

## Chapter 11

### Dominoes

Most days I felt like a bunch of rhubarb that had been cut and left out in the sun.

September of nineteen and forty-nine had to be the hottest in many years, and to top it off Boomer had us doing team work-outs at Art's Place until two in the morning – drinking beer, playing dominoes and doing ciphering drills. He'd yell at me, "Hey, Freddy, quick, what's 5 plus 3 plus 6? Quick, 6 plus 2 plus 4 plus 5?"

I liked the game and enjoyed drinking beer with the guys, but sometimes Boomer went too far. First, we had to drink three beers, part of the drill. Then, Boomer would hit us with word problems. "Your opponent opens with a double six. You're holding three bones" – that's what we called dominoes – "three bones with sixes, 6 and 2, 6 and 1, 6 and 3. Quick, what's the best play? Come on, quick!" He called it getting in shape. At that hour of the night, I called it brain busting.

Beverly had returned to Morgantown in early September, her sophomore year at the University. Her absence wilted me more than the heat. We'd dated a lot through the summer, and then in August her parents left for a weekend to visit friends in Louisville. That Saturday evening we went to a movie, and came back to her house. We sat in the front porch glider until midnight, holding each other close. The joy of her touch, her kisses, stirred me. Her too. I unbuttoned her blouse and she unbuttoned my shirt, then we went indoors, holding each other tightly and walking sidewise like our lips and front sides had been welded together. For the first time we had an entire night to lie next to each other. Touching, talking. I didn't know anything could be so wonderful. Her warmth

and her scent – I wanted them, and her, in my life. Always. But she had gone to Morgantown.

One night the combination of Boomer's long drills and Beverly's absence got to me. Shortly after midnight I had had enough. "Boomer, I got to get up at six in the morning, open Buckingham's Gulf Station and pump gas all day. These midnight practices are killing me." Boomer gave us a couple of nights off.

Boomer, Boomer Cremeans, had eased in to Art's Place about a year earlier, hanging out in the afternoons, buying a few rounds now and then, and sitting in on the dominoes games. I didn't know him, but Art gave Boomer an OK. He said, "Boomer's family had a farm up on Tinker's Creek, a few miles north of town. His Daddy came here to start a vineyard, but he could only get Concord grapes to grow. Used them mostly for jelly and juice, though he produced a fair-to-middlin' sweet wine."

Boomer told me he'd graduated from Kettle High the year I had been born, nineteen and thirty. "I been living at a boarding house in Charleston for nigh on to ten years, working at the bottling plant in Kanawha City." He beamed when he said, "I worked my way up to supervisor. Of the evenings I picked up a little money playing dominoes. Not a bad life. But I got laid off from my job when my company hit hard times. You may've heard about it. They lost that big Mason Jars contract and had to go out of business." Over at Bertha's Place somebody said that Boomer's company tried to expand, diversify they called it, to make lids as well as jars, and couldn't pull it off.

Art recognized Boomer's talent and signed him on as manager of what Art called the pool department, a poolroom downstairs below the bar. Art weighed about 280, a man of limited movement. He needed somebody to watch over things downstairs.

“Real proud to be back in management,” Boomer said. He had some glossy business cards printed up: “Boomer Cremeans, Manager, Pool Department, Art’s Place, Rt. 42 West, Kettle, West Virginia. Phone 3210.” The pool department had just two pool tables, but somebody needed to collect the nickel per game, take orders for beer, and most of all, to make sure that nobody stole the balls or ripped the felt on the tables. Art had a conniption fit when one kid showed off with a fancy shot and ran the tip of his cue stick through the felt.

Art’s appointment of Boomer didn’t surprise me. Boomer looked like a manager – always wearing a white shirt and necktie, his shoes polished, even when just hanging around. Boomer seemed thoughtful about things going on around him, as if he wanted to reflect on the full meaning of what somebody had said or done. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and slicked his hair straight back. Boomer always carried a small bottle of Wildroot Cream Oil for his hair. It made a bulge in his left front pocket. But Boomer’s pride and joy had to be his pencil mustache. It started as a small block just under that little bridge that separated his nostrils, and split into two neatly trimmed lines of black hair above each side of his upper lip, with each line getting thinner then ending in a point.

And he had smooth moves. One of the guys said, “Boomer don’t walk so much as he glides. It’s like he wears magic shoes.” I tried to imitate his walk, in fact each of us tried to do it, but no one could get it right. With his classy style, Boomer could have been over at the funeral home, a mortician escorting a widow during a service, or a teller taking your deposit at the bank, rather than a fellow racking up a new game of pool.

When Boomer talked to you he looked you right in the eye and spoke in a soft but firm voice. I should add that when he did this you couldn't be sure which of his eyes looked at you. His eyes didn't cross, but they seemed off center. Almost cross-eyed.

People seemed to take to Boomer. Art called him a natural leader. "Why do you think they made him a supervisor up at the bottling plant?" he asked.

Pearl Chapman followed Boomer around like a little puppy. Pearl dropped out of Kettle High the year Boomer graduated. Like Boomer, Pearl had been raised on a farm up on Tinker's Creek. Pearl had a skinny body and white hair, though he often said, "I ain't no albino."

One afternoon earlier that summer, Boomer, wearing a white shirt and tie, no jacket, drove his '46 Hudson into Buckingham's. He had the Hudson all shined up. Pearl sat alongside him in the front seat wearing a fresh white painter's cap and a clean white t-shirt, a pack of Camels rolled into the right sleeve. I walked to the driver's window and we exchanged some chit-chat, then Boomer said in a matter of fact way, "Freddy, I have been retained by Pearl to help him get his driver's license."

Retained?

He continued, "We're on our way to the courthouse in Huntington to get Pearl a learner's permit, the first step" – he beamed at Pearl, then me – "towards becoming a licensed driver." When Boomer paid for his gas, he told me in a firm, almost smug, voice, like he expected me to be checking on Pearl, "Pearl has all his papers in order to make the application." Pearl smiled at me and held up a cardboard folder. I could see documents sticking out of it. When I got my learner's permit I just went to the

courthouse, took a blank application from the stack of forms on the counter in the County Clerk's office, and filled it out.

About the time Art hired Boomer as manager of the pool room, Boomer began to talk about organizing a domino league here in Kettle, similar to the leagues in the Huntington and Charleston taverns. One evening at Art's Place, Boomer asked if he could speak to me, private and confidential. I nodded OK, wondering if I'd done something wrong. We walked over to the corner furthest from the bar. Then in a quiet and respectful way Boomer said he'd been observing me. He wanted me to consider taking an important step in my life. "Freddy, with your experience in making change for customers at Buckingham's, all the adding and subtracting, you'd be a natural for the Art's Place Dominoes Team."

Just to myself I said, "I'm over eighteen. I can go to Art's Place and order a beer. Maybe I could make the grade and be on the dominoes team." Then I reflected for a second, and added, "That is, if we had a team."

Boomer set up some card tables in the rear of Art's Place, beyond the bar and customer area. Most evenings Boomer would pull some of the guys together and we'd play a few games. Up until then I had only played dominoes at home with William White. He always laughed big and loud when he scored – got the end dominoes to total the number five or a multiple of five.

At Art's Place we played a different kind of game, faster-paced, and the players didn't laugh when they scored. The first player to score one hundred points won the game. The loser paid the difference between the scores of the winner and the loser, a penny a point. With a run of bad luck you could rack up some financial losses over the

course of an evening. Of course you could win, too, which I did from time to time. One Wednesday night I cleared big money, \$4.60.

With Beverly up at the university, other than going to church and the movies, I didn't have a lot to do in the evenings. The Jack Benny and Fred Allen radio shows occupied me on Tuesday evenings. Other weekday nights I listened to "This is Your FBI" and "Mr. District Attorney." It took a year or more for higher grade movies like "Easter Parade" and "Road to Rio" to get to Kettle. Most of the time we had movies that starred actors like Randolph Scott and Sonny Tufts. William White liked Ginger Rogers movies.

One evening after a few games of dominoes, Boomer looked around the tables, gave us a confident smile and in a loud voice said, "I believe you boys may be ready for competitive play. An Art's Place Dominoes Team might do OK in league play." He walked over to the bar, "Set these boys up with a round of beers, Art."

Benny Porter got a serious look on his chubby face and said, "Boomer is taking our money pretty regularly. If he thinks we're good, could be that we are."

Pearl replied, "Right, Benny. Anyway, they roll up the streets after dark. We might as well give it a shot."

The team tryouts took place at Art's Place on a Sunday afternoon. Boomer put a hand-lettered sign in the front window. "Dominoes Team tryouts today, 2PM. All are welcome. Must be able to cipher."

In the tryouts, each guy played a game of one-on-one dominoes with Boomer. To keep things even, Boomer set it up so that at the start of a game each of his opponents had the same seven dominoes in front of him, and he started the each game by placing a double six in the center of the table. The games varied with the plays we made and the

luck of the draw from the bones pile. Pearl flashed a grin and winked at me when he played his seventh domino, ending the round, and left Boomer holding dominoes totaling over twenty points.

Even though nobody else tried out, Pearl, Benny, Scooter, Buster, and I congratulated each other when Boomer told us we'd made the team. Boomer shook my hand and welcomed me as the team's youngest member.

"Hey, we did it," Scooter said, then asked Boomer, "When's our first game?"

Boomer gave us a big smile, "Boys, congratulations to you! Be proud you're on the team. Practice your addition and subtraction while I get a few things going." Over the next week he made phone calls and visited some local bars. The next thing we knew Boomer had set up The Domino League of Kettle, West Virginia. Boomer appointed himself league commissioner, and – what else? – had business cards printed. That was Boomer.

The league had five teams, three from bars in Kettle and two from taverns out on Route 42. Boomer required that teams be sponsored by bars or taverns. At the time I didn't understand why, but like everything Boomer did, he had a reason for it. In this case it had to do with bonus points, something I'll explain later.

Not long after Boomer set up the league, he started dating Fanny. She had been runner-up in the "Miss Kettle of 1940 Contest." Fanny worked four to midnight for Art waiting tables and tending bar. Benny liked to stare at her while she worked. He had longed in his voice when he said, "Her long dark hair and cute rear end is a treat to watch. And I love those v-neck t-shirts she wears." Every time Fanny wore one of those

t-shirts and leaned over to get a couple of beers out of the cooler, Benny would elbow me in the ribs and in a voice too loud for a whisper, say, “Look.”

One time Fanny heard him, turned, shot him a frown at him and yelled, “Look at what, Benny? Tell me so I can look too.” After that, Benny whispered.

When Art’s Place had no customers Fanny would play the jukebox, sit in Art’s big green leather chair, and listen to the music. Before she and Boomer became a couple, she’d put six or seven nickels in the jukebox and play only one song, Vaughn Monroe’s “Red Roses for A Blue Lady.” Afterwards she played Doris Day’s hit, “It’s Magic.”

When guys tried to flirt with Fanny, she’d ignore them. Once Benny whispered something in her ear and Fanny slowly turned towards him. He lit up with a big smile, licked his lips and opened his arms wide just as Fanny’s knee nearly rearranged his family jewels – a light tap but she had a serious look on her face.

But Boomer? He just asked Fanny out, and after that nobody else could get close to her. Sometimes Boomer would look at Fanny, wiggle his eyebrows up and down, and then slowly move his tongue from left to right under his upper lip. This caused his pencil mustache to bulge in a wave, sort of like a snake crawling. Fanny would break into an embarrassed giggle and say, “Boomer, don’t do that.” Boomer would laugh, which told me that he had a sense of humor, something I wondered about when he drove us so hard during what he called “bones practice.”

Boomer talked to Art about the responsibility of being a team sponsor, and to everybody’s surprise got Art to spring for t-shirts, two per guy. That way we always had a clean shirt for league competition, except for Benny, a little slow on the wash cycle. The shirts represented a big investment for Art. Even at Christmastime, we felt proud if

Art gave us, “regulars,” as he called us, a free beer. The mere suggestion of money moving from Art’s cash register to someone else’s pocket would bring a look of concern to his face that would drive a teetotaling Methodist to drink. Fanny designed the lettering on the dark brown shirts, putting a big yellow double six domino on the back and “Art’s Place” in yellow letters above the domino. On the front, left side, each guy had his first name printed, same shade of yellow as on the back of our shirts. Customized, not cheap. Boomer’s shirts had “Coach” printed below his name. Scooter loved the color of our shirts. “Good for putting my tobacco crop in the barn,” he said. Scooter always looked for an angle, a little habit that came in handy in competitive dominoes.

In a league match, four guys played one-on-one with four members of the opposing team, rotating to a new table and opponent after each game. Each team held one player in reserve. Boomer would watch the action and move from player to player, quietly whispering coaching tips to us. We used hand signals, too, just like a manager’s signs to players in professional baseball. Boomer’s right hand on the front of his left shoulder meant slow down the speed of play. Left hand on the right shoulder meant drink up, go for the bonus points, part of his overall plan. If one guy overloaded on beer and started playing kind of wacky, Boomer made the call and brought our reserve player into the game. Once a player had been pulled out, he couldn’t return to match play that evening. Boomer described that rule to us in a voice that sounded very official, “Same rule as baseball when a manager inserts a new player into the game.”

Since league rules gave each team only one reserve player, Boomer absolutely insisted that the reserve player not drink any beer until he entered the game. By watching the other team carefully, and inserting a dry player against a very wet opponent, a timely

call by a manager could make a big difference. Boomer became a master at making those calls.

I'm not bragging when I say we had a strong team. We rode along in first place and the competition didn't seem all that tough. The other teams came from places like Harry's Bar and The Back Porch, and their guys didn't have great ciphering skills. Our guys could cipher well, Boomer made sure of that. Not all our players had finished high school, but they didn't flunk out. Life had given them some rough jolts.

Take Benny, for example. During the war, on a morning in one of the rainiest and darkest Februarys ever, Benny's Daddy went out behind the barn on their farm, put a loaded shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Benny dropped out of Kettle High to run the farm for his Mom.

Buster Whittington hit some major potholes in his life, too. In nineteen and twenty-five, right after he was born, his parents took off for Roanoke, Virginia. His aunt and uncle raised him. Buster's uncle worked at Gruber's Department Store unloading produce and stocking the bins and shelves in the grocery department. Everybody called him "produce man." In the store people would sometimes poke their heads through the door into the back room where the store received shipments, and yell, friendly-like, "Hey, where's the produce man?" Buster's uncle would wave and smile. Lot's of folks didn't even know his name. If they met Buster's uncle on the street they'd call out, "Hey, produce man," and he'd always answer "Hey."

One night in nineteen and forty-four, after Buster went to bed his uncle and aunt packed up and left town. Buster had just started tenth grade. He woke up the next morning all alone. Never saw his aunt or uncle again. Across the front of their house, one

they rented, his uncle painted in big black letters, “I ain’t no produce man – not no more!” A family in town took Buster in, but he had to go to work to support himself. He got a job at Gruber’s Department Store, unloading and stocking produce, just like his Daddy. But nobody called him “produce man.”

One evening after practice Boomer called our team together. In a voice that sounded like the Kettle High football coach at the start of the season, he said, "Whatever you guys might have been through in life, I believe you've got what it takes." He paused, lowered his head and looked at us over the top of his glasses. "To do well in dominoes, you have to be smart enough to cipher correctly and fast under the pressure of competition. You’ve shown me you can do it.”

Boomer’s confidence in our team meant a lot to me – to all of us.

He gave us a slight smile and wrapped up his talk with, “We’ve still got work to do – our play has to get sharper and faster. But I know you’ll do it, and we’ll rise above the other teams.”

One evening I arrived early for practice. Art’s wife sat at the bar drinking a cup of coffee. She told me she’d never played dominoes and asked me about the basics of the game. I gave it to her as simply as I could. “Each player picks seven dominoes, bones we call ’em. The player with the highest double goes first, lays his double on the table. His opponent then has to lay down a domino whose spots match the domino on the board. As play continues, in turn each player lays down a domino matching the end of a branch, what we call a ‘leg,’ Four next to a four. Three next to a three, and so on. When it’s your turn, you study your bones and the board, figure all the possible ways of connecting one

of your bones to the outer dots of each leg. *And*, here's where it gets tough, you mentally calculate whether or not you can score, get a point total of five, or a multiple of five – that's where the division comes in. You total the spots on the ends of legs, and then divide by five. If it comes out even, you've scored. It's important to keep asking yourself, what's been played? What's in your hand that you might use next turn, so you won't have to draw from the bone pile?"

Scooter walked over and listened to my description. He smiled, shook his head and said, "Going to the bone pile reminds me of putting your hand in a den of snakes. The best that can happen is you get away without getting bit."

I added, "Yes, but sometimes a trip to the bone pile just can't be avoided."

By then Boomer had joined us and he jumped into the conversation. "That's right, but at other times it's bad planning." When Boomer saw one of us make a second trip to the bone pile he'd give us what we called "the ray" – his face would turn red and he'd scowl, then he'd lower his head and look over the top of his glasses. His almost crossed eyes would bore into us, like an angry parent after a kid had done something wrong. I told Benny, "The first time he hit me with the ray I felt like I was in second grade, standing in front of the class, and peed my pants."

Art's wife raised her hands like she'd had enough, said she'd be happy to be a dominoes spectator.

League play took place in the rear of the taverns. Boomer told us, "Each player is expected to have a beer in front of him at all times, and to keep the old elbow action going. That means drink up. League rules."

For league matches, each player paid three dollars. The money covered a small league fee and all the beer you wanted to drink. Bottles, though no draft, because each team's empties made up the bonus point calculations. Here's how Boomer described it to us – his big plan. “At the end of the evening there will be a grand counting.” Pearl dreamed up the term, “grand counting,” and it took hold. “First, each team's total points for the games will be calculated. Then each team's empty bottles will be counted.” Boomer continued, “The difference between the two teams' total empties will be calculated,” he paused and looked over his glasses, “using subtraction. Then the difference will be multiplied by five. That number of points will be added to the total match points of the team with the most empties.”

Scooter spoke like he had made a discovery, “Boomer, if the games are close, bonus points could make the difference between winnin' or losin' the match.”

“You got it, Scooter. Any questions about this?”

Pearl, not the brightest bulb on the tree, asked, “Now, Boomer, how does it work? I got to get it straight.”

With Job-like patience, Boomer went through the whole thing all over again.

So, in league play we drank up.

The Abacus, a tavern located near a couple of small insurance agencies in Kettle, began to pull together a dominoes team. The insurance guys would go to the Abacus after work for a few beers and play some dominoes. No surprise to us, their ciphering skills would put them at the top of any arithmetic class. Before long the Abacus owner applied for admission of his team into the league.

I voted against the Abacus being admitted into the league. It seemed too much like bringing in a professional baseball team to play in a local league. Scooter voted against them too, and added, “I’m always on the losin’ end of a vote. I voted for Albert Akers for mayor of Kettle, and he took the biggest whippin’ since nineteen and thirty-two, when Wilfred Howell ran for office on the slogan, ‘Hold true to Hoover.’”

One evening after the Abacus entered the league, Boomer asked me to mosey over there for a few beers and come back with a scouting report, for our first match with The Abacus would come up soon. I knew a few of the guys who hung out at the Abacus. After we said hello I made my way to the back of the room to watch the action.

I gulped – they had games with six legs moving at high rates of speed. And they played *double nines* dominoes! I knew double nines existed, and stores sold sets, but I had never seen double nines played. And fast.

I couldn’t take my eyes off Marley Farcus. He handled the paperwork for the insurance on my car. A quiet fellow, about Scooter’s age, medium height, balding, with thick lenses in his wire-rimmed glasses. And I don’t quite know how to say this except to say it, he had a hump in his back. It gave him the posture of a question mark. Around town most folks referred to Marley as Humpy, Humpy Farcus, though nobody said Humpy to his face. Just behind his back, no pun intended. Some folks said Humpy’s stoop had been caused by his bending over accounting books for long periods of time. Others said it came from his habit of bending forward when he smoked a cigarette. And he smoked a lot of them.

Humpy lived with his Mom and had never married. Most Sunday mornings Humpy walked his Mom to services at the Baptist Church. No one could remember ever

seeing Humpy go out with a woman other than his Mom, except for one time. Humpy had a date with Meredith Quisenberry and they went to see a Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland movie at the Dixie Palace. About the time Mickey fell in love with Judy, Meredith Q reached over to hold Humpy's hand. He began breathing hard, wheezing and stood up. Then Humpy fell across the people sitting in the row in front of him. Benny and Scooter sat near Humpy and Meredith Q. Benny yelled "Help!" He and Scooter carried Humpy to the aisle and stretched him out flat on his back. Everyone stood up and craned their necks to see Humpy lying there. Finally the manager of the theatre ran down the aisle with an empty popcorn bag and put it over Humpy's face. Pretty soon Humpy started to move. To the best of my knowledge, he never had another date.

Humpy had a reputation for being good with numbers, but I couldn't believe how fast he played dominoes. The moment his turn came, Humpy's right hand shot a domino onto the board like a rattlesnake striking a mouse, a move that put pressure on his opponent. Humpy didn't laugh much or make chit-chat. In match play he spoke only to criticize the other player and he did that a lot. He'd look across the table at the other guy, aim his magnified eyes through those thick lenses in a stare, then tell the fellow what he'd done wrong. While he waited on his opponent to make a play, Humpy would drum his fingers against the table.

Humpy loved to smoke cigarettes. Pearl, himself a smoker, said admiringly, "Humpy is very involved with tobacco and has become an accomplished smoker." Humpy often used the butt of the cigarette he'd finished to light the fresh one placed between his lips. Benny said, "Humpy smokes like a steam engine coming up Blair Mountain." Lucky Strikes. After a while, with Humpy's speed, his relentless criticism,

and an endless cloud of smoke, opponents often caved in, particularly if they'd had a few beers. Later, when the Abacus played against Art's Place, it happened to me more than once.

After two beers I hustled out of the Abacus to give my scouting report to Boomer. "You're not going to believe what I saw." I described the six-legged games, the double nines and the speed of play.

Boomer listened to my report, nodded, and looked over my shoulder, staring into the dark area towards the men's room at the back of Art's Place. After I finished my report Boomer didn't move a muscle and continued his stare.

"Boomer, I hope you're dreaming up a game plan, because we're going to need a good one." Boomer turned and looked at me, slowly blinked his eyes and nodded. Then he walked away.

With the entry of the Abacus into the league the competition got a lot tougher. Before long their team climbed into first place. We occupied second place, though close on the heels of the Abacus. Boomer told us in an upbeat voice, "We can still win the league, boys. Hang in there. Practice your ciphering."

As much as I wanted our team to win the championship, I have to admit I didn't know if we could do it. Our team play seemed a little awry and I couldn't put my finger on why. Boomer hadn't thrown the ray for a couple of nights, not like him. He spent a lot of time coaching Pearl, and less time with Buster, who really needed the help. In his work with Pearl, Boomer threw word problems at him. "What do you do when you hold a bone with a five spot and you can play it but not score – play now or keep it till later?"

During practices Pearl and Boomer sometimes talked in whispers. While they talked each of them would look around the room like they wanted to make sure nobody heard what they said. At first I didn't much care. One night when Buster mentioned Boomer and Pearl's whispering, I said like it didn't matter to me, "Who wants to know?" Buster – working on his third beer and feeling the frustration of going to the bone pile for the second time in two turns – looked over at Boomer and Pearl and blurted out real loud, "Right, who the hell cares what they're saying?"

Pearl and Boomer both turned and stared at Buster and me. I thought Boomer might give us the ray but he held back. That made me wonder even more what he and Pearl had been talking about.

Pearl had been a strong offensive player, frequently getting big multiples of five. But he had hit a slump, slowed down, scored less often. I wondered if something else had fired up in his life. I later found I had it right, but I would never have guessed why.

In April we neared the end of the Domino League's season, October first through April thirtieth. Art's Place had pulled into a near dead heat with the Abacus, neck and neck. Then came our last match of the season against the Abacus. Even Art said, "Well, boys, this is it. Tonight will likely decide if you got a shot at winning the league."

About the middle of the afternoon before the big match, Boomer's Hudson, looking like it had just been Simonized, pulled up to the Gulf pumps at Buckingham's then rolled slightly forward to high test. Boomer always bought regular gas. Boomer sat in the front seat, Pearl in the back, and beside each of them sat one of the Posey twins, Lovey and True, from up on Sour Apple River. As usual I had a hard time telling the twins apart, but it looked like Lovey sat beside Boomer and True beside Pearl. The twins

had their blonde hair piled high on their heads. Lovey always told people, “I think I bear a resemblance to Lana Turner, the movie star. She has a cousin in Beckley, you know, and it’s possible True and I are related to her.” Her voice always trailed off when she got to the related part, causing the other person to lean forward to hear her. Then Lovey would say no more, smile and stare at them. A few weeks earlier I had heard Boomer and Pearl gossiping about Lovey and True ditching Chappie and Ferlin R.

While the tank filled I cleaned the windshield, even though it already sparkled. Boomer had polished every inch of that car. Wouldn’t you know, Lovey leaned forward and from inside the car pointed her finger to a couple of areas of the glass, saying “I swan, Boomer, I think he missed those places.” Boomer looked at me with raised eyebrows – not the ray or anything. I put the wipe rag on the areas she pointed to and did a little extra cleaning. I didn’t mind doing that, but Lovey knew better. She just showed off for Boomer. When Boomer paid for the gas he thanked me for, as he put it, “attending to the problems pointed out by Miss Lovey Posey.” He said it most seriously, but I could see True and Pearl in the back seat about to bust a gut holding in their giggles. And Boomer had alcohol on his breath – at only three in the afternoon.

All day my mind stayed fixed on the match against the Abacus. I played imaginary games against each of their players. The winner would take over first place in the league standings and be seen by the other teams as the best. That kind of thing can mean a lot coming down the last stretch of a season’s schedule. As they say in baseball, we’d play a game that would decide who’d most likely win the pennant. I wondered what Boomer and Pearl had their minds on, and then thought maybe I knew.

That night we had the advantage of playing in our home territory, Art's Place. At eight-thirty, the time to begin scheduled play, everybody sat at the domino tables, ready to play, except for Boomer and Pearl. The Abacus guys, all but Humpy, more interested in smoking, kept saying, "Hey, we're thirsty, let's get started."

I joined Buster, Benny, and Scooter for a team huddle. We decided to begin the match. Pearl could be the reserve player if and when he and Boomer arrived.

I said to Benny, "I can't believe this. Boomer has never missed a match. *Never ever.*" Fanny kept calling Boomer's place. No answer. Shortly after eight-thirty Art got out of his big green leather chair and walked to the front door and looked up and down the street for Boomer's car. To make matters worse, a fellow at the bar laughed and said he had seen Boomer, Pearl, and "some ladies who shall remain nameless," as he put it, "over at The Hat Rack Bar and Grille about six o'clock." He lowered his voice when Fanny served beers near him. Thank God for small favors. Though as things turned out, he might just as well have yelled out his news.

Fanny collected three dollars from everybody and served up the first round of beers. We started the match. The Abacus guys downed their beers down so fast they must have chug-a-lugged them. One of them said, "Hey, Fanny, bring us another round."

Scooter elbowed me and whispered, "They're going after grand counting, bonus points."

The Abacus guys seemed so smart-ass sure of themselves, like they could put away both the beer and us at the same time. They knew we didn't have a reserve player, and of course they did, in Lysander Preston. By day Lysander kept the books at one of

the insurance agencies, and by night he became a human adding machine. Lysander remained stone sober, eager to get into the game.

Scooter called a team huddle and whispered, “We ain’t got a shot at the bonus points if we don’t drink up,” so we sped up our pace of drinking. This seemed to spur on the Abacus team. By ten-thirty each of our guys had drunk three or four beers, and I don’t know how many the Abacus team had put away. Art and most of the regulars gathered around the tables to watch the match.

With us trailing slightly in the point totals, the coach of the Abacus made his move and put Lysander Preston in to play against me. I choked as I took a sip of my beer, but I didn’t choke in my play. If I just concentrated on the game, not Lysander’s reputation, I could stay with him.

The only sounds in the bar came from the hum of the beer cooler and the alternating buzzing sounds made by the red “Art’s” and green “Place” neon lights in the front window. And Humpy Farcus criticizing his opponent, Buster, who he had on the ropes.

A car drove into the parking lot. Car doors slammed and men and women laughed. Art’s front door opened and everyone looked up as Boomer and Pearl entered, working hard to stop laughing, shut down their smiles and appear serious. Boomer pulled it off OK, but Pearl kept smirking and poking Boomer in the side and giggling. He stuck his head out the front door and yelled towards the parking lot, “Hey, stop that laughing, get serious.” I figured I knew who came with Boomer and Pearl, but hoped I got it wrong.

Boomer glided forward, surveyed the action and the scores posted on the blackboard. Pearl stopped at the bar and grabbed a hot dog. He munched on it as he

hustled to catch up with Boomer, dancing that little two-step he often did after winning a game. When Pearl two-stepped into the back area where we sat, he stubbed the toe of his shoe on that little riser Art had painted white to prevent anybody from tripping over it. He stumbled head first towards the tables and swore like a sailor as he hit the floor, though we had trouble understanding him for he had filled his mouth with the half of the hot dog that hadn't been squashed between his hand and the floor. The Abacus guys laughed and pointed at Pearl.

Our team tried to keep straight faces but Buster started howling and Benny joined in, then Scooter along with me. That made Pearl cuss even more. Still lying face down on the floor he yelled, "You wouldn't think it was so damn funny if it was your hot dog." We laughed harder. Later Scooter said, "I thought my sides was going to split."

Boomer stepped towards the playing tables, staggered slightly to his right, then said in a voice a little too high-pitched, "Players, please restrain yourselves." That's what he said, "yourselves." I muttered to myself, "Oh my God, we're sunk."

Play resumed. Boomer took his coaching position. He kept his eyes on Buster, as Humpy continued to clobber him. Buster had slowed his calculations and kept interrupting play to tell jokes everybody had heard a thousand times. Humpy criticized Buster almost non-stop. "You could have scored if you'd..." Or, "Not too smart a play, with what's likely to be in the bone pile." I got to admit, Buster gave Humpy a lot to work with. We needed a fresh player to go in for Buster, and only had Pearl, half or three-quarters drunk, sitting in a chair propped against the back wall and looking like he'd fallen sleep.

In the parking lot car doors slammed again. The front door of Art's Place swung open and in walked Lovey and True, giggling and pointing towards Boomer and Pearl. Their high-rise hair do's had toppled a bit, and their lipstick had smeared. Everybody stopped playing for a few seconds and watched Lovey sidle up to Boomer, even though he stood in his coaching position.

True pulled a chair up beside Pearl, who by then had started snoring, though he stopped and opened his eyes when she put her hand on his thigh. Speaking in a soft voice True asked, "Was you asleep, Pearl, honey?"

He answered, "No, darlin,' I was just checkin' my eyelids for cracks." The room had been so quiet that everybody heard what they said. Except for Boomer and Lovey, we all busted out laughing again.

Boomer gave the right hand on left shoulder signal to Buster, meaning to slow down, and motioned with his left hand for Pearl to warm up, prepare to come into the game against Humpy. Pearl, with True's help, got himself to a standing position. Boomer stood behind Buster, across the table from Humpy. Pearl walked towards them.

Fanny came out of the kitchen with a tray full of sandwiches and at least six long-necked bottles of Burger Beer. Perfect timing, I thought. Fanny's gaze fixed on Boomer at the instant Lovey's hand stroked the Wildroot Cream Oil bulge in the left front pocket of his trousers. Fanny looked at Lovey's well-placed hand and screamed, "You philanderer!" With that she threw the tray over Humpy's head. The sandwiches and beers spewed and sprayed all over Boomer, Lovey, Buster, Pearl, and True. Humpy, already stooped forward, had the presence of mind to lean further across the top of the table to protect the arrangement of dominoes.

Art jumped into the middle of everything and said firmly, “OK, Fanny, I think you’d better go home. Now!” She threw her apron on the floor and stormed out the front door. Art raised his arms like a teacher quieting kids in a classroom and said in a loud voice, “Everybody settle down and get on with the match.”

Boomer chased after Fanny, but came back in two shakes. Her car peeled rubber as it sped out of the parking lot. After we cleaned up the mess, Boomer called a huddle and tried to get us back to normal. But he slurred his words.

Except for one, the Abacus guys walked around laughing and talking. Humpy sat quiet as a church mouse. His hands trembled as he lit another Lucky Strike. Maybe he’d had too much male-female craziness.

Boomer pulled Buster out of the game and put Pearl in against Humpy. Pearl never once looked at Humpy. He stared at the board and started making his plays. Humpy kept looking around, first towards the front door, then over his shoulder as if he expected something else to happen. And then, surprising everybody, Humpy made a couple of real bonehead plays. Pearl, not sounding drunk at all, started criticizing him and really poured it on. Non-stop. The next thing I knew Humpy had to go to the bone pile and draw, three times. Pearl played like a demon and, I could hardly believe it, he soon built a big lead over Humpy. Pearl?

Yep, we won. Usually both teams hung around after league play, had another round of beers and discussed the games. That night the Abacus players slid out of Art’s Place like a bunch of slugs on a rainy sidewalk.

Shortly after they left a car pulled into the parking lot. Art’s front door opened and in came Fanny. She walked up to Boomer like nothing had happened. I wondered

how she could put everything behind her so quickly. Boomer gave her a little grin, wiggled his eyebrows and put his tongue under his lip and rolled his moustache. When Fanny moved her tongue in and out between her lips real slow-like, then reached over and patted his Wildroot Cream Oil bulge, it hit me that she'd been in on the whole thing.

Pearl held True's hand and said, "Let's go," to Boomer. Lovey took Buster's arm and the two of them walked out with Pearl and True. Boomer told Pearl he'd ride with Fanny, and gave him the keys to the Hudson. Pearl had become a licensed driver. The six of them left.

Later I told William White that the Abacus boys had received a brain-splitting knuckle-knocking load of trickery worthy of an Academy Award. The Great Houdini couldn't have done it any better.

In the league competition, the Abacus guys lost it after that night – still good but their edge had disappeared. At the end of the season they wound up in third place. You could look it up.

At the beginning of the summer Beverly returned from the University. Even though league play had ended, Boomer wanted to hold practices a couple of times a week, sometimes more. I began to miss them to be with Beverly.

In early July the Tennessee Gas Pipeline came through Kettle, a 24-inch-diameter pipe running from Knoxville to Toledo. Lots of jobs opened up. Buster and Benny signed on and kept going north with the project. Boomer brought in a couple of new players. One of them didn't cipher well and the other one enjoyed drinking beer more than playing dominoes.

The next thing I knew Boomer had left town. Not long afterwards, our team called it quits. We raised a toast to our championship and to Boomer. Soon the league disbanded. Fanny said Boomer had found a good job in Huntington, but he'd asked that it be kept confidential.

Late on a warm night near the end of that summer, Beverly and I sat in the glider on her front porch. We rocked slowly, held hands and didn't talk. But inside me I had a lively conversation going on – about how much I loved Beverly, how I wanted to live my life with her – and then I thought, “Why don't you tell her that?”

When I began to speak the words jumped out so fast they surprised me more than they did her. I said at a rapid clip, “I love you, Beverly. Will you marry me?” I had hardly finished my question before she whispered, “Yes,” and then wrapped her wonderful long arms around me.

I called Phil early the next morning to tell him the good news and ask for the day off. Beverly and I drove to Huntington and picked out her diamond engagement ring. Standing in front of the glass counter in the jewelry shop, I took her left hand in mine and gently placed a diamond ring on the third finger of her left hand. It slid on easily, looked like it belonged there. Then we gave each other a kiss that lasted so long the clerk began to clear his throat. When we looked up at him he smiled. That night we took a blanket to a remote section of the park along the Sour Apple River, undressed and touched the diamond over every part of both our bodies.

The last I heard, Pearl and True had a home up on Sour Apple River. Lovey moved to Charleston. Fanny worked for Art a couple more years, and then moved to her sister's place in Paintsville, Kentucky. Humpy contracted lung cancer and passed away. Art died of a heart attack one evening while sitting in his green chair. Not long afterwards his wife sold the building. Talk about sacrilege, Art's Place became a storefront church. A hand-lettered sign in the front window said, "The Apostolic Church of Faith." When I saw that sign I thought Art must be turning over in his grave.

One day I had some business in Huntington and stopped at the Eighth Street Drug Store to pick up some Band-Aids, mercurochrome, shaving cream, that sort of thing. I walked in and stopped, frozen in my tracks. Behind the prescriptions counter, decked out in a white pharmacist-like uniform stood a man who looked exactly like Boomer. I never heard that Boomer had a twin – it had to be him.

I said, "Boomer?"

He looked at me in that calm and expressionless way of his, glided a few feet in my direction and said, "Yes, can I help you?"

"Boomer, it's me, Freddy." He gave me a blank look. "Art's Place," I added.

He said, very pleasantly, "Yes, Freddy. Can I help you with anything?"

I got the articles I came to buy, paid for them and walked towards the door. I put one hand on the doorknob, and then turned to take one last look at Boomer.

He looked up at me from the prescriptions counter. Then he wiggled his eyebrows, rolled his tongue from left to right under his moustache and gave me a mischievous smile.

That was Boomer.