

A Tale of Two Boxes

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Big Black Bird Books
272 Day Lily Ln
Lewisburg, WV 24901

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Contents

[Chapter 1: The Best of Times](#)

[Chapter 2: Fifteen Men on a Dead Man's Chest](#)

[Chapter 3: The Worst of Times](#)

[Chapter 4: A Far, Far Better Thing](#)

Chapter 1: The Best of Times

“They’ve fallen, they’ve fallen” wafts in over television voices of Bullwinkle and Rocky on the first Saturday morning of the new school year.

Beulah and I peek out our recreation room window and see neighborhood kids scampering toward the pear trees behind the Januzzi house.

“C’mon you guys, it’s time you joined this side of the block” calls our big sister Beatrice.

The four pear trees in a line between Hanken Road and the cul-de-sac we called the Circle were remnants of an orchard from the LaMonte estate that had occupied the western half of Bound Brook, New Jersey. A chunk of land had been sold off for development about every decade of the twentieth century resulting in a patchwork of West End neighborhoods of varying ethnicity and architecture. South of the decaying Evergreens mansion on Old Ladies Hill was Westerly Gardens with stucco duplexes housing large Italian and Polish families drawn from Ellis Island down the Central Jersey Line to woolen mills along the Raritan river. To the west were the hand-made houses of second generation Italian families spreading down Second and Franklin Streets toward the Middlebrook floodplain. North were the Codrington Apartments, a maze of brick and timber buildings where more recent immigrants came and then went if unable to land a job in one of the factories that had replaced the mills by mid-century.

My family had just moved from these Apartments to Downs Manor, the newest LaMonte subdivision in the northwest corner of town. Forty-five identical split level homes wedged into a hank of the Middlebrook were filled with baby boomers, each household scrambling to be seen as a little different. Just down the street from us the Colavito girls played inside an evergreen hedge which hid their games of SPUD until the big rubber ball popped up above the yews. Halfway

around the loop of Hanken Road the Mazurkewicz family had a two-story addition to their kitchen to help house nine blond boys and girls. My father had opted for a roofed carport and sidewalk around the house of our lot at the north corner with Tea Street.

"Where'd those sidewalk blocks come from?" asked a bald guy who had pulled up to the curb in a white van with Elmer Schall & Sons written in script across the sides.

"Why, Frank got em from the landfill" answered my mother tending one of her rosebushes in the front yard.

"They kinda look like some missing from our job site in Finderne" growled the guy with eyebrows raised as he drove off.

"I helped Daddy unload em on Sunday night" said my teenaged brother Blaine coming out the front door.

"Where'd he get em?"

"Finderne."

"Goodness gracious sakes alive."

"You two go up front with the little kids" commands Beat pointing to the middle trees where a half dozen children from our end of the block are lobbing rotting pears at a equal number from the other end. "I'm gonna climb the back tree and drop down some hard ones."

"Look out for yellow jackets" instructs black haired Beulah, a veteran from last year's campaign. "They're under some a them and only sting if you grab em."

The air is ripe with vinegary sweetness as I heave a mushy one toward Leo Mazurkewicz hoping he won't see who threw it.

"I'll get you for that, Weeds" roars the bully of my kindergarten class, ducking my pear and reaching for one of his own.

I leap behind the trunk as his throw splats into it. Looking back toward the rearmost tree on our side, I see Blaine and Jerry Januzzi whipping Beat's unripe ones as hard as they can.

"Oh no, here comes Big Mazurk" Beulah cries with her eyes flashing.
"Head for the lilac bush, he's got the best arm on the block!"

I take off as a pear whizzes past my head and strikes her in the middle of the back with a thud, splaying her face down into the grass.

"This is the last year for the pear fight" smiles Enzo Januzzi as I scramble into the open area in the middle of the overgrown shrub.

"Why?" I muster, still huffing from my frantic flight.

"We're getting a German Shepherd" states my heavysset kindergarten friend.

"Huh?"

"The old man's cutting them down to build a fence."

Chapter 2: Fifteen Men on a Dead Man's Chest...

"... yo ho ho and a bottle of ... Gramma's Old Fashioned Cider, Gramma's Old Fashioned Cider" I cry parroting Pirate Sam from the Looney Tunes cartoon as I prepare to shove off.

As the youngest of four I usually would have had last dibs on a large empty box. But it had arrived that morning and was waiting in the carport when I got home from half-day kindergarten. On the half mile walk in the rain from LaMonte School I'd passed a dark pool filling a dip in the dirt road that ran beside the lilac bush. Big box, big puddle ... time to go sailing.

Polishing off a couple of fried bolognas on white with mayo, Mom's standard lunch fare, I headed out the kitchen door.

"Stay outta the mud" my mother called so I ran around the back of the house, stopping only to scoop the muck and white shingle specks out of a spoon indentation in one of the sidewalk blocks.

Mom was out of sight when I completed the loop around the house so I grabbed the box and dragged it across the Januzzi yard to the hidden fort in the old lilac bush.

The puddle was still full but had turned the color of chocolate milk. First I tested the water with a sycamore leaf and it floated. Then I folded in the sides and set the box lightly onto the pool. It was seaworthy so I took a quick look up and down the street to make sure the coast was clear, sang the only pirate song I knew, and set my cardboard boat back down on the sea of muddy water.

"Shove off, matey" I shout, holding onto the side of the box and stepping in.

My ship wobbles as it shoots out to the middle of the murky pool. A big grin spreads across my face as the box sits still for a minute. I sit back and that's when I notice the bottom of the carton turning from tan to dark brown. My eyes widen as brown water starts to seep in through the seam. I shift up to kneeling and paddle madly as cocoa trickles through the sides of the waterlogged cardboard. My mouth drops open as cold water strikes my knees and spreads up my thighs.

"Glug-glug-glug" goes the boat as it sinks straight to the bottom of the two-and-a-half foot pool.

"Nice day for a swim" laughs Beat walking down Tea Street toward home.

"Don't tell" I plead, dripping muddy water as I slog out of the puddle.

She just keeps walking.

I slink into the lilac bush and squat down, soggy to the shoulders from my shipwreck.

"What am I gonna do, what am I gonna do, what am I gonna do" I chant, shivering in the suddenly chill late afternoon.

"Stay here and you'll be dry before he gets home" whispers the lilac, answering my fear of an irritable father with a wide leather belt.

Chapter 3: The Worst of Times

“Ahma count to ten and then I’ll run ya over” growls a burly bearded guy in pumpkin colored coveralls in front of puffs of dark smoke belching from the idling bulldozer.

Six-year-old Beulah just crosses her arms, purses her lips, and stares up at him with piercing blue eyes, pressing her skinny back against the rough bark of the first and biggest of the pear trees.

“What’s that dozer doing on Tea Street?” asked Blaine flopping into his seat at the head of the dinner table after getting home late from football practice.

“Taking down those pear trees tomorrow” replied Dad from his customary chair at the window side of our cramped table.

The kitchen fell silent for a few minutes as Blaine wolfed down his mashed potatoes and gravy before diving into a hunk of cubed steak.

“Ahh” moaned Beat downing her glass of milk and standing up from her seat by the door.

She raised her eyebrows to catch my and Beulah’s attention and then moved her eyes to the left and down to tell us to meet downstairs.

“I’ve gotta go to the bathroom” groaned Beulah a few minutes later, unfurling her legs from the chair by the stove and sliding out behind Mom.

I waited a few seconds and then ran for it, grabbing a couple of chocolate chip cookies on the way.

“All the kids are gonna block the bulldozer” Beat whispered, her brunette bangs leaning forward with her.

"How do we know when to go?" Beulah whispered back.

"Get up early and listen for the engine."

I just nodded but felt my belly tighten up on those cookies.

"Okay ya little trouble maker, I'm gonna call the cops" shouts the big guy from up on the still idling bulldozer.

"Honey, it's time to go home" suggests an older man wearing a yellow hardhat stepping out from behind a pickup truck over on the dirt road beside the lilac bush.

A single tear slides down Beulah's cheek as she uncrosses her arms, lays her hands on the craggy trunk, and looks up at the arching branches one last time. Then she trudges home, turning only to see her old friend shudder and then tilt, slowly leaning, leaning, leaning into the next tree in line.

Chapter 4: A Far, Far Better Thing

"Oh" gasps my kindergarten teacher with dark eyebrows raised and eyes widened as she looks down at me wedged into a box at the bottom of the rec room stairs.

"Stuck" I manage, wiggling my feet and hands sticking up out of the cardboard carton I had just tumbled down the steps in with a failed sledding attempt.

She was making an unannounced Saturday house call to show my parents a picture I had drawn in class. The assignment had been to color what we liked best about the field trip to Swift's farm. There was much to see for town kids at the high school principal's farm up in the Washington Valley between First and Second Watchung. The old red barn smelled of hay and horses, and I scratched the long nose of an old mare leaning out of her stall. We ran through a maze of dried corn stalks and stomped over a mushy pumpkin patch. Then Mrs. Swift passed out apple cider and oatmeal cookies with a kind smile. But the most interesting thing to me was a dead hawk lying in a bed of straw behind the barn.

The big bird looked lonely in my crayon drawing with its talons sticking up from the center of the cream colored paper. So I surrounded it with a tangled mass of dead pear trees. Then I added the heads of neighborhood kids sticking up from gaps in the pile along with a few big black birds circling overhead.

On the day of pear tree destruction everyone had stayed inside trying not to hear the rumble of tractors and buzz of chainsaws. The next morning word quickly spread that the trees had been taken to a swampy area behind the houses at the other end of the block. Groups of kids climbed into the pile, braving swarming yellow jackets drawn to the sweet smelling pear mash. Beat, Beulah, and I claimed a small chamber with three exposed branches for seats. Above the buzz of the wasps,

we could hear whispers from other hidden pockets in the trees and caws from nearby trees. We spent the day reclaiming our lost pear trees until the Calco whistle at quarter to five signaled the end of day shift and the other kids started filing out for home. When it was finally silent, Beat climbed out and I followed, leaving Beulah alone as the big black birds flapped down to the pyre.

That night at dinner Beat announced that Jerry Januzzi had seen a snake deep in the pile. Our mother forbade us to go back, which normally wouldn't have stopped us. But this time I was glad for an excuse to stay away from that snake pit. A few weeks later puffs of white smoke smelling faintly of pear billowed over the neighborhood, masking the red and yellow maple leaves on the last day of Indian summer.

"Let me help you out" my teacher offers, a smile spreading across her face with each step down the stairs. "You were just playing in that box, right?"

"Yeah, it's a bumpy hill" I nod pointing to the steps.

"What were all those children doing in your drawing of the hawk?"

"Saying goodbye."