

*Chapter 2 of Love Is Where You Find It*

*Time: 1956; Place: Towson < MD*

**The Trestle**

Kneeling on his bed, nine-year-old Miller Nowaki cut out the date on the front page of the *Baltimore Sun*, October 8, 1956, marking the 8<sup>th</sup> day since his brush with the Grim Reaper. He pasted it to the bedroom wall, alongside the seven other dates. Miller viewed the passage of time like the planets circling the sun. It varied, sometimes short, sometimes long. How long was a year on Jupiter? Glenn called him “dumb” for messing up the wall. Miller ignored Big Brother. He’d do what he wanted with time.

Wish it was still summer. He would be in his usual shady position, cross-legged on the grass, hunched over the chess board, playing beneath the branches of Big Guy, his name for the oak ruling the quadrangle of two-story, brick apartment buildings. Dad had introduced him to chess at Christmas. He took to it right away. Now Dad couldn’t touch him. Sweet! Miller had become a master at maneuvering knights, thinking five to ten moves ahead.

Funny, he saw himself as a windy boy, an anxious boy, but no fidgeting playing chess. Sometimes he’d be so deep into a conflict that he couldn’t hear Mom calling him home for dinner. Like a gunslinger, he took on all comers in the quad: the Chowder boys, Gill and Tag in the East Building, three of the six Eckert kids in the North Building, even Mister Sheer, known as “Streetcar Man,” who saluted him as “Little Napoleon” after several losses. Preening like a peacock around that big ass oak, Miller drew a rare laugh from this sad-face man. Dad said that sadness had something to do with the Korean War.

Miller loved Whispering Pines, home to steelworkers, cab drivers, cops, lawyers, teachers and vets, like Dad, who ran Marines to shore in the South Pacific. Best of all, it was home to lots of kids.

He went to the bathroom, closed the door and stared out the window. He mourned the fallen giant, dead as a doornail. Not good seeing those chain saws slicing up the tree, home for bugs and birds. The quad now seemed naked. Big Guy left a hole in the North Building, not far from Apartment 3C, where Rusty, his number-one friend, lived with five sisters. Hurricane Flossy ripped Big Guy from the ground, tossing the oak through the brick wall with a sound that Dad likened to “incoming.” Betcha they were scared! Why’d they name hurricanes after girls? Why not name one after him?... *Hurricane Miller*. How cool would that be!

Miller zipped up his fly. On the tiles, he spotted a black ant. Where’d it come from? Where’s it going? He picked up the ant, dropped it into the yellow water and pulled the flush. ‘round and ‘round the creature spun. *What’d you do that for?* Ant never did anything to him... wasn’t that a venial sin, another smudge in the Baltimore Catechism milk bottle?

Banging on the door. “What you doin’?” yelled Big Brother Glenn. Miller opened the door and tried to escape his paws, but Glenn caught him by the arm and spun him around, tapping out a tune with his knuckles on Miller’s bushy red hair. “Hello to Earth!”

“Stop it.”

“Hey, pissar,” he said with a shove. “Take a look at the bedroom. Cross the line and...” He ran his finger across his neck.

Yep, Glenn had most definitely laid down the law. Miller eyed the chalk running down the middle of the red rug, dividing the bedroom into separate kingdoms. Everything had a place in Glenn’s world, Miller’s, not so much. Longingly he looked at the orderly space, the 45-record

player with the spindle holding the latest hits... didn't mean to get fingerprints on the records. No more Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, Elvis or Little Richard —'cept when Glenn's out. Then he'd have to be careful and put everything back where it was, 'specially the harmonica and turtle.

Monday had dawned clear and cool, a keen day for horsing around, playing army, Nazis versus Yanks, or king of the mountain on the grassy hill out front... or racing bikes across the country club golf course... lots of choices, even watching a praying mantis lay eggs on the screen would do... any place but that stuffy classroom, trapped with 33 other kids under Sister Clementine, dedicated to making his life miserable by calling on him whenever he gazed out the window, wishing to be a crow so he could fly away. Kids on the playground called him Squirmy... what's up, Squirmy? Pissing your pants?... they didn't know he was chess champion. Sitting at his desk in stuffy Room 4A was the worst, especially when he had to pee. Sister Clementine had him doing jumping jacks in the back of class instead of letting him go to the lavatory for the second time in an hour... led to an accident... shouldn't have drunk those cartons of chocolate milk after First Friday communion.

He clipped on his brown tie... might as well be handcuffs. He checked his nails for crud. Ready for inspection. Per the routine, breakfast dishes soaking in the sink, clock radio playing big band music, Mom behind the easel with her oil paints... wasn't fair, he wanted to stay home and paint too. "Okay, let me see you," she said.

The big band music ended. "Folks," said the WITH disc jockey, Johnny Dark, "that was Baltimore's own Cab Calloway singing St. James Infirmary. Uh oh, looks like Flossy did a number on Immaculate Conception elementary. It's closed for the day, due to flooding."

Glenn and Miller hopped about the living room. "Yay, Flossy!" Miller whooped, rubbing his arms over his starched white shirt till they burned.

“Miller’s washing his clothes again,” Glenn teased.

So what. He was free this Monday. Why couldn’t life be like kindergarten? You made friends, listened to stories, took naps and played on the monkey bars. Finger-painting was boss. It was okay to make a mess.

He traded his school shoes for PF flyers and khakis for dungarees; off went the shirt and tie; he threw on a faded blue sweatshirt, a hand-me-down from Glenn. Miller announced that he was going outside.

“Watch for cars,” his mother said from behind the easel. “No running out in the street between cars. If that man...”

“I know, Mom. I’ll be careful.”

Smoke curled up from the glass ashtray, her first Tiparillo of the day. He liked that his mom smoked Tiparillos; it set her apart. She slid away from the easel so she could give him what he called her “bad ass eye,” her Dundalk eye. She was a big woman, not fat, just big, with muscular forearms from working in the steel mill during the War. “You better, young man. Understand what I’m saying? You look distracted. Miller, you can’t be distracted when you cross a street. Look both ways. Promise?”

“Promise,” he said, closing the door, glad to be free of her glare. Mom did have a point. A week ago, after Sunday mass, he ran across Knollwood without looking... didn’t see the sports car. “What!” shrieked the driver. In slow motion, Miller watched himself fall backward... no time for an Act of Contrition... yet it seemed like minutes before that MG came to a screeching halt, inches from his face. Too stunned to move from the smoking tires, Miller saw his elongated reflection on the silver bumper. “You hurt?” the driver asked in a high-pitched voice. The car door swung open. Out plopped a black engineer boot. Miller scrambled to his feet, raced to the

other side of the road, and ducked around an apartment building. Returning home later (this time he did look both ways), he found the MG driver on the edge of the sofa, holding his leather cap. Miller recognized the goateed face: Mister Turnbaugh, English teacher at Towson Catholic High... lived in the South Building. He apologized for “disturbing their Sunday.” Mom thanked him for letting them know.

That was a long night. Dad’s spanking was bad enough, a few stinging swats with the hairbrush; Mom’s tears when she tucked him in hurt more. Worst was the dream of a car racing down a very wide road, coming right at him. Woke up in a cold sweat.

Miller bounded down the steps and trotted to the quadrangle in the back... His high tops slid over acorns. Rusty appeared at the second-story window and said he’d be right down, soon as he combed his hair. That could take minutes. On the stump, Miller sniffed the scent of cut wood... wonder if the roots in the ground were dead. Be weird not having Big Guy’s shade on hot days.

Rusty’s hand pounded Miller’s back. “Howdy, pardner!” he said, a perfect imitation of Chester in Gunsmoke. He had a gift for voicing TV characters. “What you say we mosey up to Towson... hang out with the drapes.” Rusty’s sole ambition in life was to be a drape, comb his hair like Elvis, and ride a motorcycle. Mister Eckert, who worked in the state’s attorney office, wasn’t thrilled with this direction, particularly the Vitalis haircut that came to a perfect ducktail. Said it made him look like a “hoodlum.” Through open windows, Mister Eckert’s angry voice boomed across the quadrangle.

At ten and a half, Rusty Eckert, Jr. was the tallest and oldest member of Sister Clementine’s fourth-grade class. He flunked second grade and had trouble reading. Miller did

what he could do to help his buddy. Rusty in turn protected him from the bullies in the neighborhood. A skinny kid with coke-bottle glasses was easy prey.

“What do you say we walk the tracks to Towson and grab the latest issue of *Mad* at Read’s drugstore.”

“You mean lift it?”

“I got coin today,” Rusty said, shaking the quarters in his pocket.

“Kazaam!” said Miller in agreement.

The railroad tracks, part of the MaPa line, ran a meandering 77 miles from Baltimore to York. They started the Black & Decker plant off Joppa Road. Aware of the possibility of a train, the boys quickly crossed the riverbed, stepping on the brown ties with little hesitation. They had taken this route before. They would end up above York Road in Towson, where the trestle stood, a barrier they had yet to conquer. Today felt different; they were ready for the trestle... just had to concentrate, one step at a time, like playing chess. You always want to know your best move before you take it.

Not far from their destination, they paused to observe the colored kids playing in the schoolyard. East Towson Elementary, three stories of a white cement at the end of Susquehanna Avenue, sported big windows and a rooftop garden... looked more inviting than Immaculate Prison. “Bet they get a longer recess,” Miller said.

A glass bottle exploded on the rail a few feet behind them. “Jesus!” cried Rusty. They took off, taking two ties at a time. Out of range, they slowed their pace.

“Someone’s having a bad day,” said Miller.

“No shit.”

Ahead, the trestle loomed, supported by pre-civil war rocks and cement on both sides of York Road. They built them to last in the olden days. Fear trickled down Miller's back, slowing his walk. The black iron walls encasing the track made him squeamish. There was a slight chance that Miller's skinny body could slip between those planks. But spaces between ties didn't scare him. He had conquered the Black & Decker trestle, longer and higher across the valley. It also was more open, which, for some reason, seemed safer. Here, you felt trapped, closed in. Plus, a west wind whistled through the trestle, not good for balance. Below, four-lane traffic rumbled... could not help but think of his encounter with that MG. Another foot and he wouldn't be standing here. Forget that! Deal with Number 6, a black beast chugging back and forth from Black and Decker, not to mention the occasional train loaded with slate, marble or coal. Halfway across would be the point of no return. Don't want to be rushed by a whistle.

The boys stood at the foot of the trestle. Cars and trucks were passing underneath. No sign of Number 6 at Towson Station. "Ready?" Rusty asked.

"I think so..." said Miller.

Rusty's steps were sure; Miller froze at the edge. "You coming?" Rusty asked halfway across. Miller wavered. He really wanted to do this. Think of it as a game, like chess. Clear the mind and make your move. He stepped onto the trestle and began his slow walk, face down, concentrating on the next tie. Near the center, a yellow jacket buzzed his ear. Bees scared him, allergic... messed with a hive when he was a toddler. Miller waved off the invader. "Go . . . a . . . way!" Must be the bubblegum. He spat out the gob; it fell to the street. Swatting at the bee, his finger caught the edge of his glasses. Off they flew, bouncing along the trestle. Below his feet, the yellow streetcar shook the ties. He fell to his knees to search for his glasses.

From the other side, Rusty shouted over the traffic: "What's wrong!"

“Lost my glasses!”

“I’ll come get you.”

What if he slipped, getting smushed by a Mack truck?... Miller planned his funeral... hoping his friends would say nice things about him. “Do you see my glasses?”

“No.”

Wonder what Mom would say now? She worried about him... had to get off this trestle alive. Grasping Miller’s trembling arm, Rusty raised his friend to his feet and led him across the trestle. The whistle of Engine 6 tooted. It was pulling away from Towson Station! With seconds to spare, they stepped off the ties and slid down the slope to the sidewalk, just like in the movies. The coal train rumbled overhead. Click! Clack! Click Clack!...” During a break in traffic, Rusty searched for those glasses, finding them no worse for wear between streetcar tracks as the light turned green. Snatching the glasses, he raised them in triumph and scampered to the curb. “You owe me a hot fudge sundae!”