-colored hair, the dirt tan, and the need to race everywhere even when there was no place to go.

Dancer glanced over at Dede. She had a crooked mouth and a gap between her two front teeth that he hadn't noticed when they first met because of her eyes. Her eyes were big, wild, and crazy-blue. They had met when Dancer was a senior. Even though she was two years younger, she had been the one to make the first move. He'd never been with another girl, but Dede made it easy. She knew too much for a fifteen-year-old.

But now, with her face half-covered by her wind-tossed hair, she appeared so innocent. She didn't look like she was two months pregnant. Her belly was still flat, and her breasts hadn't swelled, not like they had when Clayton was on his way.

Maybe the doctor was wrong.

After Clayton was born, Dancer had found an offseason job at the Caterpillar plant – parts inspector – a dollar an hour and boring as hell. He wasn't cut out for factory work, but they needed the money. When he moved up to the Rolla Rebels, the pay was better, and he thought he'd be done with the factory, but Dede fell in love with the red brick house on the hill east of town. So they bought the house, and then he had a wife, a baby, a house, a mortgage, and another offseason back in the factory inspecting parts. And now with a new baby on the way, he'd have to work overtime just for them to survive.

"Hey Dad, is that the ballpark?" Clayton asked. He pointed at a well-groomed Little League field that was in a clearing surrounded by spruce and poplars.

"No. It's just over the hill, beyond the fairgrounds."

Mr. Seymour Crutchfield, the owner of the Rebels, was a merchant. His father had built a general store in downtown Maple Springs fifty years ago, and Seymour had taken the idea of that general store and built stores all over Missouri and Arkansas. When he expanded into Rolla, he bought the Rolla Rebels baseball team because their stadium was sitting on the land he wanted to develop. He built his store, renamed the stadium, and hired his son-in-law, Doc Evans, to manage the team.

Clayton creased the brim of the Cardinals cap Dancer had given him and leaned forward in his seat to get a better look. The hat was several sizes too big, so Dede had bobby-pinned the back so it would stay on.

“Are you going to strike them all out, Dad?”

“Your daddy can’t strike everyone out. He’s not Superman,” Dede said. She winked at Dancer.

Dancer squeezed the ball into Clayton’s small hands. “I’m going to try.”

As they crossed into Phelps County and the outskirts of Rolla, the woods and small lakes that had lined the highway for the last twenty miles gave way to cheap motels, filling stations, and car dealerships. The Phelps County Fairgrounds, with its huge parking lot and grandstand, stretched along the east side of the highway for nearly half a mile. Beyond the fairgrounds and next to the brand new Crutchfield General Store was Crutchfield Stadium, home of the Rolla Rebels.

Dancer pulled the car up to the box office. “They’ll have your tickets here. See you after the game.”

“Not so fast, mister,” Dede said. She leaned across Clayton and kissed Dancer hard on the lips.

“Mom, you’re squishing me,” Clayton said.

As they slid out of the car, Dede leaned back in the window. “Now don’t wear yourself out,” she said. And then she giggled and skipped away with Clayton to pick up their tickets.

Dancer parked close to the centerfield gate where all the players entered the ballpark. In centerfield, Mr. Seymour Crutchfield, looking like an undertaker in his black wool suit and bow-tie, was shouting directions to one of the Negro groundskeepers who was on a ladder applying a patch to the Crutchfield General Store sign that covered twenty yards of the center field wall.

“A little higher, boy. And move it to the right. A little more. That’s it.”

The sign had read, “Over 100 stores in Missouri, Kansas, and Arkansas.” Now the “100” had been covered up and replaced with a “150.” When Dancer had joined Rolla, the store count had been fifty.

Doc Evans stood beside his father-in-law, puffing on a cigar and looking impatiently at his watch while Crutchfield finished his instructions. When Doc spotted Dancer, he waved him over.

As Dancer approached, Mr. Crutchfield turned to him. “Look at that, Dancer. One hundred fifty stores. Next year there’ll be over two hundred. Y’all be able to shop at Crutchfield’s no matter where you live in Missouri.”

Dancer was surprised Crutchfield knew his name. “That’s really something, Mr. Crutchfield.”

“Yes, it is, son. Yes, it is.” He looked back at the sign again and frowned. “Hey, boy!” he said to the groundskeeper who had started to fold up the ladder. “Could you clean those bird droppings off the corner of the sign? Right there by the ‘C’?” He pointed to the big “C” in Crutchfield, then turned and faced Dancer again. “Wilbur has some things to discuss with you, so I’ll let you two get down to baseball.” He extended his hand. “Good luck, son. It’s been a pleasure.” He shook hands like a preacher, holding on just long enough to make Dancer uncomfortable, and then he walked over to get a closer look at his sign.

Doc Evans stared at his father-in-law walking away and slowly shook his head. “Just stop in my office before you go out for warm-ups. We can talk then.” As he walked off toward right field, still shaking his head, it sounded to Dancer like he muttered, “Bird shit.”

American Past Time by Len Joy

Something was happening. In the three years he had been with the team, Mr. Crutchfield hadn't said ten words to Dancer. And Doc never wanted to talk to anyone before a game.

The Joplin Miners were taking batting practice and Billy Pardue, the Rebels' veteran catcher, was on the top step of the dugout studying them. The Rebels were either young hotshots on their way up, or old-timers on their way down. Billy was an old-timer, but he had had his day. Three years in the big leagues. He knew his baseball, and he shared everything with Dancer—even showed him how to throw a tobaccy-spit pitch. When thrown properly, the ball would squirt out of the pitcher's hand and waggle its way to the plate like a leaf in a windstorm. It was, in Billy's words, "a fucking unhittable pitch." But Dancer couldn't stomach tobacco-chewing, and he figured with his fastball, he didn't need to cheat. Not too much anyway.

Billy spit his tobacco juice in the direction of Dancer's feet. "Get your ass out here as soon as you change. We got work to do."

"Doc wants to see me first."

Billy grinned. "That ain't going to take long. Get a move on."

The locker room was a concrete bunker that even on the hottest days was cool and damp. It smelled of liniment, sweat, mildew, and Doc's cigars. The only player who had arrived before Dancer was Ron Bilko, who sat on the bench next to the row of banged-up metal lockers that lined the front wall. Bilko was in his underwear, eating a hot dog, and studying a crumpled issue of *The Sporting News* as if it were a foreclosure notice. Next to him on the bench was a cardboard tray with a half-dozen more hot dogs.

"What's the problem? Someone take away your homerun title?" Dancer asked as he opened the locker next to Bilko.

Bilko smacked the paper down on the bench. "Goddamn Enos Slaughter." He grabbed another hot dog.

Enos Slaughter was the right fielder for the St. Louis Cardinals. The one man standing between Bilko and the major leagues. The last few months a man couldn't have a conversation with Bilko without Goddamn Enos Slaughter joining them.

“Slaughter’s still playing?” Dancer said, grinning. Dancer and Bilko were the top minor league prospects in the Cardinals organization. At the end of the season, most of the major league clubs brought up their promising young players to give the veterans a rest and check out the prospects. But the Cardinals’ skipper, Eddy Stanky, didn’t want a player if he didn’t have a spot for him. The Cardinals had an all-star outfield led by Stan Musial, Slaughter, and a solid corps of pitchers that never seemed to get injured. There was no place for Dancer or Bilko.

Bilko showed Dancer the stat box for the Cardinals. “Look at that. Slaughter’s batting .294. Thirty-seven goddamn years old. That son of a bitch ain’t ever going to retire.”

Dancer flipped the paper over to the minor league stats. “Siebern’s got twenty-seven homeruns – only three behind you. He could hit that many today.”

Norm Siebern was a power-hitting lefty for the Joplin Miners. Twice this year, Siebern had smashed Dancer’s fastball out of the park.

Bilko picked up another hot dog. “I ain’t worried. Norm Siebern’s not going to hit three homeruns off Dancer Stonemason, because after the second homerun, I expect you to plant your fastball right between his numbers. Give that son of a bitch a decimal point.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

Bilko winked. “Have a hot dog, Dancer. Put some meat on those bones.” Bilko pushed the tray toward Dancer.

Dancer shook his head and grabbed his uniform that was hanging from the door of his locker. “No thanks.” He was always too nervous to eat before he pitched.

The rest of the team had arrived. Bilko set the hot dog tray on a table in the middle of the locker room floor and yelled, “Any of you yahoos want a dog?” A minute later the tray was empty.

Dancer tugged on the grey pullover jersey with the two rows of decorative buttons running down the front. It was supposed to look like a Confederate officer’s longcoat. He sniffed the armpit. “Shit, these still haven’t been washed.”

Bilko grinned. “Season’s almost over. Crutchfield probably figures he can hold out until we’re done. Save a few bucks. Is Dede coming today?”

“Already here. We brought Clayton. He’s never seen me pitch.”

“You’re a lucky man, Dancer. Got a good woman and a boy who looks up to you. Ain’t nothing better than that.”

“Dede says we’re going to have another one.”

“Holy shit, Dancer!” Bilko jumped up and thumped Dancer on the back. “That’s great. When’s she due?”

“March or April. Probably right in the middle of spring training.” Dancer pulled on his gray Rebel cap. Ever since he’d got that GI-style crewcut last month, his hat didn’t sit right. “Can’t afford another kid right now. Hard to get by on meal money and a hundred bucks a week.”

Bilko put his hand on Dancer’s shoulder. “I hear the Cardinals get ten dollars a day just for meals. When I play for the Cards, I’m going to have a T-bone every night.”

Dancer readjusted his cap and checked himself in Bilko’s mirror. The sun had turned his light brown hair almost blond.

“You making yourself look pretty for old Billy?”

“Doc wants to see me.”

Bilko smiled.

“What’s going on, Bilko?”

Bilko shook his head, but kept grinning. “Maybe he’s tired of you always bitching about the laundry service.”

Doc was in his office, feet propped on his desk, reading the *New York Times*. Before every game he studied that Yankee paper like it was the Bible or *The Sporting News*. Doc was from someplace back east. He knew his baseball, but he was skipper because he'd married Mr. Seymour Crutchfield's daughter, Melissa. He wasn't really a Doc either, but he wore wire-rim glasses, and his gray hair was always Brylcreemed. What with the glasses, the gray hair, the newspaper-reading, and the rich wife, he seemed a whole lot smarter than the rest of the boys, so they all called him Doc.

Doc had been a pretty fair shortstop before the war. He had an invitation to spring training with the Tigers back in '42, but enlisted instead. He was part of the 45th Infantry Division that landed in Sicily in July '43. Got his right arm shot to hell just outside Salerno. That was it for his baseball career. There wasn't much demand for left-handed shortstops.

Doc motioned for Dancer to take a seat and then kept reading the paper as though he'd forgotten about him. Dancer tried not to fidget. Billy would be pissed if he didn't get out there while the Miners were taking batting practice. Finally, Doc folded up the paper and placed it on his desk.

"I don't know what this world's coming to, son."

"Yes, sir."

"Eisenhower's a damn fool to settle for a tie in Korea. Truman would have never let that happen."

"No, sir."

"And look at this. Russians just exploded an H-bomb." He poked his finger at the headline.

"Yes, sir."

"That's serious business." He shook his head. "Do you have children, son?"

"Yes, sir. My boy Clayton just turned four, and we got another one on the way."

Doc took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You aren’t Catholic, are you?”

“No, sir. My mama was a Baptist. Dad wasn’t much of anything. They both passed, sir.”

Doc gave a sympathy nod. “How you going to feed a family of four on what we’re paying you?”

“Well, I was kind of hoping...” Dancer caught himself. Doc wouldn’t think hoping was any kind of plan.

“You’re planning to make it to the big leagues, right? Get that major league paycheck. That boy Mickey Mantle just signed a new contract – seventeen thousand five hundred dollars. That’s a lot of beans.”

“Goddamn Yankees.”

“I had a call from Mr. Stanky this morning.” Doc pulled out a cigar and sniffed it up and down. He acted as if the Cardinals manager called him every day. “Haddix has a sore arm. They’re thinking about shutting him down. Cards ain’t going nowhere.”

Doc bit off the end of the cigar. Dancer crept to the edge of his chair. Doc could spend ten minutes farting around with his goddamn cigars.

“So?” Dancer asked, his voice breaking.

“So they might need you for the Labor Day doubleheader Monday.”

Dancer jumped up. “Holy shit! The Cardinals!” His spikes almost slipped out from under him, and he had to grab Doc’s desk to keep from falling.

“Try not to kill yourself before you get there, son.”

Dancer sat back in his seat. “But I’m still pitching today, right? My boy’s out there. He’s counting on me.”

Doc cocked his head to one side. “I can’t send you up to St. Louis with your arm dragging around your ankles. Mr. Stanky would rip me a new asshole.” He puffed harder on the cigar. “Tell you what. You can go three innings. That’ll keep you fresh enough so you can still pitch in two days if Stanky needs you.”

As Dancer ran back through the locker room, he almost collided with Bilko. “Doc like the way you looked?” Bilko asked, grinning.

“You asshole. You knew?”

“Eh, I hear things.” He smiled. “Congratulations, Dancer. Make us hillbillies proud.” He clasped Dancer on the shoulder. “But don’t keep Billy waiting.”

The Joplin Miners were still taking batting practice when Dancer joined Billy in the dugout.

Billy pointed to the umpire out by home plate. “That’s Lester Froehlich. He’s got a low strike zone. Froehlich will give you a pitch down by the ankles, but anything above the waist he’s calling a ball. So keep the goddamn ball low.”

After he finished on Froehlich, Billy ran through the lineup, reminding Dancer where he wanted him to pitch each batter. Dancer wasn’t paying attention – he was far away, trying on his new uniform with those two red Cardinals perched on the baseball bat. The same uniform Dizzy Dean had worn.

Billy backhanded Dancer’s hat off his head.

“Listen, boy. I know you got the call. You earned it, and you’re going to be aces. But right now we got a game to play. You want to stay up in the Bigs, remember this – respect the goddamn game. Play every game like it’s your last.”

“I’ll always respect the game, Billy.”

Billy picked up Dancer’s hat and put it back on his head. “I know you will, kid.”