

*Sunday Dinners,
Moonshine,
and Men*

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Chapter 7 Excerpt

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Sunday Dinners, Moonshine, and Men
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On that day, I remember Tate had been gone a while and I guess whatever money he used to leave for Mom to take care of us had run out. I remember thinking during those days about Stony Point and how well we would always eat at Sunday dinners at Grandma Kirkman's house. Mom had tolerated the move to Florida, but it was always Tate's place where he believed he would make his fortune. Now Mom was left alone, with few acquaintances, no friends, and nothing to feed her hungry children. I suppose nothing could feel more helpless for her. Mom would sometimes wait by the window crying, hoping that Tate would come home, hoping that he would come back and come back soon.

Now, there was nothing. We had water, but there was no juice. There was no bread. There were no Vienna sausages, there was no potted meat, and there was no baloney. There was nothing! Most of those things were staples that we ate around the house. But now, there was not even that stuff.

I remember an entire day that I did not eat at all. Tate was too proud to put me on a free lunch program at Hopper, so I didn't eat at school. He would have hit the roof if Mom had gone over to the neighbors and shared that we had nothing to eat. And, for whatever reason, my mom still believed in him.

One night I was lying in my bed and heard Tate finally come in the door. We had gone almost two days without eating, but as my mom promised, he was back. I am sure Mom had her hopes that somehow he would rescue us, but he wasn't much help. I was already in bed. I tried to sleep, but it wasn't easy on an empty stomach. I could hear Mom's voice uncharacteristically loud and aggressive as she opened the refrigerator and cupboards to show Tate they were empty. He was surprisingly silent. Then he stumbled to my room.

“Bub, do you have any change?” he asked. I got out of bed and reached under a blanket I had strategically placed to cover a small box of keepsakes. I dug out some change from the box. My mom emptied her purse, and we all searched between chair cushions and under things to see what we could scrape together.

Tate cleaned out the Cadillac, looking on the floorboard in the dark for coins as I held up the flashlight. We went through Vickie’s room to see if she had any change and found a few more dimes.

By the time we finished the search, we had gathered a total of ninety-seven cents to our name.

Tate said, “Bub, let’s go to the store.” He and I walked four blocks to a corner store still open. I was angry at him, but at the same time I felt better that he was with me. That was always the familiar feeling. We had no stability, but having Tate home convinced all of us that now things would be okay.

I understand now that Tate painted pictures with his words. He wanted us to believe in him. As I walked by his side with ninety-seven cents jingling in his pocket, he told me about a big deal he had been planning in Orlando.

“Son, look at these houses,” he said, pointing to the homes that lined the sidewalk. “I am going to be listing a lot of these houses.” He touched a sign in front of one house that had a realtor’s name on it. “You are gonna see my name on every sign up and down these blocks. Things will be very different for us.”

I got caught up in his excitement, almost forgetting why we were walking to the store at a time when I should have been in bed. “Oh, Bub, I almost forgot to tell you about this big deal I got going in Orlando. It’s near Disney.”

Had I been older, I would have realized he was filling my head with bravado to deflect from the embarrassment of finding us all almost starving. At that age, I believed everything he said without question. Even if he was misguided, my memory of that time was of his irrepressible optimism with a fundamental belief in himself that was difficult to resist. I imagine he sincerely believed he was going to pull a rabbit out of the hat.

We walked in the pitch black to the convenience store. That night, he was my hero with the ninety-seven cents in his pocket and the “free” Cadillac parked in the driveway.

When we made it to the convenience store, we scoured the shelves. We bought a small jar of apple jelly and some cheap white bread. It was all we

could afford with ninety-seven cents. We took it home, toasted the bread, because cheap white bread is better toasted, and we had jelly sandwiches.

That is what we had for breakfast and lunch the next day, and we finished it off at dinner. Honestly, I don't remember what happened when it was all gone. I guess Tate found some grocery money after that night. I do remember it was not the last time I would go hungry. The good thing I remember about that night was just being with him. After that, the rest took care of itself. I know now Dad had no idea about the basics of being an adult then. His world was himself, and we were all reflections in his mirror. There were times when he could shine a glow that would make you feel you were the only person in the world and the most important to him. I loved the man, then, and despite his barking orders at me now as if I were a six-year-old, I still love him.

Eventually, the Cadillac Man repossessed the '74 Sedan Deville. I would later learn he found Tate and the Cadillac outside a nightclub in Winter Park, Florida. Lucky for us, Tate's boss, Rosa Peyton, let him drive her 1972 white Sedan DeVille with a blue top. So we were back in style by the time we retreated from Rosalia.

