

Erskine Caldwell



With All My Might

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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CALDWELL

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for Virginia

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Chapter One

MY ACTUAL RECOLLECTIONS OF earliest childhood—some particulars still vague and others glowingly vivid—did not have a beginning until sometime between my second and third birthdays. All else until then is hearsay.

Prior to that indeterminate age, according to my mother's often told tales, there were some incidents in the beginning of my existence which I wish I had the ability to recall.

It is possible that first-hand knowledge of such happenings would lead to speculations of some significance in the events that followed in my life. In fact, during most of my adult years I have often sought signs and manifestations from the past that might enable me to make wise decisions that would lead to personal happiness or, at the other extreme, to avoid damaging disaster. This has brought me to wonder if our entire life is spent in a subconscious search for that mysterious lost phase of existence.

When I was a babe in arms—what follows here of course is according to my mother's own recollections and recounted on occasion by her with delight in the presence of family or strangers alike—then it was that I was said to have rebelled against being held in arms and restrained in any manner. As a result, I always struggled free and proceeded to crawl

on the church floor during my father's Sunday sermon.

While tolerated by some members of the congregation and severely criticized by others, my freedom to wander at will was undoubtedly aided and abetted by the permissiveness of my parents. My father, for his part, believed that forcibly constraining a small boy-baby was a denial of freedom of action and stifled the growth of independence. The reason for my mother's acquiescence was not made known although it may be presumed that she was glad to be relieved of the hopeless task of trying to confine me.

It was said that my tireless crawling on hands and knees, performed in silence and without causing disconcerting sounds at the outset, took me up and down the aisles, under row after row of the straight-back pews, and even to the pulpit where my father stood while conducting the service.

My conduct was disturbing enough during a religious service, but there was another phase of my permissive wanderings under the pews that was understandably even more of an annoyance to the congregation of more than a hundred men, women, and children. After exploring the whole width and breadth of the church floor, my next objective was the tickling of the bare legs of the small girls in short dresses whose dangling feet were a tempting lure. For whatever reason, the legs of the boys were usually left untouched. And as might be expected, the ticklish little girls often giggled or shrieked so loudly that my father would have to pause in the delivery of his sermon until silence could be restored throughout the church.

After a season, there came the time when, still with no recollection of my own, my career as a crawler was abruptly ended with my advancement to the stage of a beginning toddler. Soon, with the experience then of one who had taken a few tottering steps without incident, I ventured all the way across the kitchen to the cooking stove. There, flushed with accomplishment and in a moment of eagerness, my fateful introduction to the toddling stage of life was signified by my tipping over a large pan of boiling grease at the glowing-hot iron stove. The flesh-searing liquid spilled down my chest and over my stomach with the burning of my body deep under the skin that was to leave lifelong scars and wales.

Following an extended period of surgical and medical treatment, the local doctor said to my parents, as quoted by my mother, that he had feared from the outset that I would never recover from such a damaging accident at my tender age.

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“This child must have been intended by the Good Lord to live for some worthwhile purpose,” the doctor had said, “because otherwise he would have been dead by now.”

At this stage in life, having survived the likelihood of a fatal injury, though still without the benefit of remembrance, it would be necessary to rely completely upon hearsay in order to be confident that actually I had been born and was a native of the land. Reliance on hearsay was necessary for a long time because there was no provision in effect for recording births by the county or state.

Consequently, I was never able to obtain an official birth certificate. The lack of such a document was of no concern to me until many years later. Then it was, in order to fulfill the requirements for obtaining a passport from the Department of State for travel abroad, that I looked in all directions for possible help for my cause. The doctor who had attended my mother at my birth and later treated my burns had been dead for a number of years. All the few neighbors had died or moved to places unknown. Moreover, my parents had moved from place to place in intervals of two or three years during my youth and nobody could be found to attest to the fact that I was known to have come into the world.

Fortunately, in the end, the United States Bureau of the Census determined, after lengthy and diligent search, that I had in fact been officially enumerated in the census of 1910 with legal name, known parentage, and place and date of birth.

And so here and now it can be stated with sufficient authority that I was born on December 17, 1903, in a three-room manse in the pine-and-cotton country of the White Oak community near the village of Moreland, Coweta County, State of Georgia.

My father was Ira Sylvester Caldwell, an Associate Reformed Presbyterian minister, and my mother was Caroline Bell Caldwell, formerly a teacher of English and Latin in seminaries and colleges for girls and young women in the Carolinas and Virginia. At the time of my birth, my father was pastor of the White Oak A. R. P. Church and was paid a yearly salary of three hundred and fifty dollars. He had been born in North Carolina where his father was a cotton farmer. My mother was a native of Virginia and the daughter of a railroad telegrapher. Each of my parents had six brothers and sisters. I was the only child of my parents.

At the age of three, I was old enough to have my first playmate and, according to my father's wish, was permitted to play outside our house without supervision by a parent. In our rural neighborhood of widely-scattered families, both black and white, my only playmate was a chubby-faced mulatto boy of my own age whose parents were sharecroppers living in a one-room log cabin on an adjoining tenant farm.

Whatever my playmate's real name may have been, it always sounded to me like "Bisco". Even years later when I wrote about him at length in a book with the title of *In Search of Bisco*, I was still in doubt about his actual given name and had to speculate that it may have been Brisco or Frisco or perhaps derived from the cookie with the brand name of Nabisco.

During the next two years following our first meeting, Bisco and I played almost daily in summer and winter alike with only minor disruptions in friendship. When disagreements did occur, they would last only momentarily and then disappeared completely after a casual shove or nudge of the elbow by either one of us. A slight shove or nudge was the gesture that indicated all was forgiven and that no hurt feelings had been engendered.

Our favorite pastime was friendly rough-and-tumble wrestling. Our tussling usually lasted for several hours of tireless activity during the day and took place on a sandy patch of ground between our two houses in fair weather and on the sandy earth under the elevated breezeway of my house on rainy days. Often when we wrestled, cockleburrs or sawdust or weedchaff would cling to Bisco's close-cropped kinky black hair and he had a habit of calling quits long enough to brush the annoying burrs and chaff from his head with quick flailing motions of his hands as if fighting gnats and mosquitoes.

Both Bisco and I would grunt and groan with exaggerated sounds of effort while trying to get a better hold. With no rules to guide us, nevertheless first one and then the other would acknowledge defeat or claim victory. And, willingly taking turns of winning and losing as we did, at no time was there a flaring of anger to lead to painful blows and gouging. Without words spoken at the end of day, it was as if actually we had said we were pleased with our friendly wrestling and looked forward to the coming of the next day for another bout between us.

There came a time when there was a change in our routine of play, however, and this was when long before nightfall of a cold and rainy day in early autumn that Bisco began shivering and said he wanted to stop playing and

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not wanting to leave Bisco and have to go into my house before it was dark, I followed him up the long path to his house. Once before I had followed him home and on that occasion his mother had taken me down the path to where my mother was anxiously waiting for me. This time I hoped I could stay with Bisco and not be sent home.

There were blazing pine logs in the fireplace when we got to the small cabin on the hillside and Bisco's mother took us both to the brick hearth and told us to sit there in the warmth and glow of the fire until all our shivering had stopped.

Presently, since it was soon to be Bisco's suppertime, she brought each of us a large tin cup filled with steaming-hot collard pot-likker and, to share between us, a big plate of sliced chitterling bread. When we had finished drinking the pot-likker and eating all the chitterling bread we could, Bisco's mother sat down in her rocking chair and lifted both of us to her broad lap. She was a large, wide-hipped, ample-fleshed woman with a beaming smile and glowing mulatto coloring. She usually wore a brightly-colored shawl during most of the year and her gleaming black hair was always in a long braid dangling down her back.

As she held Bisco in a tight embrace while tucking his bare feet against her stomach for warmth, with her other arm she drew me into the soft cushion of her bosom. Soon after that she began singing as though to herself while swaying slowly in her rocking chair. Drowsy in the warmth of the cabin and lulled by the soft sounds of her voice, I must have been wondering if anywhere else there could be another place as cozy and comforting as the cradle of her warm and gently heaving bosom.

Presently, in the flickering firelight, Bisco's mother left me in the rocking chair and placed him on the quilt-covered bed. He had already fallen asleep while she was undressing him for the night and that was when I began taking off my clothes so I could get under the covers with him. While I was still struggling to get undressed, there was a loud knocking on the cabin door and I recognized my father's voice when he called to me a moment later.

A shivering blast of cold night air came into the room when my father walked inside even though he had quickly closed the door behind him. His dark thick hair had been tousled in the wind and his coat collar had been turned up for protection against the coldness. He held a kerosene lantern that swung back and forth in his hand as he came across the room to me in the rocking chair.

What my father was telling me when he reached for my hand and drew

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me to my feet was that it was late and time for me to go home. I may have thought he would scold me for being in Bisco's house without permission, as my mother had done previously, but all he said was that it was nighttime and getting colder outside and that my mother was worried about my not being at home.

Carrying me tightly in his arm and holding the swinging lantern with his other hand, he went down the long path in the darkness of the windy night with eerie shadows cast by the lantern light suddenly looming on all sides and then quickly disappearing from sight. At first, I must have been frightened by the weird display of the shadowy shapes and figures, but I tightened my arms around my father's neck and all fear quickly vanished. After that I was glad he had come for me and was taking me to the warmth of home where I would soon be in my own familiar bed.

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When I was six years old, and certainly with little more than a vague comprehension of what was to follow, I was told by my parents that we were going to pack all our clothes into suitcases and leave the house where I had been born and go on a long trip on a train to a new home.

My immediate reaction, which became a lengthy one not easily endured, must have been one of overwhelming agony, because it brought tears to my eyes day after day. My acute unhappiness had nothing to do with the fact that I was to be taken away from my birthplace and the only home I had ever known. Instead, I was in a state of abject misery because I feared I was going to be parted forever from my friend Bisco.

Soon the day came when we were to leave on our trip by train from Georgia to South Carolina. All our clothing and other belongings had been packed into three large suitcases and two trunks while the small amount of furniture and kitchenwares had been left for the use of the next pastor and his family to live in the manse. One of the members of my father's congregation had arranged to take us in his two-horse serry to the railroad station in Moreland a few miles away.

It was midmorning of a mild spring day with large, billowy, white clouds in the sky when we were ready to leave in the serry. Early in the evening before, Bisco's mother had come to our house to help my mother cook a small

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picnic meal to take with us for eating on the train during our trip. They had prepared my father's favorite food, and which I liked more than any other. This consisted of biscuit-and-sausage-patty sandwiches and small wedge-shaped fried pies. Both apple and peach fried pies had been made and, together with the sausage sandwiches, our picnic meal was carried in a sturdy shoe box with a heavy cord to secure it.

As we drove away in the surrey with the horses trotting almost silently down the soft sand-clay road and, while our small, unpainted, plank-sided house was slowly disappearing from sight, I looked back and saw Bisco standing beside our mail box waving good-by with his hand held high above his head. As long as I could see Bisco, I waved to him. And even after we had gone around a curve of the road and he could no longer be seen, I kept on waving good-by for a while. Presently, with no tears in my eyes, all I could do was stare blankly at the roadside in my loneliness with the feeling that the sorrow of parting would never end.

My sadness was soon to vanish, however. The moment we were within sight of the Moreland railroad station and, hearing the sound of a switching engine on a sidetrack, I became so excited that all I could think about was that I was going to ride on a train to a strange place somewhere far away.

There and then I felt for the first time the call of the unknown beyond the horizon. In all my life thereafter, even though not every result came to be as joyous as the prospect had been in the beginning, a journey by train, automobile, steamship, or airplane was never to become commonplace.

On this day in the farm-country village of Moreland, where the railroad station stood gleaming in the sunlight like a small castle newly colored with bright yellow paint, the faint whistle of the train that was to carry us to Atlanta on the first part of our trip to South Carolina was heard in the distance. Just as the train came around the bend, the steam whistle of the locomotive blasting its arrival, the stationmaster pulled on the long chain of the red-painted semaphore board high above the station to signal the engineer to stop for passengers. The thundering monster, looming bigger and more threatening each moment, looked as if it would sweep us from the earth.

Suddenly, with the screeching of brakes and a loud hissing of steam, the monstrous engine trailing a mail-express-baggage car, a coach for black passengers, and a similar coach for white people came to a jarring stop at the station platform. Nobody left the train, but several mail sacks and express packages were unloaded.

As my parents and I hurried from the waiting room to board the train, I

could see our three suitcases and two trunks being loaded on the baggage car. While we were still in the aisle of the passenger coach, the train started with a violent jerk at the same time that the steam whistle blew several times in quick succession.

We stayed in the Atlanta railroad station for almost six hours waiting for the train that would take us to Greenville, South Carolina. The waiting-room seats were hard wooden benches and for row after row they looked like the pews in the White Oak Church. While we waited through the afternoon, my father bought bottles of milk and a large sack of red apples for us so we could save our biscuit-and-sausage sandwiches and fried fruit pies for our supper on the train to Greenville.

Our train left at dusk while the lights of the city began twinkling on both sides of the passenger coach. The train ran faster and faster as it left the city and the sound of the *click-clacking* of the wheels on the rail joints was much louder than had been made by the short three-car train from Moreland to Atlanta. The steam whistle on our train of many cars was much louder than the earlier one and it was blown longer and more often at road crossings as we passed through numerous small towns in the night.

I could not stay awake very long after eating so much for supper and I soon went to sleep on the prickly red-plush seat. During the night, I woke up only a few times when the screaming whistle of the engine filled the coach with its sounds of urgent warning.

It was barely in the light of dawn when we arrived in Greenville and went into the station waiting room to stay until our train to Prosperity, South Carolina, was ready to leave at eight o'clock that morning.

I remember well hearing my father say there would not be a barbershop open nearly in time for him to get a shave and that he wished he would not have to arrive as the new pastor of the church in Prosperity looking like Bluebeard. My mother made light of his appearance by saying he could not make himself any more handsome than he was by patronizing a barbershop in Greenville or anywhere else. My father smiled at my mother but said nothing in reply.