

Coming Soon: *Buck's Junction*, a riveting new novel by Jill Smith Entrekin. Keep reading for a sneak peek!

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The summer of 1960 turned out to be the best and the worst summer of my nearly ten years on this earth. It was just two weeks before my tenth birthday when me and my cousin Lonnie came up with the best idea yet to make the train stop. Of course, it wasn't the first time we'd tried to make the train stop; we'd been trying to slow it down for the last year ever since Lonnie and his mama, my Aunt Loony, had come to live with us.

Maybe I should go back to the beginning and explain how Lonnie came to live with us. I'd lived in Buck Creek Junction all my life, but Lonnie and his mama had just moved back a year earlier after she left my Uncle Elwood Barker because he stayed drunk all the time. I really didn't remember Uncle Elwood or my aunt or even my cousin Lonnie because I'd been about three years old when my uncle upped and moved the whole family off to Texas where he was gonna get a job on an oil rig. Every year since then, the family had moved someplace different. Lonnie had lived in seven different states, and he was just a year older than me.

Like I said, I really didn't remember any of the Barkers even though they were my blood kin, but I'd heard stories about them since I was old enough to understand what Mama and Daddy were whispering about at night after they thought I was asleep in the bedroom right beside theirs. The walls are so thin in our old house I can hear everything that goes on in their bed at night. Sometimes I cover my ears with my pillow when I hear them talking love talk. But on nights when they get to fussing, I tune in to every word.

One night about a year ago when I was supposed to be asleep, I heard Mama and Daddy finishing up their usual go to bed routine. When Mama cleared her throat and began, "Honey, I need to tell you something," my ears perked up. Those words were a dead giveaway that Mama was gonna make Daddy mad. "I got a collect call from my sister today," Mama explained.

"What's that sorry sonnabitch done now?" Daddy growled in his deep voice.

"Now, Walter, that's no way to talk about your brother," Mama argued.

"That no-count bastard ain't but half my brother, and I know my daddy's rolling over in his grave every time he thinks about my mama marrying old man Barker. If I'd been home and not off fighting the damn Krauts, I would've stopped that union. Worst yet, I bet my daddy does somersaults when he realizes that mama actually had sex with old man Barker and made the sorriest son ever seen on this earth. No wonder she died long before her time. I'd want to die too if I'd given birth to that fool."

“Walter, hush your mouth. Remember that your half-brother Elwood happens to be married to my baby sister, and she’s in trouble!”

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that actually me and Lonnie are double first cousins on account of the fact that my daddy’s half brother married my mama’s sister.

“Hell, Cora Mae, your sister’s been in trouble since the first time she laid eyes on that jackass. No wonder ya’ll call her Loony. Only a lunatic would marry Elwood.” Their bed squeaked as Daddy sat down on its edge to take off his watch, wedding ring, and glasses to place them inside his nightstand drawer. I knew he was about to light up one last cigarette for the night. I could smell the sulfur from the match as it floated out their open window and into mine.

Mama’s side of the bed squeaked likewise as she sat on the edge to rub Jergen’s lotion on her hands and elbows, a bedtime ritual I’d witnessed for as long as I could remember. “Her real name is Lunelle, I’ll have you know! I can’t help it that her childhood nickname has stayed with her all these years.”

I even knew how Aunt Loony earned her nickname. When she was a little girl she was always trying to train wild critters to do tricks. Mama, who was ten years older than my aunt, labeled her a lunatic after Aunt Lunelle tied a piece of twine around a baby chick’s neck so that she could teach it to dance. There were two sisters and a brother in between Mama and Aunt Lunelle, and they all started calling her a lunatic and a loony, and then Uncle L.T., who was just a year older than Aunt Lunelle started chanting, “Lunelle’s a loony-bird, Lunelle’s a loony-bird,” and after a while the name just stuck. I never understood why Aunt Loony named Lonnie after Uncle L.T., whose full name is Londelle Tyrone. I guess my aunt didn’t mind being tortured by her big brother. No wonder my Uncle L.T. went by his initials now that he was a grown man. Thank the Lord, my Aunt Looney had enough sense to shorten “Londelle” to “Lonnie” for my cousin.

I heard my mama sigh as her side of the bed squeaked again. “God help that girl. She’s been trying to train wild things all her life. I always figured that’s why she married Elwood. She thought she’d be able to tame him.”

Then Daddy switched off the lamp on his night stand. “You know there’s always a place for Lunelle and the boy,” he grumbled in that gentle tone he saved just for Mama. “As long as that sorry ass isn’t with them.”

Two weeks later Aunt Loony called from the bus station five miles up the road in Braxton to say that she’d left Uncle Elwood for the last time and that she and Lonnie needed a place to stay. My daddy drove up there to pick them up while Mama put clean sheets on the bed in our third bedroom at the other end of the hall from mine. The room had once belonged to my brother Henry, but he’d been killed on his way home with a weekend pass from the navy before I was even born. The day they buried Henry, my mama realized she was pregnant with me. She

was almost forty at the time, and Daddy was already forty-five. My daddy, who by then had started *Madigan Monuments*, never wanted me to feel unwelcome. So he'd had Henry's tombstone engraved with these words: "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away."

I remember while Daddy was gone to the bus station watching Mama plump up pillows on the unused bed. "So, will Lonnie and Aunt Loony sleep in here?" I'd asked curiously.

Mama pulled up the blinds and opened the one window in the room. "Walt, I was thinking maybe Lonnie could bunk with you for a while. Aunt Lunelle will need a little more space and some privacy. What do you say?" She wrapped her arms around me and rubbed the top of my crew cut. I knew she was serious when she called me by my given name instead of "Buck."

When I was about three, I had this old broomstick horse and a cowboy hat. I'd spend all day riding that horse around the backyard and pretending to shoot at injuns. One afternoon when Daddy caught a glimpse of me trotting around on my horse, he'd yelled out, "Well, there's my Buck Creek buckaroo." As I got older and started to school, Daddy shortened my nickname to Buck so it didn't sound so babyish.

When Mama was being serious, she'd use my real name. I didn't want to share my room with anybody, but I never could say no to my mama 'cause she loved me more than anything in this world. "Okay, I guess," I muttered half-heartedly.

By the time Daddy got back from the station with Aunt Looney and Lonnie, and Mama fed them a late supper, it was time for bed. In all the commotion, we forgot to tell Lonnie about the train. The Buck Creek Boogie made two runs a day through the Junction. The first was at 2:00 A.M., and even though the engineer blew the whistle and the roar of the train shook our house, the noise and vibration never bothered my sleep. That first night my cousin slept with me, the train came by as usual and shook the whole house and made the curtains blow in and out. Poor Lonnie sat straight up in the bed and started screaming, "It's the Russians: it's the Russians. They're attacking. Get under the bed!"

It took Mama and Daddy to reassure him that it was just the train. Aunt Looney, hugging Lonnie's sweaty head to her big chest to calm him down, suggested they ask the engineer to forego blowing the whistle when he passed by. Daddy squelched that recommendation immediately. "Aww Lunelle, don't you remember Preston Ward, that drunkard harelip that works at the picture show?"

Aunt Loony giggled. "I forgot all about that. Well, I guess they won't agree then to silencing that whistle," and she'd winked at me.

Lonnie was wide awake after our folks headed back to bed. "What was all that about the whistle?" he wanted to know.

I propped my head up on my folded arms. “I didn’t know the story until one Saturday last year when Mama let me and Dwayne Eason go to the picture show without her to see John Wayne in *The Alamo*. Mr. Ward walks up and down the aisles with a flashlight during the movie, and if he thinks you’re being too noisy, he’ll kick you out. Me and Dwayne hadn’t said a word, but Mr. Ward threw us out before the previews were even over. We didn’t even get to see the new *Road Runner* cartoon. Dwayne and me had to hang around the outside of the show until it was time for Mama to pick us up. When I told her what happened, she was mad as a wet hen. We got back home, and she went next door to Daddy’s office at the monument company, and then he had a fit, too. He grabbed his hat, hopped in his pickup, and squealed his tires and slung gravel all down the driveway on his way out. Anyways, when he got home, he told me Mr. Ward wouldn’t be bothering me anymore.

“That’s all Daddy said. So, I asked Mama why Mr. Ward had it in for me and what made Daddy so mad. It turns out that when I was just a baby, I had the colic real bad. Mama would rock me and walk the floor with me half the night, and just about the time she’d get me settled down and to sleep, the train would roar by and the whistle would start me to crying again. So, Daddy asked Mr. Arthur Pruitt, the Junction’s depot manager, if he’d get the engineers to stop blowing the whistle when they came by our house in the middle of the night, and Mr. Pruitt agreed. Mama said that everything went okay for about a week until the next Saturday night when Ole Man Ward got drunk and pulled his car up to the crossing about half a mile down the road from here. He fell asleep, and the train came by and dragged his car a mile down the tracks before the engineer could get it stopped. Mr. Ward didn’t have a scratch on him but for the windshield busting and a piece of glass shaving his upper lip right off him. He claimed it was because the whistle didn’t blow, but everybody knew he was drunk as a skunk.”

Lonnie got so tickled and then got me so tickled that we both had to pinch off our goobers and run to the bathroom. It took Daddy threatening us with the belt if we didn’t settle down. “Maybe we can go to the picture show next Saturday. I can’t wait to get a look at Mr. Ward,” he whispered as we both drifted off to sleep.

Anyways, Lonnie and me had been best friends since that night. He was a year older than me, had blonde hair and blue eyes and long wiry arms that could grab hold to a higher branch than I could when we’d climb Miss Minnie Reed’s low-limbed oak tree next door. I was short and stocky and had dark hair and eyes just like my great-grandmother who’d been a Cherokee Indian. It didn’t matter that we looked so different especially when me and Lonnie joined forces against the Buck Creek Boogie.

Every afternoon at 3:10 on the dot, the Boogie would roar through Buck Creek, and every afternoon Lonnie and me would chase behind it on our bicycles. Just past Miss Minnie’s house, the train had to pull a hill, and the engineer always poured on the coal to get it going faster to make it up that incline. No matter how hard we pedaled, even Lonnie with his long legs, we never could keep up with the old Boogie. Lonnie was fascinated by that train, and he got the

idea that we should try to slow the old Boogie down so that we could finally catch it. We'd tried everything from rocks to branches to some old busted tires we'd found out in the woods in hopes that the train would stall out. But it didn't.

Then one night after we'd caught our allotment of lightning bugs and got bored of sitting on the back porch watching them light up in the mayonnaise jar where we stored them, Lonnie announced, "Catching lightning bugs is girl stuff. I wanna catch something bigger."

"We've still got the old Boogie to catch." I unscrewed the jar's lid and freed our yellow-striped prisoners. "Maybe we've been going about it all wrong. Maybe we need to stop putting things between the ties and start putting something on the rails themselves."

"Hmm," Lonnie remarked. "You might be right. If we greased up the rails, the train wouldn't be able to make it up that hill on the other side of Miss Minnie's house."

An idea had been born. That Saturday afternoon while Daddy was off delivering a tombstone to somebody in the next county and Mama had gone up to get her hair done at Miz Elmira's *Cut and Curl* where Aunt Looney worked, Lonnie and I searched for all things greasy in Mama's kitchen. I found two sticks of butter and a half jar of mayonnaise in the refrigerator while Lonnie discovered a can of Crisco shortening in Mama's pantry.

We headed to the tracks behind Miss Minnie's house. The track made a sharp curve at this point, so we knew we wouldn't be seen from the monument company if Daddy got back. By the time we'd slathered the rails with all the grease we had, it was almost 1:45, but we fell short about ten yards of having enough slippery rail.

"Aw shoot, we're out of lard." Lonnie peered into the empty Crisco can. "Whadda we gonna do now, Buck?"

We heard the train's whistle blow as it headed out of Braxton and down towards the Junction. "Mama's lotion! Wait here, Lonnie, I'll be right back."

I sprinted down the track and was taking the back porch steps two at a time when I heard a car horn blow from the gravel drive that divided our house and the monument company. It was then that I remembered Daddy telling me to keep an ear out for any customers because he was taking old Mose, the colored man who helped him, along to lift the tombstone out of the truck.

I ran in Mama and Daddy's bedroom, grabbed a half-full Jergen's bottle from Mama's night table, and stuck it in my pocket. I heard the train's whistle and knew it was rounding the curve less than a mile away. I made the decision to run back to the tracks with the lotion and then return to check on Daddy's customer. A large Buick with an out-of-state license plate was sitting in front of the brick building that served as Daddy's office. A tall, wiry man wearing a

shiny suit and smoking a cigarette was leaning against the car as its motor idled. He'd have to wait.

I made it back to the rails with two minutes to spare. I squirted lotion on the rails while Lonnie rubbed it in. We had just enough to do the job. With seconds left, we jumped behind a mess of honeysuckle vines and waited. At first, we thought the old Boogie would make it up the hill, but when the second set of wheels hit the Crisco, they spun like a car stuck in mud. We watched the engineer screaming into his hand-held radio, and we slapped each other's hands in victory. The junction, where freight was picked up and delivered, lay half a mile further down the rails. In a few minutes, one of those little one-man trolleys pulled in front of the train's engine.

I saw Mr. Pruitt, the depot manager, jump out with a shovel and a pail of sand. It took him and the engineer ten minutes to get enough traction to get the train moving, all the time Mr. Pruitt and the engineer cussing and fussing about what the hell was on those rails. Lonnie and I almost busted a gut when Mr. Pruitt scratched his head and remarked, "I don't know what this shit is, but I'll be damn if some of it don't smell good."

As the train began its slow ascent up the slight incline, I remembered Daddy's customer. "Oh crap!" I took off running with Lonnie right behind me. As usual his long stride caught my short one as he raced around me, but when he reached our gravel drive, Lonnie's bare feet skidded to a halt. By the time I caught up with him, his hands were shaking and the color had drained from his face.

The man leaning against the Buick blew a smoke circle in the air and grinned. "Well, hello Lonnie. Don't you have a hug for your daddy? And where's your mama? "

It was Uncle Elwood.

Lonnie hesitated a second too long. Uncle Elwood finished his cigarette, threw it down on the gravel, and ground it in with his fancy cowboy boot. "Boy, don't you know to answer me when I'm speaking to you?" he snarled as he took a step towards Lonnie.

Lonnie stared at his stubbed big toe. "Um, Mama's at work."

"Well, now, she done got her a job. She won't be needing it no more when she hears my news."

Lonnie had yet to make eye contact with his daddy. I could understand why. He had a mean look about him, and even from three feet away, I could smell the whiskey on his breath. He pulled another cigarette from the pack in his pocket, lit it, and took a long drag from it while he surveyed the monument company. Then, he noticed me. "You must be my brother's boy. I ain't seen you since you wuz just a baby."

I swallowed. Mama and Daddy had taught me to be polite when an adult asked me a question. “Yessir, I’m Walter Madigan, but most everybody calls me Buck.”

Uncle Elwood grunted, took another drag from his cigarette, and blew a smoke ring into the hot August air. “Yep, I remember they named you after your daddy. Where is that sonnabitch anyway?” he grinned.

Lonnie took more offense to hearing my daddy called a sonnabitch than I did. His head came up and he looked Uncle Elwood straight in the eye. “Don’t call Uncle Walter that!” Lonnie glared at his daddy.

Uncle Elwood took two more steps towards Lonnie, but Lonnie folded his arms and stood his ground. Then Uncle Elwood started unbuckling his belt, and I saw the muscles flinch in Lonnie’s jaw. “You know better than to talk to me like that, you sorry little fart. I can tell your Uncle Walter’s been letting you get away with being impudent. Get over here, boy; it’s way past time I taught you a lesson. “

Lonnie didn’t move, but I could see his jaw working and his legs shaking.

“Git on over here, boy, and take your medicine like a man. Or you might grow up to be a pussy like your Uncle Walter.” He grinned straight at me when he used the word *pussy*.

“You can’t call my daddy names like that!” I heard myself say before I could stop the words from spilling out.

The next thing I knew, Uncle Elwood grabbed me by my t-shirt and began pulling me towards him. “I guess I’ll have to teach both of you a lesson.”

With super-human strength, Lonnie snatched me out of Uncle Elwood’s hold and pushed me behind him. “I’m the one that needs the whoopin’, not him. So go ahead and get on with it.”

Uncle Elwood licked his lips, folded his belt in half, and slapped it on his open left palm. “Maybe I’ll make a real man out of you yet, you little pussy.” He seemed to have forgotten me as he grabbed Lonnie by his skinny neck and pushed him up against the Buick.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of Daddy’s old pickup as its tires hit the gravel drive. Uncle Elwood saw it was Daddy, too, and relaxed his hold on Lonnie. “Well, I guess your punishment will hafta wait, son. I need to talk to my brother. You two run on and play now.”

The color returned to Lonnie’s face as his daddy strolled down to the pickup.

Check back soon for more details about *Buck’s Junction*.