

HOTTER THAN THE DICKENS

#

Finally it was Saturday, my very very last day to work in Piney Hill Café. Tomorrow, Sunday, I was going to take a last ramble in the woods, and Monday I'd be off again in Marty's truck to New Orleans. He'd changed his schedule again for me, but I expected it was really to go see his quadron lady friend again. Taking care of the early morning chores, I was jubilant. Looney the milkman said goodbye and hugged me for good luck. I kept hoping Reese would show up soon, but he usually only got here just before noon. Maybe he'd hug me goodbye too. Of course, none of the other customers knew that after today I'd be gone.

While I was waiting on a fat man and his wife in number four, I glanced out the window and saw Daddy walking with the realtor man and the short guy who's thinking of buying the Hill. They were pointing around at things. Fortunately the place was looking real spiffy. Over the past couple weeks Daddy and I'd repainted the white trim on all the buildings and the red shutters on the café windows, as well as other fixing up.

A couple folks had looked around, but they'd all disappeared. Maybe this time it would work. Daddy'd been real nervous, pacing around the front yard or along the parking strip out front, just like I did before, feeling like a caged animal.

That scene a couple weeks ago sure changed things between us. He didn't nag or push me around anymore but just like before, never said much. Sometimes he'd put his hand on my shoulder though, a caress of sorts, I guess. I was still of the same mind as on that awful evening, emotionally empty and determined to escape, but I'd sometimes had moments of almost affection, if not love, for Daddy in his distress, an involuntary sympathy.

When I walked by Melvin at the counter with his second cup of morning coffee, he said, "Mr. Stein, hey? Betcha he's a Jew. We'll have us quite a time if he buys the Hill." I had no time to find out why him being a Jew should mean them having "quite a time," because Melba hollered pick-up on the breakfasts for the truckers in number two.

Daddy and the two men came in and sat in number three. I fetched a cup of black coffee for the realtor, Mr. Thompson, and an ice tea for Mr. Stein, who flipped up his sunglasses and smiled at me with big brown eyes. I thought maybe it was a good sign he looked so happy. I wondered what about him looked Jewish, maybe his lips a tad thick? Mom had told me he was from Houston, some kind of factory worker wanting to go into business for himself, just like Daddy'd been before buying Piney Hill. I secretly wished him lots of luck.

I was washing a tray of cups and glasses, saying goodbye to the loathsome dishwasher, when Daddy came back and with a strange, broad smile said, "Mr. Stein thinks it all looks so neat and kept up. He's going to buy the place!"

"Fantastic!" I exclaimed and truly happy for him, gave him a congratulatory clap on the shoulder. Daddy looked at me with a fishing buddy smile and left me standing there amazed.

Several more parties came in, and while working on automatic, I realized that I actually did feel awful sad about leaving the Hill now. Before, it had just been me leaving, but now the folks would be going away too. There'd be no Piney Hill for me to come back to on visits. My familiar café with all its furniture and dishes and silverware would be swept up and away in this whirlwind that was whisking me off to New Orleans, like Dorothy to the Land of Oz.

#

In a while without customers, when I was hanging out by the register with Melvin, old Jim from the filling station, and Melba, Daddy and Mom came in. She was smiling to beat the

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 14. **HOTTER THAN THE DICKENS**

band. Daddy said he'd talked Mr. Stein into hiring Melvin full time and assured Melba she didn't have to worry none about staying on as morning cook. He said Mr. Stein wouldn't be making any changes at the service station either, at least right now.

The real surprise was that Mr. Stein was in a big hurry to move in on Monday, so we needed to move out right away. To my amazement, Daddy'd already made arrangements to put up our furniture in Mr. Bledsoe's barn. Melvin said he had him a strong boy with a truck that did chores for his mama. He went over to Humpersneck to fetch him.

All of a sudden I got real concerned remembering our zoo and asked Daddy what about the animals. To my relief, he'd already made good plans there too: Clark would take his birddog and hounds, and we'd put Duchess and Lobo with Mr. Jack down at Paraclifta where they'd live at his pretty house. And he'd also stable Lady till the family could get settled in a new place. Clark would also take Fauntleroy Fox down to the real zoo in Texarkana, and Martha Hooper would adopt the cats. The hogs would go to Mr. Stein with the place.

"And when Mom gets our stuff packed up," Daddy announced, "we'll just all of us head off to New Orleans." In horror, I staggered back against a stool. "So when Melvin's boy gets here," he went on to me, "y'all can move the furniture up to Bledsoe's barn." He handed me a ten-dollar bill and instructed, "When you're done, give this to the nigger—and anything we're throwing out. I got to go with Mr. Stein down to the bank in Texarkana to finish up this deal." And with that, he left us standing there.

A truck driver down the counter was looking up like wanting something, so I took the coffeepot. Back again with Mom, I leaned up on the register and said, not without irony, "Well, looks like you're going to a city after all."

"Thank God!" Mom said with a big smile and dried her cheeks with a napkin. "I'm so glad. We'll get us a place, and you can live with us."

Horrified again, I said flatly, "No, I'll live at the dorm like we planned." Not waiting for an argument, I took Melvin's cup back to the dishwasher. There was no way I was going to miss out on living in that Robert Sharp dormitory as a Tulane greenie-wienie. I figured it didn't actually matter if the family came to New Orleans too, because I was still going to be gone off to college. When I came back out front, Mom was leaving to pack. No trouble about my stuff. It was packed already for Monday. Then I had a horrible thought: Leaving tomorrow, I couldn't take my last ramble in the woods. I'd never see my grotto again!

#

In about 15 minutes Melvin pulled up by the mailbox in his red Plymouth, a big rattle-trap green truck following behind. As I crossed the road, a Negro boy got out of the truck, about my age in old overalls and clodhopper shoes. But you couldn't tell much about him the way he looked at the ground. "This here's Zaya," Melvin said with a pat on the fellow's back. "He's a good boy and works hard. Zaya, this here's Mr. Ben. He tell you what to do."

The black boy looked up at me for a moment and muttered politely, "Mr. Ben."

Melvin went to take over for me in the café, and I had Zaya hang on while I checked on things in the house. Mom was real busy with the living room full of boxes, and Janie was out in the backyard folding up the bedclothes. I quick changed into my old Bermuda shorts because I knew it was going to be some hot work. As I was about to go out, Janie handed me her folded up cot from under the weeping willow with, "You gotta get the bed yourself, big brother." So the folks' mattress off the storm cellar was our first item to lug to the truck.

Then we loaded up the living room, all the chairs, sofa, TV, rugs, bookcase and some heavy boxes Mom had ready. Zaya's truck had a bunch of boards for sides around the flat bed,

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 14. **HOTTER THAN THE DICKENS**

and we roped things down too. He was sure enough strong with amazing muscles under his overall straps, reminding me of that banana guy on the dock. The smell of his sweat was like a horse or maybe a deer, very animal. Zaya acted surprised to see me working right alongside him, which I suppose probably didn't happen much with white folks. Mostly he'd just wait for me to tell him what to do next and say, "Yessir" a lot.

On the first trip to Mr. Bledsoe's barn, Zaya explained that his name was really Isaiah like the Bible prophet. "When I was little," he chuckled, "Folks think I was saying, 'I Zaya.'" Suddenly he said, "I hear tell, Mr. Ben, your family is papists." I confirmed that, not wanting to argue fine points. "Well," he said, "our preacher say y'all believe whatever the Pope say."

"Not just anything," I objected, by now definitely not a believer in papal infallibility. I was secretly amused at the thought of this cluster of three houses we were just now passing being called DePope. I explained, "He's sort of like the President of the Church, you know, like the President of the United States."

Clearly Zaya didn't understand. "Well, we Baptists and follow the scripture of Jesus."

"I know," I said, but I really didn't. Catholics supposedly followed the teachings of Jesus too, but Father Jordan told me it wasn't good for folks to read the Bible because there were lots of things in it needing explained by Holy Mother Church. At the time I didn't wonder about that, but now I certainly did. With my new belief in the God in everything, the Bible didn't mean much to me anymore, if it ever did. I looked at this strange Zaya with his gleaming black skin and could clearly feel the inconceivable God in him too.

Old man Bledsoe met us at his weathered old barn, kindly showing us where to stack stuff in the open area toward the back and Zaya how to back his truck right into the barn. Then he and his wife took off to go visit their daughter in Texarkana. Unloading the truck went a heck of a lot quicker than the loading, but all the same, by the time everything was stacked back there, Zaya and I were both pretty hot and sweaty.

We sat a spell in the shade beside the barn to rest and talk. Seemed Zaya's Mamma did housecleaning, and his Pappa was a janitor for the hardware and grocery stores in Lockjaw. His sister Harriet worked in the chicken plant in DeQueen. While he talked, I admired his handsome features and thought how his full dark lips sure would be great to kiss. Suddenly I recognized that boy I gave those chocolate pies to way back when.

When I remarked on knowing him from then, he said he knew that was me too and thanked me again. Then he went on about how next May when he'd be 18, he hoped to go to work in the chicken plant too, if he could get on. And he had him a pretty girlfriend. "She's from up by Dierks," he explained, "name of Millie—a real sugar-pie!" He added proudly, "And I 'spect next year we gonna get married."

#

Rattling along in Zaya's empty truck on the way back to the Hill, I thought how this was nothing compared to Marty's empty banana truck. It was nigh noon when we got back to the Hill, just in time to see the Western Hatcheries truck was pulling out to leave. Sexy Reese gave me a wave from the driver's window, and all I could do was return it. Then he was gone.

For a long moment I stood there by the mailbox lamenting that I'd never see Reese again. No chance for a hug, much less for the kiss I'd so often imagined. Zaya wondered if I was okay, and I told him I was just saying bye to my good friend.

I ran over to the café to get Melba to make us four cheeseburgers to go. While we loaded up Janie's bed and dresser, she eyed Zaya with a fearful expression. Of course, at 14 she was probably real scared by the suddenness of it all, and besides, I don't think she'd ever seen very

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 14. **HOTTER THAN THE DICKENS**

many black people. We also fitted the folks' bedroom stuff on the truck and topped off this second load with boxes of clothes and lawn furniture. I raced back over to the café to get our lunches and grabbed up a couple cold RC Colas and Milky Way candy bars.

On our way back to the barn, I told Zaya how I'd be leaving tomorrow for New Orleans to go to the university.

He asked, "What's a youn-vers-tee?"

A little taken aback, I said gently, "It's a big college."

"Oh, yah," he said with a huge smile, "I hear some about that collidge." Shortly, when we got to DePope again, he spoke up. "Me, I only done the sixth grade, Mr. Ben." He explained how he helped his Pappa with the crops and livestock and did odd jobs for white folks around, like Melvin's Mama, old Miz Purtell. "Last year I bought me this here truck!" he crowed and patted the battered dashboard.

I felt really proud for him, though chagrined that I didn't even know how to drive. What Zaya kept doing with the pedals and gearshift was way beyond me. Across the vast chasm between our two lives, my heart reached out to this splendid black boy, but I didn't know what to say, how to express this incredible connection I felt with him.

#

We made short, hot work of unloading into the barn and took a break for lunch. It was cool out in the orchard sitting under a peach tree, one I may even have picked the fruit off of. We devoured our cheeseburgers without much time for talking and then lay back on the grass with our RC Colas. I thought to mention those big stone logs I knew of over near Humpersneck.

With a big smile of beautiful white teeth, Zaya said, "Yah, I know that place. I roam all over the woods too, Mr. Ben." His brown eyes looked about to laugh.

Then I told him how those logs came from another world long before this one, and his eyes got even bigger, like me when Lew told me that wonder. On the same theme, I added, "And I know where there's some blue clay full of tiny seashells millions of years old."

Zaya looked skeptical and didn't say anything. Instead, he lay there looking up into the peach branches absently. Admiring his fascinating lips, I wondered where to go from there. Then he upped and said, "You don't know, Mr. Ben, but I seen you out in the woods sometimes, out hunting and stuff."

"When was that?" I asked nervously. The thought of someone seeing me unbeknownst gave me a strange sensation. I might very well have been stark naked.

"Oh, last time was just a couple weeks ago," he laughed and nudged my arm. "You was over by the pipeline eating them wild plums."

At least I'd had my clothes on then. I nudged him back and asked, "Well, why on earth didn't you just come out and say hi?"

Zaya shook his head and said, "'Cause it ain't proper, you a white boy and all. You see me and probably go and get all scared."

I laughed. "Oh, no, Zaya. I'd have loved to find a friend out in the woods."

He flashed another smile, clearly pleased at me calling him a friend. Zaya said he also knew my white oak grove, which his Pappa told him was a holy place "ever since Injun times." Then shy again, he said, "And, Mr. Ben, I know your garden down on that spring branch."

I gasped, "You're the elf!" He had no idea what I was on about. "You're the one who fixed my dam," I explained. His grin confirmed. "Isn't that waterfall beautiful?"

"Yah, it about the purtiest place in the world," he sighed. "And I planted them two bittersweets from my Mamma's garden for you." I was speechless. Those bushes meant Zaya

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 14. **HOTTER THAN THE DICKENS**

had known about my grotto for almost three years. A flood of affection for this black elf-boy washed over me like a warm wind. “But I gotta fess up,” he said shyly, “to snitching some of your purty purple flags for my Mamma. I hope you ain’t mad at me, Mr. Ben.”

My iris... As far as I was concerned, Zaya could snitch anything he wanted to from me at any time. I put my hand on his, so white on black, my heart suddenly aching, and said, “Well, that place is yours now Zaya. I won’t ever see it again.” I watched, amazed, as our fingers, as though with a mind of their own, started tangling together. With a curious expression, Zaya watched it happen too, but we soon let go and smiled at each other. Again, his lips tempted me. I wondered how I could feel so tender toward this Negro boy after such a short while together.

Reluctantly I suggested we go back to work and started to get up. Zaya took my arm to stop me and said, “And I seen you and your friend in the garden last spring.” My heart stopped. Oh my goodness! He saw Danny and me! Zaya laughed, “Your dog almost caught me, Mr. Ben! He kept on barking and barking.” Still, maybe he didn’t see us making love.

We got back into the truck and headed down the highway, both of us real quiet after our talk. Then Zaya turned from his driving with another big smile and said, “I know it sound silly, but you been my secret best friend for a couple years now.” I choked up because it sounded so much like me and my secret sweetheart. “It get right lonesome over in Humpersneck,” he went on, “with just the old folks, you know. I sure do wish we was friends before, Mr. Ben.”

#

It had gotten so hot, I stripped off my shirt, and we set to work on the kitchen and dining room stuff, table, chairs, china cabinet, and all kinds of boxes. On one of the boxes, I found Mom had folded up the army blanket from my bed out in the backyard, she said, because we’d be sleeping at the Hoopers’ tonight. But I decided to stay this last night in my own bed. Zaya ran out and tossed the blanket back onto the pine straw for me. Then Mom gave me a stack of sheets to spread over the stuff in the barn and keep the dust off. With another soda pop each, my new friend Zaya and I took off on this third load.

After unloading the chairs into the barn, Zaya had to take a leak, and so did I. We went outside where he unsnapped his straps, drooping the front, and peed circles on the weathered wood of the barn. I worked myself out of my Bermuda shorts and did the same. His prick wasn’t quite as big as I’d imagined from jokes, uncut of course, and strangest of all, really black, coal-black, not the rich chocolate color of his flat stomach and muscled chest.

When he started snapping up his overalls, without really meaning to, I reached out and touched the dark skin of his shoulder. It was so smooth, smoother and softer than Lady’s nose. “Your skin’s so smooth, Zaya,” I exclaimed and in confusion added, “I’m so furry.”

“I ain’t got no hairs ‘cept where you supposed to,” he laughed and closed the second snap. Then he brushed the hair on my chest and added, “But your hair real soft too.”

We resumed the unloading, wrestling with the tables and china cabinet in the mounting afternoon heat, sweating like hogs. When it was all off the truck, we flapped out sheets and spread them over what was there making a range of white, lumpy mountains. I got the odd feeling of having been here like this before, standing in this quiet, dim place smelling of hay, with white sheets over things, and with someone I loved at my side.

I turned toward Zaya, and he leaned closer, giving me a silly grin. Without thinking, I kissed his dark lips and tasted his strange mouth, his musky fragrance making me dizzy. At some point we stopped and looked at each other in astonishment. Zaya recovered first and muttered, “I ain’t never kissed no boy before, Mr. Ben.”

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 14. **HOTTER THAN THE DICKENS**

I reckoned he must have seen Danny and me kissing, but I didn't feel embarrassed. It was a loving thing of best friends. If I was Zaya's best friend, then he was now also mine. I put my white hand on his black arm and said, "I'm real glad we can be friends for at least one day."

#

After a break for ice tea, our fourth load consisted of the stuff in my room, bed, couch, desk, dresser, and boxes of my books and records, as well as lots of things stored in the garage. On the way out to the truck with the records, I mentioned all the great songs I had and discovered that Zaya didn't know anything at all about popular music or American Bandstand. Amazed again at our difference, I offered to give him my radio.

"We don't got no 'lectricity," Zaya explained. So he'd never seen television, and the only radio he knew of was in a car. It was staggering to think of living without such things. "But we all sing songs on Sundays at the church house," he added.

By the time everything was unloaded and sheeted with the rest, Zaya and I were hotter than the dickens. I suggested we go over to Mr. Bledsoe's stock pond that Cousin Lew had told me about, just beyond the pine woods. Actually it was a pulpwood plantation with trees maybe 20 feet tall about ready to cut with great mats of pine straw all over underneath. The even rows of young pines made long shady corridors to the spots of sunny brightness at the far field.

The stock pond, a long rectangular scooped-out basin, edged right up to the pines. It was a bit low this late in summer, and the exposed flat at one end was dotted with those funny mud chimneys of crawdads. Quickly losing our shorts and overalls, we leapt into the deep end, sending waves washing around the crawdad towers, melting them down into muddy lumps.

We dived like ducks and swam around under water, waving at each other through the water weeds. After splashing and horsing around a bit, we floated on our backs looking up at the sky. I felt absolutely blissful like I used to feel with Danny, and Zaya kept looking at me with such wonderful friendliness.

Out on the bank, we hopped around like jaybirds to shake off the water. With a chance now to look at each other's naked bodies, I admired his lean dark hips, and like I figured he would, Zaya asked, "Where's all the skin on your dick?"

I explained how they cut it off when I was a little baby. The best reason I could give him was so it wouldn't get in the way. "It don't get in my way none," Zaya chuckled and pulled back his foreskin so a little one-eyed animal peered out at me. When I stared, he shyly let it drop.

I recovered and half-heartedly said, "Maybe we'd best get a move on."

"Maybe so," Zaya agreed with a sidelong curious look at my prick again.

Carrying our clothes, we walked into the dark shade of the pine-row, and Zaya's fingers caught mine. He stopped and said, "I don't wanna go yet."

"Neither me," I said. We dropped our clothes on the ground, and this kiss brought our bodies tight up against each other. We made love right there on the pine straw, wiggling out a nest like a deer would.

Afterwards I lay on top of Zaya, still kissing him hungrily, breathing his wild animal smell, unwilling for it to be over so soon. When we eventually rolled apart, Zaya put his hand on my furry chest and said, "Don't worry none, Mr. Ben. I won't never forget you."

We kissed again and again and then struggled into our shorts and overalls. Stumbling along the dark, piney corridor back toward the sunlit barn felt like a dream. Several times in the truck I tried to say something, but all I could get out was his name. Zaya understood. Once he started, "Mr. Ben, I ain't never..." But he knew I knew exactly what he'd never done.

#

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 14. **HOTTER THAN THE DICKENS**

Back at the Hill, I left Zaya in the yard for a moment and ran across the road to check on things at the café. Melvin, hard at it with a bunch of customers, said Daddy'd gotten back from Texarkana a bit ago and had taken Mom and Janie on down to Horatio's house. Then I took Zaya into the house to get the money and added a ten-dollar bill of my own. He stared at the two tens and said, "This so much!" I told him to use one of them just for him and Millie.

Looking around in the empty house, we found some towels and clothes and dishes for his Mamma and a big box of groceries like flour and sugar Mom had left out for them. For Zaya I opened my suitcase and pulled out two heavy flannel shirts I'd never need in New Orleans—and my favorite red Frankie Avalon sweater for the same reason. He took them shyly saying, "I'd be proud to wear something of yourn, Mr. Ben, real proud."

To put off his leaving, I asked Zaya if he had time to help me turn the pets loose. "I got me plenty time with twenty dollars," he beamed.

Out in the yard we discovered that Clark had already taken Lady and Foxy, but Duchess and Lobo we'd take with us by Mr. Jack's in the morning. Like with Reese, I spent a moment thinking a sad goodbye. In the chickenhouse I showed Zaya what was left of my menagerie, three snakes, some white mice (for their food), two terrapins, and three hairy tarantulas.

First I took the black spider, Cinder, out of the cage, letting it crawl up my arm, and then coaxed the tan and reddish ones onto my hands. Zaya stood way back making scared noises. I carried them over to the persimmon patch and with a last fond pet, let them creep off into the grass. Zaya called from a great distance, "Now I know where I don't never go walking!"

Down by the edge of the woods we set the mice loose for a head start and came back for the snakes. Zaya wanted to hold my king snake, the one I'd caught once with Danny, and the green and yellow diamond pattern of its coils glowed around his black forearm. When I asked if he wanted to take Tut, he said, "Mamma don't allow for no snakes, but I like them turtles." With the other snakes, the black Onyx and the bull Minos, writhing all over me, we crossed the pasture again and bade farewell as they slithered off among the leaves.

#

On the way back up to the house, Zaya remarked that he ought to get on home and wash up. I got a bright idea for him to use our shower. When I showed him the shower stall off the back porch, he laughed, "I ain't never took no shower." Mom had packed up the plastic curtain with flamingos and palm trees, but with our awful water pressure, it was hard to splash much.

Before you could shake a stick, Zaya was naked again. I watched the water gleam in silver streams along his dark skin. His head under the spray, the drops rolled right off the tight curls, and he laughed at the feeling. With a bar of Ivory, I slowly rubbed him all over.

The soapy bubbles were like snow on his black legs like the smooth trunks of saplings. There were big dimples on his round butt that looked like the chocolate in Melba's pies with sudsy merengue. When I rubbed his ticklish sides, he giggled and wiggled. Being right there on the porch, I didn't dare do more than one careful soapy rub up front, but Zaya still got hard right away and real embarrassed. He spent a good while rinsing off, and I just watched, enchanted.

From the pile of stuff for his Mamma I got out an old yellow towel, and as he dried off, it shone against his skin. Again time faded away, the sun streaking in the window on him. I was fascinated by that channel running over his hips and the ripples on his stomach. When his overalls were back on, I remembered to breathe again.

#

As another brilliant delaying tactic, I went over the café and got us some chickenfries for supper with pie and cream for dessert. We sat up on the storm cellar with the late afternoon light

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 14. **HOTTER THAN THE DICKENS**

turning gold through the hickory branches. Zaya ate with great delight, the cream gravy white on his beautiful black lips, and I devoured him with my eyes.

While we dined, I told him about New Orleans with its huge live oaks, the pretty houses and balconies, and that vast Mississippi River. Zaya listened in wonder. He'd never been anywhere but Texarkana, and there only a couple times. "But I hear tell of that Missipp River."

With mixed feelings, I said, "Tell me about Millie. You go on dates with her?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Ben. We mostly never see each others but at the church house and socials." As though he'd been waiting to talk about her, Zaya went on right away. "She'd just fifteen now, but next year when she sixteen, maybe we can do some dates before we get married." He took my hand with a nervous smile. "'Bout that, Mr. Ben—where do you go on a date?"

"Well," I hawed a bit, "you know, somewhere y'all can kiss and make out and all."

"I only kissed Millie a couple times," Zaya confided. "But not like us did," he added with a sly grin that made me want another. But he looked away and remarked again about how it was high time for him to get on home.

Grasping at straws, I proposed we catch them some chickens too. It was easy pickings from the bantams clucking around the yard, a handful of feed and... We filled a tow sack with a half-dozen hens, and the little rooster with green and gold tail feathers. Zaya's Mamma would be real happy to have them in her coop.

While he tied up the squawking bag, I felt overwhelmed by how terrifically much I loved this black boy. My wish to the Magic Fish came true! But it was so unfair that now we had to say goodbye. We were standing by my weeping willow, its curtains of branches hanging to the ground. Zaya set the noisy tow sack down and said, "Don't let's say bye yet, Mr. Ben." We stepped through the draping willow screen, and in that secret place, kissed a long goodbye.

After loading all the gifts and chickens and terrapins on his truck, it came the awful time to shake Zaya's hand, but all I could say was his name. He squeezed mine hard and said, "I hope you have good luck in that collidge, Mr. Ben." We looked at each other sadly, and he added, "And I'll take good care of your spring garden. Don't you fret none." Then he climbed into the cab and waved, and the ancient truck rattled off down the Hill.

###